

Step Up, Step In, Stay True: God Is In Control

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[0:00] Last week we started a study in the book of Revelation. And what I want you to know, if you weren't there, and even if you were, Revelation is not simply a manual on the end times.

Revelation is a manual on how to follow Jesus in the end times. And we're living in the end times. One of the themes through the book of Revelation is being a faithful follower to Jesus, a faithful witness.

The word witness comes from a Greek word that we get the word martyr from. And I'm guessing when you hear the word martyr, you're thinking of someone who dies for a cause, someone who dies even for the faith.

Well, back in the first century, martyr was simply used to bear testimony to something, to bear witness. And so if there was a police, there's an accident out here on 60th and Sheridan, the police there would say, hey, we need some martyrs to give their accounts of what happened.

[1:12] Or if you go to court to bear witness, you go up into the martyr stand, the witness stand. What witnessing is, is bearing testimony to your Lord Jesus.

Being, bearing testimony to his exclusivity and his universality of his Lordship. Speaking of him. And we're often tempted to compromise our witness to Jesus. And there is a big reason why we tend to compromise in our witness to Jesus.

We fear being ridiculed. We fear the possible consequences in job places of being looked over. We fear being excluded from groups of people.

We fear being resented, unfriended or even the awkwardness that can enter a relationship when you break the ice. All of this has to do with a fear of rejection.

[2:31] And so our fear of rejection with other people can tempt us to quiet compromises, unspoken denials, and hushed unfaithfulness to the Lord of all.

Our Lord. And so what the book of Revelation is, is one huge encouragement to stay faithful in your witness to Jesus, regardless of how hard it gets.

Regardless of the consequences. So what you need to hear this morning is this. In light of the God who is sovereign over all, in light of Jesus, and what he's done in your life, and what he's going to do when he comes back, don't shrink back.

Step up. Count yourself as one of his kingdom. Don't hide out, but step into opportunities to bear witness to Jesus. And definitely, don't give up.

Stay true. Stay true to your Lord Jesus Christ. Because this morning, what we're going to see, is that God is in control.

[3:47] Last week, we looked at Revelation 1, 1 through 3. This week, Revelation 1, 4 through 8. Would you read with me? I'm going to start in verse 1.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants, the things that must soon take place, he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Even to all that he saw, blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth, to him who loves us, and has

freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen. Behold, behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Even so, amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.

[5:22] This passage is in our Bibles, in this abstract wing of our Bibles, to encourage your hearts, to give you strength to press on, in a faithful witness to Christ.

Don't compromise, stay true, because what you're going to see is God is in control. So we're going to make four stops along the way here. The first is, the first stop is the seven churches, who are in a precarious position.

The second stop is the greeting itself, in verses four and five. Grace and peace to you, from the triune God. And then there's the pivot, in verses five through seven, and it's a bit of a surprise. It's a pivot of praise, from grace to you, to glory to him. And then there's the approval, in verse eight. God the Father essentially says, I am the Alpha and the Omega, and I approve this message.

So let's look at these seven churches. There's encouragement for you, brothers and sisters, not to compromise, not to shrink back, step up, not to hide out, step in, not to give up, but to stay true.

[6:43] We read, John to the seven churches, that are in Asia. Now what first should catch your attention, is the word seven. Seven's all throughout, the book of Revelation.

And what seven is, is a number that, every Jew would understand, represents completeness, fullness, kind of like the, finally, yes, consummation.

The number seven, is to a Jew, is what the number nine, is to a pregnant woman. Finally, fullness, completeness. And what we have here, is a letter to the seven churches, in Asia.

He's speaking of, these churches, and currently, what is Western Turkey, and they're all under the, rule of the Roman Empire, at the time. And what they are, think of it as a, representative, complete sample, for us.

It represents the entire church. Now, there are very specific things, going on in each of the churches, and we're going to see that, in chapters two and three, when Jesus addresses, each church personally.

[7:52] What you need to understand now, is that, what he is writing, to the seven churches, in the first century, he's speaking to us, in the 21st century. We need to hear this.

It's a representation, of the entire church. Now, here is some historical background, that will help you understand, the precarious position, these seven churches were in.

At this time, late 90s A.D., there was a guy, who had become, the Roman Emperor, his name was Domitian. And when he became Emperor, he wanted to, unite his empire.

And so, he commanded, all of his citizens, and subjects, of the Roman Empire, to worship him, as quote unquote, Lord and God.

And he called himself, quote, everlasting king, end quote. And so, all of these seven churches, at that time, are living, under the requirement, to pay, devotion, worship, homage, to Caesar.

[9:08] All the citizens, and subjects, had to go to a temple, built in the honor, of Domitian, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fire, of the altar, and as they're doing it, they say, Caesar is Lord.

Now people, could believe, whatever they wanted to, at the time, just as long, as they were, confessing Caesar, as Lord.

They were in a polytheistic, culture, a pluralistic, culture. And since so far, they just doing that, they could worship anybody, or anything they wanted to. Kind of sounds familiar, don't you think?

I think this is attributed, to Domitian himself. He called this, act of worship, as a quote, little act of worship. But you can imagine, what this does, for a follower of Jesus, who confesses, Jesus, as their exclusive, universal, Lord of Lords.

They find themselves, having to, either be faithful, in their confession, or compromise. There was pressure, to conform, to the, pluralism, of the day.

[10:33] This little act, of worship, of confessing, Caesar as Lord, is nothing short, of denying, the exclusive, and universal, Lordship, of Jesus Christ.

It's compromise. That's the precarious, position they were in. And we're not living, under the Roman Empire, but we are, dealing with our own, little acts, of worship today.

In the name of tolerance, don't make any big claims, about your Jesus. We can feel, the cultural pressure, and what we're tempted to, is to shrink back.

Don't shrink back. Step up. We can, we can feel the pressure, to hide out. But we're not to hide out. We're to step in. We can feel pressure, just to give up. But we're to stay true. Because we are the people of God.

[11:42] God. This is the situation, facing, the seven churches, that John was writing to. They're in a precarious, position. And so are we.

Because we're, we're tempted regularly, to compromise, our devotion, to the one, true Lord of Lords, and King of Kings. But we're not to compromise.

We're to stay true. And now, as we turn to the greeting, from the triune God, you're going to see why. We're going to remain true to him, because of who he is, and what he's done.

In verse four, we read, John to the seven churches, that are in Asia, grace to you, and peace.

Grace is God's, saving power, power, directed at, undeserving sinners, because he is, a gracious, loving God.

And this, gracious, saving power, is not just a, get you saved power, it is a, get you saved, and keep you saved, power.

[13:02] God's grace, is a persevering power, for a Christian. He just doesn't, give you grace, grace to get you in, and then it's no grace. He gives you grace, to get you into his kingdom, and then he keeps pouring his grace on you, to endure, and to persevere, to stay true.

And the effect of grace, in a Christian's life, is peace. Flourishing. Flourishing, in your relationship with God, flourishing, with your understanding of yourself, flourishing, in your relationship with others, and in creation.

But as soon as I say that, I know what you're thinking, you're like, okay, I don't experience that. It's because we're living in between, the first coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus.

We're living in between, the already and the not yet, and so we don't experience, fullness of peace yet. Grace to you, and peace from.

This is where things get really good. There are three from's. From he who is, and who was, and who is to come.

[14:25] It's a reference to the first person of the Trinity, God the Father, and that little phrase, he who is, is pulled verbatim, from the Greek version, of Exodus 3.14, where Yahweh is in this burning bush, and Moses is like, who are you?

And he says, I am. It's an allusion to Exodus 3.14. The great I am.

And in that context, Yahweh, God, is speaking to Moses, and getting him ready, to deliver his people, from the suffering, in Egypt.

He who is, and who was, and who is to come. He's the God of the present, the God of the past, and the God of the future, and he has grace to give.

Grace. Grace for then, grace for now, and grace for what's to come. I'm not sure if you noticed this, but when he says, he who is, and who was, and who, were you kind of thinking, who will be?

[15:45] But he says, who is to come? And for those of us, who are feeling, a little fatigued, in need of endurance, this puts courage, in our hearts, because, we're starting to think, God's coming back.

He's coming. And when he comes, he's bringing the fullness, of peace. So the first person, who this greeting of grace is from, is from the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

And then the next from, from the seven spirits, before the throne, before his throne.

Now, we're going to see a lot of his throne, throughout the book of Revelation. And when you see, or hear that word throne, it immediately brings ideas, of sovereignty, and authority.

And in Revelation chapter 4, you're going to get up close, in personal view, of the one, who is seated, on his throne. And in verse 5 of chapter 4, we read, before the throne, we're burning seven

torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.

[17:03] It's the same expression here. The seven spirits, before his throne. What it is, it's a reference, to Zechariah chapter 4, verses 1 through 6.

Another, apocalyptic, work, in the Old Testament. Zechariah is given, a vision of a golden lamp stand, with seven lamps, torches on it, and there's, a blaze.

Zechariah asks, the angel who's with him, what are these, my Lord? The angel says, do you not know what these are? Zechariah says, no, my Lord. The angel says, this is the word of the Lord, to Zerubbabel.

This is what they are. Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

The seven spirits, the seven flames, on the seven lamp stands, is the seven fold spirit of God, in his fullness.

[18:08] It's a picture of, omnipresence, the spirit among his churches, the seven lamp stands. And not just, omnipresence, but, empowerment.

God, in the midst of us. And from the spirit, comes grace and peace. And then there's the third from, from Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity.

And in this passage, what you see, there are three titles. The faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth. The faithful witness. So, if you are in Ephesus, in the first century, and there is, a certain degree of pressure, and threat, if you don't worship, Domitian, and you come across, this red, in your church, that Jesus Christ, is the faithful witness, witness, it starts making you think, he was faithful, all the way through.

He was faithful, in what he spoke, about God, and about God's kingdom of grace, while he was on earth. And you will not, you will remember, that he spoke, these words, even unto death.

He's a faithful witness. He's our example. And his faithful witness, resulted, in his death, but he didn't stay dead.

[19:45] He's the firstborn, from the dead. He, over, came, death. That word firstborn, is a position, a position of preeminence.

It's the idea, that he is, the king, of those, raised from the dead. Firstborn, from the dead. If you're facing threat, for being a faithful witness, to Jesus, this is good news.

Because Jesus, overcame death. He is the resurrection, and the life. And if you believe in him, you too, have the promise, that you will live, even when you die.

Be faithful, as he, is faithful. And he's not, just the firstborn, from the dead. He's the ruler, of the kings, of the earth. His death, resurrection, ascension, enthroned him, in heaven, and now he's, reigning on high.

He was reigning on high, when this was written, in the late 90s, and he's reigning on high, right now. So what that means, is this. This is the statement, being made. John's writing, to the seven churches.

[21:00] Jesus, the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, the ruler, of the kings, of the earth, even Domitian. Jesus, is his ruler.

Kublai Khan, all the rulers, of the Ming dynasty, in China, the kings and queens, of the British empire, all the czars, in Russia, whatever you call, the people, who did the Aztec empire, he was ruling them all.

And today too, Putin, Kim Jong-un, the presidents, of the United States, he's reigning on high.

He's the ruler, of the kings, and presidents, of the earth. He's reigning over, the already and not yet.

This is really good news, for those who are facing, difficulty, and the temptation, to compromise.

It's a picture, of Jesus, in amazing fashion. It's a picture, of the triune God, who is poised, to grace, his people, to give them strength.

[22:19] So we don't shrink back. We step up. We don't hide out.

We step in. We don't give up. We stay true to Jesus, in light of the grace, from the triune God. Now let's look at the pivot, in verses five and six.

After describing, these titles of Jesus, John makes, an interesting turn. You know, in 1900, the Army Corps, of Engineers, they reversed the flow, of the Chicago River.

Very interesting. What we have going on here, is a little bit, of a reversal of flow. John has just been saying, to you, seven churches, to you, Christ-thinking church, to you, be grace and peace, from the triune God.

And now, we read, to him, to him, grace to you, turns to glory to him.

[23:33] It's a reference, to Jesus. And what John points us to, in these verses, is what he's done for us, and what he will do.

Did you see, to him who loves us? It's a present tense verb. What it means is this, he loves us now. He loves us.

He loves you. Do you notice, John includes himself now? grace, grace, to you, and then, he goes to him, who loves us, and has freed us, from our sins, by his blood, and made us, a kingdom.

John is experiencing, firsthand, what he's talking about. Look at what he's done for us, out of his love for us. He has shown his love, for us, by having freed us, from our sins, by his blood.

It's what we've been saved from. We're talking gospel. We're talking the cross. We're talking about, what Christ has done, to set us free. It's who we are now.

[24:47] Liberated from the power, and penalty of sin. Freed from having to, live for our own, sinful passions. And here's why this matters. It's who you are.

You're no longer held captive, by sin. You don't need to compromise. You've been freed, from that temptation.

Freed from that power. It's like this. Everyone in your world, may be living for sin, but because you have been set free, by the blood of Jesus, you stay true to him.

Look at what you've been saved from, by his blood. Now look at what you've been saved for. You were freed, from your sin, and you were made, a kingdom.

Priests, to his God and Father. There's another Old Testament, allusion here. It's to Exodus 19.6, where, Moses having brought his people, God's people, out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, to come to Sinai, and at the mountain.

[26:06] And God commands Moses, to say this to Israel, Israel, you shall be to me, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Another way to say it is this, you're my people, I'm your God.

You serve me. Here's why this is significant for us. It's multiple levels, but here's the one thing I want to point out. Let's just take the church of Ephesus.

The church of Ephesus was not a Gentile Christian church, nor was it a Jewish Christian church. The church of Ephesus was a mix of Jews and Gentiles, who had been set free by the blood of Jesus from their sins, and they had been made a kingdom of priests to God.

Here's why this is significant. It's going to help us understand some passages later in the book of Revelation. The people that he's writing to, both Jews and Gentiles, had become Christians, because they had believed in Jesus, and confessed him as their one true Lord.

And God had made them part of his kingdom, a kingdom of grace. The first coming of Jesus, his death, resurrection, resulted in a whole new people of God, a new kingdom, the saving reign of God, the kingdom of the redeemed, both of Jews and Gentiles.

[27:48] And Jesus is their only Lord and everlasting King. We are a kingdom now of grace. God's saving reign.

But we're also priests. Priests mediate the presence of God. Each of us in Christ is now a priest to God.

Everyone in this room, if you put your faith in Jesus, you have been made a priest unto God. The priesthood of all believers. It's who you are now.

It's the new purpose for which God saved you. He saved you from sin in order to make you his priest. Christ. We no longer live for ourselves, but for him who for our sake died and was raised.

Before you were blood bought, you were constrained by your own sin to live for the world. But now, having been redeemed by his blood, he's made you you part of his kingdom of grace to serve him, to serve God, your God, your Father.

[29:10] And the result is witness. We see the impulse here. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. John is just picking up where he started. The hymn is Jesus.

We read, to him who loves us and has been freed from our sins by his kingdom and made us a kingdom, a priest to his Father, God and Father, in him be glory, that in him, to him is Jesus.

1 Peter 2.9 says, but you, Christians, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim, bear witness to the excellencies of him who called

you out of darkness, sin, into his marvelous light, the kingdom of his grace.

So what has he done? By his blood, he has made us a new people, a kingdom of priests to proclaim his praises. Amen, John says.

Amen. It's true. So you don't need to shrink back. You step up.

[30:27] You don't need to hide out. You belong to God, Jesus. So you step in. You don't give up. God hasn't given up on you.

So you stay true. So you stay true. What follows is further praise in verse 7 for what is going to happen.

Jesus is going to come back. And we see the allusion to Daniel chapter 7 when we read, he is coming with the clouds. The son of man comes to the ancient of days and has given dominion over all the nations of the world, fully realizing his reign.

Behold, he's coming. Look, imagine with the eyes of your heart the coming of your Lord and Savior Jesus.

And when he comes back, every eye will see him. Every eye. No one's going to miss his second coming. Even those who pierced him.

[31:35] What that makes you think of are the Roman soldiers who pierced Jesus' side, drove nails into his wrists and feet. But it's also a reference to Zechariah chapter 12. All those who have opposed Jesus outrightly, whether through indifference or in ignorance, they're going to see him when he comes.

And if you're a Christian who's being tempted to compromise, there's a vindictive nature to this. It's like, yeah, he's coming back. There's a yes to this.

And it's just not those who pierced him. It's all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Now, there's some debate on what that word wail means, whether that is a mourning of repentance by the nations on account of him, or whether it is a, oh no!

He's come back. Just as those faithful ones were proclaiming. I believe it's a wail of, oh no!

And here's why. In Revelation chapter 16, there's the outpouring of wrath symbolized by seven bowls. In the fifth bowl, the fifth bowl is poured out on the earth.

[33:09] And what do the people do? They curse God and do not repent. And then the sixth bowl is poured out onto all the earth.

And what do the people do? They curse God and don't repent. And then the seventh bowl, the final bowl, poured out on all the earth. What do people do?

They don't humble themselves, but they curse, literally, blaspheme God and they don't repent.

When Jesus comes back, publicly for all to see, for those people who have cursed God, refuse to repent to the Lord Jesus, when they see Him, they are going to wail on account of Him because they're realizing it's all true.

Now for those of us who are followers of Jesus, this is welcome news. Oh, come Lord Jesus, come. But for those who are outside of the kingdom, this is a warning.

Don't be wailing when Jesus comes back. It compels us believers to be about the work of bearing witness to what Jesus has done because there are people in this city right now who need to hear about Jesus because of the wrath to come.

[34:44] Jesus is coming back. What we see here is who Jesus is and then what He has done and what He will do.

He's going to come back. And John wraps it up by saying, even so, amen. Yes, count on it. This kind of stuff gives us strength to endure because we know what our Savior has said.

He's the faithful witness. He's coming back to Him. Be glory and dominion forever and ever.

What we see happening here is this greeting has now pivoted into praise. And it's intended to give you courage in your heart to stay true to Jesus and not compromise.

In verse 8, we have the great approval. John comes full circle back to the Father who is and who was and who is to come. It bookends the passage in verse 4, He says that.

[35:54] In verse 8, it says that. And the effect is God in His glory is surrounding all of it, which is true. But He says He's the Alpha and the Omega.

I am the Alpha and the Omega. Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. And the expression meant, hey, the first, the last, and everything in between.

It's like our expression, hey man, that guy is the A to Z. God is saying, I am the A to Z, the creator, consummator, and controller of everything in between.

What's amazing is Jesus will use the same language of Himself throughout this book. Behind this is Isaiah 41, 44, 48, where God is making these huge claims that He is the only one.

sovereign over all. And then there's this other title, the Lord God, first person of the Trinity, another claim of sovereignly reigning over all.

[37:03] And then it closes with the Almighty. Another way of talking about God in His power reigning on high over everything.

So one can look at these titles and expressions of God the Father and say, well, those are very interesting. But you've got to understand how they're functioning.

Think of verses 4 through 7 as a kind of campaign commercial claiming Jesus to be worthy of your exclusive devotion. Don't compromise. Stay true in light of who He is and what He's done and what He will do.

And what verse 8 is is like that line at the end of a campaign commercial that says, I am God over all, the Alpha and the Omega, and I approve this message.

I approve this revelation. I approve this disclosure. Stay true. The only other place in Revelation where the Father speaks is at the end in chapter 21 starting in verse 3 moving forward and He is very keen on telling us, I'm going to wipe away every tear from your eye when I come back.

[38:23] God over all. The God over the already and the not yet. He is the God over every one of our circumstances.

He is the God in control. And He has grace for us today. He has peace for us today as we live in between the already and the not yet.

So don't shrink back. Step up. Count yourself yourself as one of the kingdom of God's grace, a priest of the living God.

Don't hide out but step into situations needing you to bear witness even challenging circumstances. And don't give up.

Stay put. Endure what you must until you see Him whether either on the day of your death or on the day of His second coming.

[39:28] Step up. Step in. Stay true. Your triune God is in control. We must take it to heart.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, there's no one like you.

And I pray for us who are tempted regularly to compromise our devotion to you that in light of who you are and in light of the sovereignty of our great triune God that you would give us what we need, the grace we need to stay true to you regardless of whatever little act of worship we're called to compromise you with.

Give us strength to endure for the glory of your name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.