

Revelation 1:1-8 “More Than Meets the Eye”

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! God wins. Grace prevails. Jesus reigns. You may have heard that the book of Revelation was complicated.

So I wanted to give it to you simple, upfront. Maybe some of you were expecting bigger words like post-millennialism and pre-tribulation, and we'll get to some of those complex matters later.

But at the heart of Revelation is a message that is as simple and as hopeful as you could possibly imagine right at the heart of our lives and our world. And that is why I am so excited, albeit a little intimidated, to start preaching through Revelation with you. We're going to be there for a while. Get comfortable. See, Revelation's message is that in spite of real evil and darkness in human history and in your life, God wins. So don't lose heart. There's real hope. It's found in God outside of us.

And grace prevails. Good comes out on top. So the best is always yet to come for us.

And Jesus reigns. So worship Him. Love Him. Delight in Him. Follow Him. Worship Him like we've been enjoying doing together this morning. Revelation is full of images. So I wanted to share one with you this morning that really helped me this week. Thursday morning, I went up on the mountain here at Blevins Gap Land Trust. I'd been told that the sunrise would happen right about six o'clock.

[2:28] So about that time, I made it up to the first clearing at the top of the mountain, and I saw this. Thick fog everywhere. Forget seeing the sunrise. I could barely see the trees right next to me or my hand in front of my face. It was just fog. Disappointed, I just jogged on down to the next clearing and turned to find a gorgeous sunrise developing. It was there all along. But from some angles, I wouldn't have been able to see it. From some perspectives, darkness and clouds would have been all there. And all there was, all that I could see, I almost missed out on something truly glorious.

You ever have that experience in your life? Does life ever seem more confusing and chaotic and cloudy than it does clear? Maybe the first week of school? Maybe. But maybe wars?

Disasters? Diseases? Maybe you're hurting. Maybe you're suffering. And things just never seem to get better when you thought that they were promised to.

Maybe life seems out of control and you don't see any purpose in it. And you were told there was one. Maybe like John who writes the book of Revelation, your plan for your life is not going the way that you expected. Because of John's faith in Jesus, he is exiled on a tiny island here in the latter years of his life. This was not John's ideal retirement plan.

Life seeming foggy and dark. And right into that kind of darkness, God shines the light of hopeful good news.

[5:05] God wins. Grace prevails. Jesus reigns. The sunrise is there. Behind the clouds.

In awe and gratitude. In awe and gratitude. If it doesn't lead you to stand before the storms of life with hope and confidence, you're not getting the right message.

That's what it's for. We need to ask for God's help because it can be hard to hear for us. And then I want to look for a few minutes at just the first few verses of Revelation.

They're at the very back of your Bible. Pray with me. Father, we long to see something truly glorious.

Someone truly glorious. We want to see more of where we fit in with him. But we're limited.

[6:47] And we're distracted. And we struggle with that. And so as you give us your word, would you not only open it to us, but open our eyes and our hearts to hear it and to see Jesus.

Please help us by your spirit in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. 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.

[7 : 58] 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, 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.

Thus far, God's holy word for which we give him thanks. What does Revelation teach us about itself right up front?

It's going to give us the introduction. In addition to being the word of God through John, it begins, very first word, by saying it's the revelation.

[9 : 13] The apocalypse is the word of, second word, Jesus Christ. It puts it in some ways in the category of apocalyptic literature, which probably you haven't read a ton of.

But that means it reveals, it discloses, it unveils something, something otherwise or previously hidden or shrouded.

It's going to show us. What? This revelation is focused on Jesus. In fact, it's a revealing of Jesus by Jesus, right?

Passed from God to Jesus through an angel who delivered it to John to give to everyone else, all of his servants.

So whatever else it may reveal or explain, it's first and foremost centered on Jesus. In case you don't know this about the book, it tells us here in the first verse that there will be figurative representation.

[10 : 29] Now that's what this verb means, to show, to give signs for. A figurative doesn't mean not real. But it may be that there are signs that are symbolic for other things.

We're going to see a host of these through the book of Revelation because seeing is really important here. Jesus is showing his servants all John saw.

It's unusual. Typically, God's word is heard or announced, even read. But this apocalyptic literature commonly used visions, images to communicate truth.

So we're going to have to look and listen through those lenses, he's telling us, as we go. I think to help us, you could picture it, what you're going to be doing in Revelation like walking through an art museum.

Okay? There's paintings all over the place, maybe of the similar scene or the same event. And Revelation is going to do that.

[11 : 37] It's going to describe the same events from different perspectives. It's not merely a chronological book exactly the way we might think about it. Sometimes it's a different painting of the same event from just five chapters previous in the book.

And you just saw it in the other room of the museum, right? What does that help us with? What does that do for us? Well, it engages our imaginations.

It brings us, helping us to put ourselves right there in the event itself. It stirs our hearts to wonder, to appreciate different facets of what's going on, to marvel at a picture, not a mere description of something.

Kids, some of you like to draw pictures of what you read in the Bible. Sometimes after a sermon, you will bring them and show me. And that's great. If you like doing that, you're going to enjoy Revelation.

Even if some of your pictures might get a bit scary, many of the ones that you draw as we read are going to be marvelous. You're not even going to be able to draw everything you want to.

[12 : 51] But this book is not mere apocalyptic literature like some other writings at the time. It's also referred to here as prophecy.

What Jesus wants us, his servants, to see is needful truth. In other words, it does tell us things that are our future.

Most agree with me, it says some things that are still future to us today. Things that must soon take place for the time is near.

Now with the coming of the Messiah, he's saying, we are in what the Bible calls the last days. It's this era of history that we have been living in for 2,000 plus years now, where we can count on certain things to happen because Jesus tells us they will, and we need to hear them to know how to live in this time.

Sometimes, though prophecy is not predictive of the future, but will correct us as God's people. God's people then and now.

[14:03] That's what prophets do, right? Just wait a couple of weeks until we hear the letters to the seven churches. Convicting. Challenging. Directing us today.

Not just one day, someday. What's going to happen. Prophetic in addition to apocalyptic. And finally, Revelation is also a letter.

Yes, there's a lot that John will see. Images that he will paint. But it is also written. God's written word. Sent specifically to his people, right?

Like most of the New Testament books, they're letters addressed to a church. This one to seven churches in Asia. Today, they're all in Turkey.

But seven is a special number pointing to fullness. There are lots and lots of sevens in Revelation. Okay, you can have fun keeping track of them.

[15:04] But it's one of those numbers that helps us understand something else behind it. Here, it's clearly meaning seven actual churches. They exist. On behalf of all the churches, the fullness of churches of Jesus Christ then and now.

This is for us as God's people. And for those to whom it is sent, to us, it is for their blessing, it says. What a gift.

This made me feel bad, honestly, for not preaching it sooner. Some of you have been very patient over the years. Blessing when we read. When we read.

When we listen. When we obey. When we center our lives and hope on the central hope of the book, Jesus. It's for your blessing.

People of God. It was not written to confuse you. but to show you truth. Revelation is not meant to make God harder to understand, but to unveil, to reveal him to you more. He wants you to know him. It's not intended to frustrate or to scare you, but to bless you, okay? To bless you with grace, the goodness of God poured into you beyond what you could ever deserve, to bless you with peace, the well-being that comes from graciously being welcomed into relationship with the one you were made for, grace and peace.

[16:44] There may be a moment in the next few months when you need to come back and remember that revelation is designed by God to bless you. What a good gift that is.

Well, what do we need to know about the one sending this blessing? The triune God. God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, the whole Godhead together here. First from the one who is and who was and who is to come. Long before you live, long after you are gone, he is Yahweh, the I Am, the self-existent God over all. And he not only spans past and present and future, but also verb change.

He is to come, not just will be, but is to come, to draw near to you, to be present with you, to assure you of his control of absolutely everything in your life. When this description is repeated in verse 8, he adds the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the one in charge of everything. The Almighty, who sovereignly rules over every single thing then, every single thing now, every single thing in the days ahead, there is nothing that he can't do. He, isn't this amazing? He brings you grace and peace that you don't deserve and that you can't find anywhere else. He brings it to you. Then there are the seven spirits before his throne, almost certainly a reference here to the Holy Spirit, referred to this way several times in the prophets. There's our seven again, right? It means the full Spirit, importantly, before the throne of God, ready to exalt the Father and the Son by bringing into our world, into our life, what the King on the throne decrees. The Spirit's going to make it happen.

But in this description of the triune God, the Son gets the most attention and description. This is about revealing him after all, right? Jesus Christ. Fully God couldn't be any clearer in this description that he also is the one who was and is and is to come. Jesus is called the faithful

witness. That means he perfectly reveals the Father to us. The Almighty, ever-existing God is truthfully and accurately shown for who he is when Jesus comes in the flesh. That's part of witness. But so is the extent that Jesus went to to do that. The word for witness is *martyr*. It's the word we get martyr from. He faithfully suffers. Jesus doesn't pull back. Even when he goes to the cross, he endures to the very end. He is faithful beyond anyone else. The faithful witness. And that sense of it is needed here because he is also called the firstborn of the dead. This word means not only has he risen, not only is he alive again after being truly dead. Wow, that's amazing. But it's even more than that. It's that because he is, many others will be too. Many other martyrs, sufferers will die and yet live again. This great faithful martyr will see to it that even death itself will not have the last word in your life. Indeed, he conquers death for us so that we too rise to new life. Praise Jesus, right? This is amazing good news.

[21:40] And finally, he's called the ruler of kings on earth. There is a king over all the other kings.

Then, now, tomorrow, and forever. Neither Nero, nor Domitian, nor Charlemagne, nor Hitler, nor Trump, nor Charles, nor Netanyahu, nor Putin, anybody else holds a candle to his reign. There is no comparison. He holds the hearts of kings in his hands. The ones who seem powerful now are to him, but a drop in the bucket. They will come and they will go and he will be on the throne. You know how you can know that? See, he is the anointed one. He is the messianic king going all the way back to the line of David. These descriptions of Jesus are all coming from Psalm 89. Quick side note, there are over 500 Old Testament allusions in the book of Revelation. About 70 percent of the book is referencing something in the Old Testament. So, you want to understand Revelation better? read Daniel. Read the Psalms. Read Exodus. We'll notice many of these as we go. Not 500 this morning. Today, just Psalm 89. Psalm 89 celebrates God's promise to David of a king who will always and forever be on his throne. Verse 27, I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.

Sound familiar? His throne will continue. He will always rule like the sun and the moon of faithful witness in the skies. Does John in Revelation have any question? Who is this unique, all-time great ruler, the promised king? Who that is? No. Jesus the Christ. He has no rival, no equal, no competition.

He reigns over every particle, over every power, over every person. And that is why, friends, you can have hope when things seem to be out of control. It's not some pie-in-the-sky hope. This is lion-on-the-throne kind of hope. That he is there today and no one can take him off of it and he's controlling what you're enduring and he's got you. You can have hope. That's what he's telling you. There's something to hang on to.

[24:54] The true king, in fact, verse 7, is coming with the clouds, coming in judgment on everyone, coming with the power of the storm in his hand. He rides on clouds for fun. That's how great his power is.

Those who haven't bowed the knee to his greatness will wail. So awesome is his arrival. So listen, John breaks out in praise of his greatness to him who, what does he say?

Think about what you expect him to say. To him who could crush you with one breath of his mighty justice. Could have said that. Is it to him who can't stand the presence of lesser beings, so great is he?

To him who won't be bothered with the likes of us, so uniquely worthy is he? No. No, it's none of those. To him Listen, you are beloved.

But it's not merely that you're loved. It's that he loves you. That's what makes being loved so marvelous, right? When you get engaged, you don't go around just saying, I'm getting married. I'm getting married. And someone says, to who? And you're like, I don't know, someone. I'm getting married. No, that's not what you say. You say, I get to marry her. I get to marry him. He loves me.

[26:44] That's what makes it wonderfully exciting. See, the book of Revelation is not just any letter. It is a love letter capping off the great love story of the Bible. Jesus wants you to know that the God who reigns over heaven and earth and all of history and every corner of creation and reigns over every person who has ever lived, that he loves you.

In case you get confused in Revelation at any point, would you come back to that? Revelation is not a coded treasure map where you're supposed to think that you're in an escape room and every single piece of writing has some coded message that if you could just figure it out, you could unlock the door to life.

That's not the kind of letter it is. Now when you get stuck in that loop, remember this is a love letter. Not surprisingly with poetic imagery, okay? It may take a minute to understand, but with a clear message you can count on that the conquering king, the lion and the lamb loves you. That's what he's telling.

But he does even more than say that he loves you. Some of us, honest confession, sometimes hear our spouses say, you know, you talk so much.

Would you stop just saying you love me and show me for just a little while? Jesus does that. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, with his blood he purchased for God a people from every tribe and language and people and nation.

[28 : 44] We were enslaved to sin in rebellion against the king and instead of fighting against us he fought for us as he bought our pardon at the cost of his precious blood.

The king doesn't just love you a little. Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends and when we were yet enemies Christ died for us.

So we're free. We are loved and we are set free but be honest aren't we after all pretty small and meaningless in the grand scheme of the universe and the millennia of history and don't we need to remind ourselves of that sometime?

I mean that is one way to look at it and it can be a helpful way when you're tempted to prideful self-importance because it's not untrue from that viewpoint.

But that's not the way Jesus looks at you. He has made us a kingdom priests to his God and Father.

[29 : 58] forever. Now don't get confused. He's the king. The glory and the power are his forever and ever. Amen. No confusion there.

But the king includes us. Nothing else could be more significant than this identity that the king bestows on you.

Having been loved and set free by the king you're brought into his kingdom like his people Israel in Exodus 19 and his New Testament church in 1 Peter 2.

We are royal priests in the king's very house. You know what that means? It means that you are invited in to the closest of relationships with the king himself as his very priest priest it means that whereas on your own you were undeserving you were his enemy who deserved only to be repelled from his presence in his grace because of his great love we can now draw near to him and bring acceptable sacrifices to him as part of his kingdom work all because the great sacrifice has set us free has qualified us to be priests of the great king can you believe that?

That you would be doing vitally important work for the king of the universe? That you would be close enough to know him personally? That means that you're tending to a little corner of creation's garden you're wiping the nose of a little child you're generous giving to a missionary you're sacrificial loving of the left out new kid at school this week you're obeying your parents when it doesn't make sense to you you're repenting to your spouse or your friend or your child from the heart those little things it means they are so significant it means that they're a part of the everlasting kingdom of the

[32 : 31] God of all of history who is and who was and who is to come whose kingdom will have no end and neither will your sacrifices when you offer your body a living sacrifice to worship him you're a priest in his kingdom he loves you unbelievable now that's the story of revelation God wins grace prevails Jesus reigns you might hear that again but it needs to matter for you it needs to mean so you may ache under the attacks of evil in this world you may be suffering right now in what feels like an endless cycle of meaningless work and painful relationships and traumatic loss you may even be martyred for your faith but God is bringing his precious purchased people to share his limitless glory and joy in a perfect home forever so whatever else you think about yourself today that you're unloved that you're stuck and trapped and insignificant you need to remember that you're a vital part of King

Jesus beloved family and universal purpose today and through eternity you always will be we're going to hear that a lot and he wants you not just to hear that today but he wants you to taste it just think for a minute if you could be invited by this incredible king to eat with him then maybe just maybe you're more significant than you're giving yourself credit for maybe you maybe you matter to him and as a result you matter to the whole unending story of all of history you're significant in that listen to the words of King

Jesus speaking to disciples like John and other whose names you don't even remember who failed him at times but whom he loves all the way to the cross as he headed there he said with the bread that he broke and gave to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take and eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and then in the same way after supper he took the cup and he said this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins so whenever you eat this bread and you drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes because he'll be coming he's that one the one who is who was who is to come and he's going to be coming for you because he loves you and he gave his blood to free you from your sins forever friends this is not the table of

Southwood or the Presbyterian church this is the king's table Jesus invites you to this table he invites those he loves in spite of their poor performance this week he invited you before that and he invites you now after it to come and to remember that you've been freed from your sin by his precious blood brought into his family to sit at his table and eat with him please come as you trust him if that's not your hope if you're honestly not sure you need Jesus or you're just not willing today to bow the knee to him to what he says your life should look like to him being the king then don't come and eat what he serves this morning but equally don't let these elements pass without considering who he offers himself as to you as the one true king who actually gives his life to rescue you forever and to bring you into the relationship you were made for let me pray and then we'll come and celebrate together

Jesus that you would love us like that is beyond what we could honestly comprehend today thank you for giving us bread and wine to help us taste it to help our hearts expand the possibility of what it could be like to be loved by you so would you use them powerfully in our hearts even now thank you for meeting with us we pray in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org may may