

REV 1:1-8—GOD IS AT THE CENTER

INTRO: In his play “As You Like It” Shakespeare wrote “**All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players.**” In a sense, that is true. In the play the speaker then goes on to talk about how, over the course of our lives, everyone plays many parts, namely, the different stages of our lives. The speech concludes by talking about the “**Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.**” IOW, life ultimately has no lasting meaning or purpose—it’s sort of like all the things we do in this life and are so excited about or wrapped up in amount to nothing more than rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

If there is no God, if there is no eternal life, then that’s exactly right. In that case, Macbeth is completely correct when in that play he said, “**Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.**”

However, the Bible paints a different picture. Over the course of these next 8 weeks while Wade is on sabbatical, we will be looking at the book of Revelation—perhaps the most interesting and amazing book in the Bible. We’re going to do this because Revelation is either ignored by many churches or misunderstood and abused by others. But the book is incredibly important. It’s the only book where the whole scope of church history from beginning to end is put together and is the only book which in some detail talks about the consummation of all things. Although the book was written in a symbolic format, it was designed to be understood by us and was written to apply to the church throughout the ages until Christ returns.

BTW, over the last year or two I have preached on six different passages from Revelation. I post the audio and written sermons are on the “sermons” page of the ECLEA website: www.eclea.net. These eight sermons I’ll be doing will fill in most of the gaps so that, together with the ones I’ve done already, we should have a pretty good understanding of the book.

Today we’re going to begin at the beginning: Rev 1:1-8. But before we discuss the passage in depth, let me introduce this passage and the book of Revelation as a whole.

BACKGROUND: In vv. 1 and 9 the author identifies himself as “John,” which most people traditionally have taken to be the apostle John. In v.9 he tells us that he was writing from the island of Patmos, a small island off the west coast of Turkey. Most scholars have concluded that John probably wrote the book around the year 95, about 65 years after Jesus’ crucifixion.

What kind of a book is this? v.3 says that it is a book of prophecy. Biblical prophecy was not mainly about predicting the future. Rather, biblical prophecy looked at the contemporary situation faced by God’s people; the prophet sees how God’s ultimate purpose for the coming of his kingdom relates to the contemporary situation; and then he demands an appropriate response by the people: IOW, prophecy reveals how the people or the situation must change if God’s kingdom is to come. So prophecy, by its very nature, is ethical—it relates to how we are to live our lives. We see that in v.3 since John exhorts his readers to “**heed** (or as the ESV puts it) **to keep the words of the prophecy of this book.**”

The book of Revelation is largely a particular form of prophecy called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic prophecy is highly visionary and uses lots of symbols, often very bizarre symbols. We’ll see that particularly in later portions of the book. But Revelation is also a letter or an epistle, kind of like the epistles of Paul or Peter. We know that because v.4 is a standard form of how people back in the 1st century introduced their letters: the author would identify himself, identify to whom he was writing, and give words of greeting. And that’s what John does in v.4 when he says, “**John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: grace to you and peace.**” It’s just like, for example, Paul introduced his letter to the church at Ephesus: “**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace.**”

This is important, because all letters were written to be relevant to and understandable by the 1st century readers. So anyone who says that Revelation is a “secret code” that only applies to events that take place thousands of years after the 1st century just before the Second Coming of Christ, is incorrect.

Why was Revelation written? Toward the end of the 1st century the churches were facing various problems, both inside and outside. Rev 2-3 reveals that within the church itself there was: lack of love (2:4); false teaching (2:14-15); immorality (2:20-21, 24); spiritual deadness, lack of faithfulness (3:1-4); lukewarmness and pride (3:15-17). But the church also faced problems from the outside, including: some instances of persecution, various forms of legal insecurity, and the issue of being co-opted by the surrounding culture. IOW, their situation was similar to what the churches face today. So the book Revelation was written: to *warn* believers of the dangers of compromise; to *explain* to the church how God is dealing with

the world; to *call* believers to persevere in the struggle against evil; and to *comfort and encourage* believers because Christ is Victor.

With that background we can now look at Rev 1:1-8 [READ]. What is this telling us? I think I can summarize it by saying that all the world *is* a stage and men and women *are* players in it. But the drama we are involved in is *not* “**a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.**” And we are not “merely” players, like expendable extras. Instead, we are integral players in an incredible cosmic drama of unimaginable importance. These verses are telling us that:

PROP: God in Christ is the author and director and the main character in the drama of our lives.

O/S: (1) We will see how God is the *author* of the great cosmic drama in **vv. 1 and 3**; (2) we will see how he is the *director* of the great cosmic drama in **vv. 4 and 8**; (3) we will see how he takes center stage in the person of Jesus Christ in **vv.1-2 and 5, 7-8**; and (4) in **vv. 3-6** we will see how *we* have hugely important parts to play in this great cosmic drama.

I. God is the author of the great cosmic drama.

v.1 begins by telling us that “**this is the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his bond-servants the things which must soon take place.**” IOW, the revelation is from God. He is the author. And, since he wrote the script, he knows what’s coming next. We also see God as the author in **v.3** where it talks about “**the words of the prophecy**” and “**the time is near.**” God knows. This is not something made up by John. According to **v.1** it was communicated to John, and now he is telling us what has come from God.

We need to understand what is going on when it says “the time is near.” What the book of Revelation does again and again is to take passages and images from the OT and reapply them to the situation faced by the church. And we see that here: **Rev 1:1** is alluding to **Dan 2** which three times talks about how God make known what will take place “**in the latter days.**” But here in Revelation John substitutes the word “**soon**” in place of “**in the latter days.**” What he’s saying is that “we are in the latter days now; the time of fulfillment is at hand.” It’s sort of like when Jesus announced at the beginning of his ministry, “**the time is fulfilled and the KOG is at hand**” (**Mark 1:15**).

But the fulfillment that John is talking about in v.3, like the fulfillment Jesus was talking about, is not the consummation, but the inauguration of prophetic fulfillment. We know this because throughout the rest of the book John talks about the church; he talks about the troubles the church will experience; and he tells the church to “heed” or “keep” the words of this prophecy. So while John will describe the consummation of the kingdom, the bulk of the book of Revelation is designed to be relevant in the here and now until Jesus returns.

II. God is the director of the great cosmic drama.

We see how God is the director of the great cosmic drama—IOW he is ultimately in charge of things—in **vv. 4 and 8**. Both verses say that God is “**the one who is and who was and who is to come**” and **v.8** adds “**I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . the Almighty.**” All of these expressions in different ways tell us that God is sovereign over all of history: past, present, and future. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. That is telling us that nothing that exists is outside of God’s control. He is eternal. He is the first and the last. And when **v.8** says that God is “**the Almighty**” that is telling us that there is no power—not ISIS, not cancer, not Satan, not anything—that can hold a candle to him.

There is great evil in the world—for example, ISIS, cancer, and Satan. There was great evil in the world in John’s day; and there will continue to be great evil in the world until Jesus returns. BUT, God is reassuring us, even though we do not understand why things are happening as they are, that he is sovereign over the evil. He is not taken by surprise. He not only wrote the script but is directing and orchestrating events. And all of these things—including the evil—are ultimately serving his purposes.

Do we believe that? It’s not easy to believe that if we look at the state of the world. But that’s why we should not *just* look at the state of the world but need to keep the Lord God front and center in our thoughts and in our evaluation of things. And most particularly that is why we need to focus on the fact that, not only is God the author and director of the drama of our lives, but:

III. God is the main character in this great cosmic drama—and we see this most clearly in Jesus.

The centrality of God in Christ begins in **v.1**: this is the revelation of **Jesus Christ which God gave Him**. Then notice **v.2**: John testifies **to the WOG and to the testimony of Jesus Christ**. Those two phrases are parallel. IOW, the WOG concerns what God has carried out through Jesus Christ. It is God in Christ who is the main character of the great cosmic drama.

v. 5 specifies the great work of Jesus Christ. He was **the faithful witness**. IOW, he did everything that the Father showed him; he perfectly lived the life we should have lived. **v.5** also tells us that he **released us from our sins by his blood** on the cross. IOW, not only did he live the life we should have lived, but he died the death we should have died and paid the penalty for our sins that otherwise we would have to pay but could not. The fact that the Father accepted his sacrifice is shown by Christ's resurrection from the dead—as **v.5** says, he is **the first born of the dead**. The fact that the Father accepted Christ's sacrifice is also shown by his ascension to the throne of God where, again as **v.5** says, he is **the ruler of the kings of the earth**.

But Christ's work is not done. **v. 7** tells us that he is coming again. In this verse John again alludes to the book of Daniel, this time to **Dan 7:13**. When he returns he will come not in lowliness but in great power and glory: **Every eye will see him**. This is reinforced in **v.8**. In **v.8** God describes himself as the one **who is and who was and who is to come**. **v.8** is talking about the Lord God. But in saying **"I am the one who is to come,"** **v.8** is drawing the connection with **v.7** where *Christ* is said to be coming. IOW, these verses are implying that Christ is God; he is the SOG, the second person of the Triune God. And, not coincidentally, in these verses we see a picture of the Trinity: **v.4** refers to the Spirit (I'll discuss that some more in a few minutes); **vv. 4, 6,** and **8** refer to the Father; and **vv.5** and **7** refers to the Son.

I am in the process of working on my next ECLEA teaching book, which will be on Christianity and Islam. Muslims, particularly in the West, say that they honor Jesus as a great prophet. But Muslims deny that Jesus is the SOG, that he died on the cross for our sins, and that he was resurrected. **vv. 7-8** are telling us that Islam is wrong. Everyone who denies that Jesus is the SOG, that he died on the cross for our sins, and that he was resurrected to great glory is wrong—and one day, as **v.7** tells us, everyone will see Jesus and realize who he is, and will mourn in remorse at what they have done. **v.7** is just saying what Paul previously said in **Phil 2:10-11**, that **"every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."**

Now, you may think that that sounds like Christian triumphalism—"we're right and they're wrong!" But that's not so, which is why we need to consider what **vv.1-8** imply about:

IV. Our important role in the great cosmic drama.

We see our role particularly in **vv. 3-6**. **v.3** says, **"Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed [or keep] the things which are written in it."** So again get out of your mind the idea that the book of Revelation is a secret code that only applies to events of the distant future. **v.3** emphasizes **heeding [or keeping] the things which are written** in the book. IOW, what the book of Revelation says is supposed to be *applied* by us—here and now. So let's look at the ethical and practical component of these verses a little more.

v.4 says that the book is given **"to the seven churches that are in Asia."** That, of course, is not referring to China or Japan but to the Roman province of Asia which was the western half of modern Turkey. But the reference to **the seven churches** suggests that it is really a letter to all the churches in Asia and probably everywhere. Why? The number seven prophetically is typically a number signifying wholeness or completion or fulfillment. Also, the word **"the"** before **"seven churches"** indicates that what is said is designed to apply universally because there were *more than* seven churches in Asia. So when he says **"the seven churches"** he is seeing them as representative of all the churches. In fact, the issues John discusses throughout the book are common to all churches at all times and in all places throughout history.

So what does this mean for our lives? There are three statements in **vv. 4-6** that speak to us about how we live our lives. **v.4** says **"grace to you and peace."** **v.5** says Jesus Christ was **"the faithful witness."** And **v.6** says **"He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father."** Let's unpack this.

Let's begin with Jesus, "the faithful witness." Several times, particularly in the book of John, Jesus said how he never did anything on his own but only did what the Father showed him. In **Rom 8:29** Paul tells us that the whole point of our lives is to be **conformed to the image** of Jesus Christ—IOW to become just like him: to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, to speak as he spoke, and to do as he did. *How are we doing with that?*

If we are to think as Jesus thought, feel as he felt, speak as he spoke, and do as he did, we need to know what he thought, how he felt, what he said, and what he did. The only way we are going to know those things—the only way they will become a part of us—is if we know **"the WOG and the testimony of Jesus Christ,"** as John said in **v.2**. Only if we are regularly in the Word, thinking about the Word, and trying to do what the Word says, can we hope to become like Jesus. Jesus himself was saturated with the Word. From the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness to the end of his life when he was on the cross, he quoted the Word.

Second, what made Jesus "the faithful witness"? It was not just that he knew and could quote

Scripture. Instead, his life was radically “others-centered.” He said that the entire WOG is fulfilled in two commands: *What are they?* [**love God and love your neighbor as yourself**]. So when people were hungry, Jesus fed them; when people were sick, he healed them; when he saw people with spiritual and other needs, he helped them. And at the very end of his life, he reinforced this entire ethic of life by washing his disciples’ feet—something the lowest slave would do—and then said, **“I have done this as an example for you, now you go and do likewise.”**

So what is the focus of our lives? How others-centered are we in the use of our time and our money? How we each play this out will differ among us because we all have different circumstances. But if there is not an important others-centered dimension to our lives, then I am sorry to say, we are failing at what the very focus of our lives should be.

Which leads us to Jesus’ statement in v.6 that says **“He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.”** This is telling us that we are not to live just as individuals but we are a community. We are an alternate kingdom to the kingdom of the world. Throughout the book of Revelation, John repeatedly makes clear that there are two, and only two, kingdoms and categories of people: the world and the church; those who dwell on the earth, versus those who are citizens of heaven. As people look at our lives, do they see where real citizenship lies? We need to ask ourselves: Are our values and priorities the values and priorities of God and his kingdom, or of ourselves and the kingdom of the world? *How do we know—and how do other people know when they see us?*

When he calls us to be “priests” that is also significant. The role of a priest is to represent God to the people and to represent the people to God—to be mediators between God and people. So we need to ask ourselves: Are people seeing godliness when they look at me? Are people’s needs, hurts, and situations of such concern that I am going to God with them in prayer constantly? And it’s not just prayers for our family and friends, but for our church, our community, and the worldwide church, which in many places is suffering greatly. How big of a priority is that for us?

Finally, v.4 says **“grace to you and peace.”** It goes on to say that the grace and peace we need in order to be a kingdom of priests come to us from God and from **“the seven spirits who are before his throne.”** The reference to **“the seven spirits”** is a figurative reference to the Holy Spirit. The number seven, again, suggests the fullness of the Spirit, which may come from **Isa 11:2**, which talks about the characteristics of the Spirit.

When we have Jesus as the Lord of our lives, he gives us the Holy Spirit to enable us to live as we should. It’s the same Holy Spirit who came upon Jesus and led Jesus all of his life. Do we draw upon the power of the Spirit? We are called to be faithful witnesses just like he was. We are to follow in his footsteps. By his Word and his Spirit—and with the help of the community of others—he has given us everything we need to live as a kingdom of priests. As we take this into us, the focus of our lives can be transformed.

CONCL: As we begin this wonderful book of Revelation, I hope we get some glimpse that our lives are of infinite importance. Our lives are of such importance because God in Christ is the author and director and the main character in the great drama of our lives. He has designed our lives so that he is to be at the center. If he is not, then our life will not fulfill the very purpose for which he created us. But if he is not, you can change that. And if he is, then let us praise him and thank him and live our lives through his Word and Spirit, in community. Then we can say, as John said in v.6, **“to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”**