

The Writer's Greeting to The Churches of Asia
Verses 4-8

Verse 4

Now Revelation has been transmitted from heaven to earth. The human medium of revelation addresses seven historical churches of Asia Minor in the name of the living God in Christ.

Note: See C. F. Wishart, *The Book of Day*; an excellent examination of the significance of the various numbers which constantly appear in *The Revelation*.

Why were these seven churches singled out for examination? The seven congregations listed did not exhaust the congregations in Asia - at the time of John's banishment to Patmos. There were congregations at Hieropolis, Colossae, and Miletus. We cannot give any categorical answer to the above question - why were only seven churches mentioned? There have been many answers given to the question, but unfortunately for the answers they were not grounded in biblical exegesis; therefore, we are not bound to accept their speculative answers.

What are the geographical boundaries of Asia as it is used in *The Revelation*? The term is found in *Aeschylus*, *Pindar*, *Herodotus*. The geographers of the fourth century B.C. also used the term Asia Minor. The term is also used in the Books Maccabees and it there means the territory of the Seleucid Empire. The Territory which is signified in pre N.T. usage was identified, by the Romans, as that territory which Attalus the third, had controlled before the Roman conquest of his domain. In the N.T. Asia is always Proconsular Asia. Ramsay calls the "seven churches of Asia" representative only, because there were other congregations in existence at that time. This very narrow sense of the term Asia (in comparison to its pre-N.T. and/or contemporary use) certainly fits in with the biblical data (see Acts 19: 10 and 26). The boundaries of Asia were relatively small in N.T. times. (see any good recent *Bible Atlas* for the specific lines of demarcation.)

The salutation of "grace to you and peace" . . . is reminiscent of Paul's greetings. The salutation bids unmerited favor and the holiness of God through a holy life (peace). The source of the grace and peace is Christ. John states that it follows "from him who is, who was, and who is to come." Those who reject the Scriptures as the unique Word of God often appeal to this verse of *The Revelation* and assert that the author did not

know Greek grammar, because this verse is a maze of grammatical confusion.

Note: See this charge made by C. H. Charles in Volume I of his commentary - Introductory section - the grammar of The Apocalypse.

Two things can be asserted in reply to this charge - (1) Contemporary Linguistics completely repudiates the now antiquated view that there is any thing like an absolute grammar which is binding on the user of any language. This thesis still survives through classical scholars who are unacquainted with linguistic development; (2) John could not have said what he wanted to say (and did in fact state) on the basis of standard grammar. Each of the three terms is a proper name for God. The first proper name is translated as "him who is." This present participle is the best that human language can do to express the eternity of God. (The *ho-ōn* is the same expression used in the Septuagint for translating the Hebrew tetragram in Exodus 3:14.) The second name comes from the imperfect form of the finite verb - (Greek has no imperfect participle following the parallel structure of the first name - present participle form) - see John 1:1ff where the imperfect is used regarding the person of the Word incarnate.) The third proper name is literally translated "the coming one." This is a present participle and is not to be confused with a future form which might be translated "who shall be." The term is about almighty God, and to use a future would imply that He does not now exist, but that He shall exist sometime in the future. This name points to His coming again as in 1:7 and 22:20. The salutation is also "from the seven spirits that are before his throne." Though the symbolism makes this figure enigmatic, I believe that Trench is correct when he says that this must be "the Holy Ghost sevenfold in his operations."

Note: See R. C. Trench, *Commentary on The Epistles to The Seven Churches*, Macmillan, 1867, p. 9.

Hardly any other interpretation fits into the pattern between the Father and the Son (vs. 5) - other than that this is a symbolic phrase for the Holy Spirit.

Verse 5

Jesus Christ is mentioned after the Holy Spirit because of the fact that what follows (vs. 5-8) relates to His person. The first title is a messianic title (Ps. 89:37). The Christ is a faithful witness because He is the medium of the revelation and

he has delivered without modification the will of God for man through a banned prophet on an isolated Mediterranean island. He faithfully discharged His work as the redeemer of men. The term thus becomes descriptive of the nature of His testimony. The next title is also descriptive of a vital aspect of His messianic work. "The first begotten of the dead" is also used by Paul in Colossians 1:18. This title asserts His absolute and final victory over death. Others have been raised from the dead (e.g. Lazarus John 11), but to die again. Christ and Christ alone is victor over the grave never to fall prey again to the dark chambers of death. Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). The word translated first begotten is composed of *prō* plus a form of the verb *tiktō* - to bear or to bring forth. Though in classical Greek the meaning of *beget* is dominate, but in N.T. Greek the sense of *beget* is probably not found. There are one or two possible exceptions. The glory and majesty of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords shines through the third title. Through the triumph of the resurrection Christ is openly declared to be "the ruler of the kings of the earth." The glorified Christ reigns over every human domain. Swete aptly observes that the preceding three titles of Christ "answers to the threefold purpose of the apocalypse which is at once a Divine testimony, a revelation of the Risen Lord, and a forecast of the issues of history." (See his *The Apocalypse of John*, reprinted by Eerdmans, 1951, p. 7). See for further analysis of the titles of Christ in *The Revelation* in an appendix of this commentary.)

The first of the many beautiful doxologies to Jesus Christ appears in the next sentence of verse 5. The text literally reads "To the one loving us and having loosed us out of our sins by his blood."

Note: There is a textual problem here for those who want to consider the technical matters of the text see Jose Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse* - Textes, 1955, 2 volumes - imperative for serious textual study.

The K. J. translation "unto him that loved us" is wrong. The imagery is beautiful here. John is asserting the fact that Jesus Christ constantly loves us (*agapōnti*, present participle) and loosed (or freed) us (*Lusanti* - first aor. participle from *luo* - to loose - not washed as the K. J.) once for all out of our sins,

this imagery reveals that we have been in bondage to sin (Romans 6:1ff) but are now set free by the atoning work of Christ on the cross. The necessity of the blood atonement of Christ is asserted in the last phrase of the verse - "by his blood." How are we loosed from our sins? The vicarious work of Christ is the answer. No man can be loosed from his sins by being good; if he is saved at all, it will be because he has surrendered to the faithful witness, the first begotten from the dead, and Ruler of the kings of the earth.

Verse 6

What are some of the results of being loosed from our sins by the blood of Christ? John continues that Christ "made (epoiesen aor ind.) us a kingdom." The K. J. is wrong where it gives kings instead of kingdom. The term (basileian) means kingdom not king (this term is basileis). The N.T. does not apply the term king to Christians. We do not need to go to Luther's reformation doctrine of the "Priesthood of Believers," because its origin is in the N.T. (see I Pet. 2:9 - Royal priesthood) The kingdom of the King of Kings is the collective form of the committed community (The Church). Next, John asserts that the redemptive work of Christ has also made priests (*hiereis*) of each Christian. In the O.T. the office of the priest was a special office held only by a limited, select group of men.

Note: (See Hebrew Epistle chps 2:17f; 4:14f; 5:1f, 7:1f.) B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to The Hebrews*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan reprinted, 1950, see p. 210; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of The Older Testament*, Zondervan Pub. House, 1962, pp. 372, etc. Oelher's older work in Old Testament Theology; also has an excellent study on the place and purpose of the O.T. priesthood. There are many more advanced works, but the ones mentioned above are written by men who believe the Bible to be the Word of God.

After Christ's atonement every believer becomes a priest. What does this imply? In the O.T. the priest was a special person whose function was to make mediation between God and the community of Israel and himself. Now the Christian does not need any special group, whether a clergy system or the Roman Catholic priesthood. Each Christian has direct and immediate access to God through Jesus Christ. The distinction between clergy and laity is abolished. The New Testament uses forms of the terms clergy and laity, but they are applied to the same group, i.e., Christians. Each member of the kingdom is a priest! John concludes verse 6 by announcing that Christians

are priests unto "his God and Father; to him be the glory and dominion for ever and for ever. Amen." The universality of God's glory and dominion are clearly implied in the use of the definite articles with each noun. Glory implies honor, praise to God. The word probably means to be placed out in public view under the best possible conditions. Dominion asserts the universal sovereignty of the living God. He is not merely sovereign over the kingdom, but over the entire universe - physical and spiritual. The phrase "forever and ever" is the only way human, timebound language can assert the eternity of God. (See appendix on *The Biblical Theology of Time and Eternity* for further discussion.)

Verse 7

To the preceding doxology, John adds the great and glorious declaration that the one who has all dominion and merits all glory is coming again. The cloud symbolism is used in Daniel 7:13; Matthew 24:30, etc.) His coming will be no secret! Every eye shall physically behold Christ's coming (*opsetai* - future tense of *horaō*). This verb denotes the result of seeing rather than the act of seeing. The compound relative "that they" covers the class of people who *pierced* (the verb form is aor. act. ind.) Christ. I take this to be that class of people of all ages from the actual crucifixion to His coming again who reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The aorist form of the verb could be construed to mean those who actually crucified Christ, but I believe that the remainder of the sentence militates against this interpretation. John continues to describe the response of mankind to the coming again of Christ as he states that "all the tribes (phule-tribes - linguistic groups) of the earth will shall mourn (wail) over him. Even so (Yes) Amen." It is apparent from this statement that no man or group of men shall be exempt from the hour of his judgment. The remorse of men is intense (the verb translated mourn shall be translated wail - it is fut. ind. mid. voice of *koptō*). John is led by the Spirit to use a verb which means to smite, to beat or pound one's self in mourning. This picture presents men wailing (beating on their chests), because they have rejected the only one who can forgive their sins. The use of the middle voice form of the word points out that the cause of mourning is within themselves and is not caused by some inflicted external anguish.

Verse 8

The alpha and omega were the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. The two titles (or one combined title) have the definite articles which assert the absolute first and the absolute last. The Lord God declares Himself to be the absolute first and last (that He continually makes that declaration is shown by the present tense verb to say *legei*). The three following descriptive titles of the Lord God are of the very same form as we found in verse 4. The term *pentokratōr* is a new descriptive term for God in The Revelation. It means all powerful, or completely powerful and is used only one time besides this instance in the N.T. - II Cor. 6:18. It is constantly used as a descriptive term for the Lord God in the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Hebrew O.T. In our age of power struggles we need to realize that power can be destructive as well as creative. Power can enable one *to take* what he wants or *to give* what he wants. It is in the latter sense (to give) that Paul asserts that "The Gospel is the power of God unto Salvation" (Romans 1:16).

Review Questions

Prologue 1:1-8

1. What is the origin or source of revelation according to vs. 1?
2. What two factors did John bare witness to according to vs. 2?
3. If we desire the blessings of God what are some of the things we must do according to vs. 3?
4. Were there other congregations in existence besides the 7 churches of Asia which are listed?
5. What do the three messianic titles listed in vs. 5 mean to you?
6. What are some of the results of our being loosed from our sins through the blood of Christ in vs. 6?
7. Will any escape on the great day of His coming again, vs. 7?

SECTION 3

Text 1:9-20

9 I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony

of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet 11 saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Laodicea. 12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. 14 And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. 17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not: I am the first and the last, 18 and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter; 20 the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angles of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks are seven churches.

Initial Questions, 1:9-20

1. What *tribulation* was John speaking of in vs. 9?
2. Where is the island of Patmos located?
3. Why was John on Patmos?
4. Where are the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea located?
5. Is the symbolism of *seven stars* and *seven golden candlesticks* clearly defined in this section of scripture? vs. 20.