

# Revelation 1

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Preacher: Joe Barnard

[ 0 : 00 ] If you'd like to open your Bibles to Revelation 1, we're going to focus on verses 4 to 8 this evening.

I'd like to tell my son that there should always be a big idea with a sermon. Tonight we're thinking about Christians, the fact that as Christians we're misfits. Now I can remember I was in Rome, I was probably 18 or 19, I was taking a tour of the Colosseum.

It was summer, a lot of people around the Colosseum that time of year. And I don't know why I was on this tour, I don't usually do that sort of thing, but usually a tour guide has some kind of clothing.

Something such that he's identifiable, a funny hat, bright shirt, an umbrella. Now the problem with this tour guide was there was nothing really to identify him by.

Which meant the whole time, rather than really being able to listen to whatever he was explaining about this incredible building, I was just trying to follow him, and find him, and figure out where he was in the crowd.

[ 1 : 07 ] Now I think that's a picture of the way Christians often are. In the scriptures that we're meant to have some kind of calling to stand out. But truth be told, I wonder if sometimes we're so blended in, that actually people don't really know who we are, or where we are.

They're not able to identify who those people are that actually have a relationship with the living God. So what I want us to do, I want us tonight to look at these verses, but I want us to keep two eyes on two different things.

I want us to be thinking about what John is saying, but also thinking about how what he's saying goes against kind of the culture that we live in. That actually if we really appreciate what he's telling us, we can't help but not quite fit in to the world around us.

The first way I think Christians are misfits, that I think we see in this passage, is we're misfits because ultimately we acknowledge a different authority. There are a couple of words just in verse 4.

They're the kind of words we gloss over, but I think they're hugely significant. And it's just when John in this introduction, he says, Grace and peace to you. And then he explains from whom this grace and peace has come.

[ 2 : 28 ] You know, we're accustomed to these words. These are just kind of, you know, New Testament language. Grace and peace. But what you have to realize as you move into a book like Revelation, is that it's not just Christians that believed in a grace and in a peace.

That actually in the Roman world, there was a supposed peace and a supposed grace. Let's think about the peace first. In the Roman world, there was something called the Pax Romana.

There was this mentality that actually Rome had brought peace to the world. And of course, the peace that Rome had brought was the peace of empire.

It was the kind of peace that said to anyone who would contest her rule, either you submit or we'll crush you. It's the kind of peace that puts the plaster over the wound, but doesn't get to the real problem.

It doesn't bring actual justice into the world. But actually just creates a kind of system that exploits, creates wealth, that elongates the power of Rome herself.

[ 3 : 36 ] That was the peace of Rome. And likewise, there was a grace that went with Rome. It's what Juvenola Roman writer called bread and circuses. The strategy of the Caesars was, you tell the people, you preach a message of your generosity, give them entertainment, and give them food, and they'll be happy.

That's just what happened in Rome. This is taken from an article. I thought it was interesting. The writer said, free grain and controlled food prices meant that the working class could not starve, while free entertainment, such as chariot races and the gladiators, meant that they would not get bored and restless.

Bribery it may have been, but it often worked. There was a peace. There was a grace to the Roman world. But it was very different from what John opens this book with.

When John says, peace and grace, he's talking about something that you can't find anywhere else. The peace that he speaks of at the start of Revelation is the peace that is unfolded through the mission that we read about in Revelation.

God's not interested in a superficial peace. He's not interested in, you know, some sort of global economy and some sort of democratic values and something that will maintain a good standard of living.

[ 5 : 07 ] That's not what he's interested in. He will not bribe us to keep us happy. What he offers and what he's bringing in Revelation is peace.

Final peace. Wickedness uprooted from creation. New creation. Every hint of injustice, every hint of sin, every hint of the beast removed finally from his creation.

So that absolute peace can come. When John says peace, that's the peace he wants us to be thinking about. And when he says grace, again, he's not talking about that bribery of Rome, just the food and the entertainment.

And if you think about us, we're not a lot different from the Romans, right? You know, we're pretty happy if we're given food. If we've got good internet access.

Maybe you throw in healthcare as well. We're content. But at the start of this, John wants to offer the grace of God. The grace is what makes God's peace come into effect in the world.

[ 6 : 20 ] And from the very beginning of Revelation, you've got to recognize that John is saying that the church recognizes an altogether different order of authority, a different world order than what anybody outside the church would recognize.

And you see it when he unpacks what really is probably the greatest statement of the Trinity in the whole of the New Testament. I mean, look at what he says starting in verse 4.

Remember, this grace, this peace, it comes first of all from him who is, who was, and who is to come. I mean, he takes that great statement of God's name in the Old Testament, I am who I am, and then he just explodes it and speaks of the God who is and was and who is coming.

And then he mentions the seven spirits before God's throne. Seven, not because there are seven different spirits, seven in the sense of the fullness of God's spirit. They're with him at the throne.

And then finally, this peace and grace that comes into our world, verse 5, from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

[ 7 : 42 ] That's the authority that we recognize as Christians. The only authority that really offers any real peace to this world, that has any kind of grace, any kind of gift that could actually bring real prosperity to our planet.

It comes through a God, Father, Spirit, Son, that in Revelation is on a mission to bring that peace through that grace.

So again, we see from the start the first way that Christians are misfits is because we acknowledge an altogether different authority, governing, bringing peace than anyone else.

and the world around us. Now the second way I think that we see from this passage that Christians are misfits is we're misfits because we tell a different story. Again, we've got to recognize Revelation, it tells a story, but it's not the only thing telling a story.

The world around us is also telling a story. And these things come into conflict. I mean, let's think about the world first. Let's think about its story. The first thing the world would tell us is not that God is dead, but that God is irrelevant.

[ 8 : 58 ] There's a whole lot of Christians fighting atheists. The problem is there aren't that many atheists. There's a lot of indifferent people. The New Scientist had a really interesting article. This is what it said. It said, the UK isn't becoming a country of committed atheists.

Most of the unaffiliated neither accept nor reject religion. They simply don't care about it. Those passionate about religion's role in public life, whether to elevate or expunge it, should recognize that they are in the minority.

Increasingly, none of us do God. God. The story of the world is, guess what, it doesn't matter if there is or isn't a God. He's irrelevant. And secondly, underpinning that story that the world tells us is this story of progress.

That the world just continues to advance and get better. And so again, whether there's God or not, He's in the dust. The world has moved beyond Him.

And guess what, the third part of that story would be that the church is just a relic. You've got to realize that, you know, in the world's eyes, we are the equivalent of a VCR player.

[ 10 : 14 ] I mean, I hope nobody here still plays VCR. You know, there's videotapes. There probably is somebody here that still has some of those in the house. And if so, it just tells everybody around you that you're just a little bit behind the times.

In the same way, the world, it looks in on us and thinks, you know, they're sincere, they're nice, they're well-meaning. They just haven't caught up with where the world is. That's the story that the world is telling.

Now, what's amazing is the story that Revelation tells and how it conflicts and contradicts that story of the world. I mean, the first thing Revelation would tell us is that God, I mean, you can almost say this with Revelation, that God has never been so alive.

I mean, if you want to see this, look at verse 5. You know, Jesus, who we read about, who was dead, now he's alive. The firstborn from the dead.

And what the whole of Revelation tells, and it says it with imagery that baffles us, confuses us, that we've got to meditate and pray on, but what it tells us is that God is active in our world in the most surprising of ways, that actually, when you can view our world through the lens of heaven, the things the world would say discredit God are actually the very actions of God progressing the victory of Jesus.

[ 11 : 46 ] That the seals are coming undone. That the trumpets are blasting. The bowls are being poured out. That God is coming.

It's really interesting. Verse 4. You would expect, John, to tell us that God is the one who is, was, and is in the future.

Past, present, future. He doesn't. I mean, the literal translation, God who is, was, and is coming. Don't you love in the Narnia books when we're told that Aslan is on the move?

And the word that John would have us know is God, he's not irrelevant, God is present, he's active, he's on the move. He's never been so near. But equally, what's interesting when you read Revelation is you find out that the world gets things backwards.

The world thinks that history is a story of progress. What Revelation would have us know is that actually human history is the story of regression. And I mean regression in the Freudian sense.

[ 12 : 51 ] The Freudian sense to regress is to behave in a way inappropriate to your age. To behave in a way that belongs to someone who's less mature than you are.

What's incredible that we see in Revelation is that actually human behavior is regressive. The furthest, most progressive act in human history is the resurrection of Jesus.

He's the only one that's been resurrected from the dead. You can't progress past that. You know, you can extend human life as long as you want, but you can't resurrect a dead man.

That's the furthest point of progression. And it's amazing. What we find as we read through Revelation is that actually human behavior is adolescent.

It's rebellious. Again, it's regressive. I mean, it's really interesting as the plagues of God come in Revelation, what we find is the very things that ought to break the hardness of the human heart, the judgment of God.

[ 14 : 03 ] You know how human responds? They just get more stubborn. Human history is the story of us regressing, refusing that message of salvation, refusing to advance according to what God has done in trying to cling to what we regard as happiness.

When God is offering us something much richer. But thirdly, you might remember that story the world tells how the church is just a relic. It's not at all what Revelation would tell us.

Revelation tells us that actually the church is the hope of this world. Now, God is the hope of this world, but he uses the church. Verse 6, look at what he says.

You know, through Christ's work, what has happened? He has made us to be a kingdom and priests. Kingdom and priests. Do you know the story of Exodus?

Do you know God, he took the Israelites out of Egypt, he brought them to Sinai, he took them to Sinai and said, I will make you a kingdom of priests. You will be my instrument through which I bring that blessing of Abraham to the world.

[ 15 : 25 ] The calling of Israel was to be a missional people. And what we find here is the same phrase is used as kingdom.

Kings and priests, kingdom and priests. it's the language of Exodus that God has redeemed us not just so we can sit back and be self-satisfied, but so we can realize we now have a mission.

That now we are the ones that God will use to win the nations. And that's what Revelation is about. It's a battle for the nations. It's a battle between the Lamb who has purchased people from the nations, from every tribe, tongue, and nation for himself versus the beast who is deceptive and wants the nations to be deceived.

And there in the middle is the church bearing witness, showing people that God is at work, that Christ is worth believing in.

It's our testimony that God uses to reach the nations. That's the story of Revelation. That the church is not at all a relic of the past. The church is actually the very instrument that God uses to bring hope to this world.

[ 16 : 46 ] So Christians, we're misfits. Again, we're misfits because we acknowledge a different authority. But secondly, we're misfits because we tell a different story. But thirdly, the third thing I think we see in this passage is that we're misfits because we have hope.

we have got to realize regardless of what people say, the world has no hope.

You know what the world has? The world has technology. And sometimes the world thinks that technology actually is hope. It's not. Again, the same magazine, the same new scientist has had this really interesting article on stem cell replacement or stem cell therapy.

And this is a quote from it. It said, a revived cloning method has turned human adult cells into stem cells that become anything you need. From neurons to cartilage, cell replacement therapies could dramatically change treatments and cure debilitating diseases.

They raise the possibility of rejuvenating aging bodies with the injection of stem cells. And friends, that all sounds wonderful, but guess what? Maybe stem cells can make me live longer.

[ 18 : 08 ] But they can't conquer death. They can't fix my marriage. They can't help me with an addiction. If you're really placing your hope in stem cells, your hope is rather narrow and has nothing to do with the expansive hope unveiled through the gospel.

The world doesn't have hope. Only Christians have hope. Only Christians have the promise, as we read this morning, of one who has the keys to death and to Hades.

Only Christians have the hope, if you read through Revelation, that one day God's redemption will be so perfect that heaven will come to earth. God will dwell with men.

Suffering will be over. Bodies will be resurrected. Peace between all peoples. And life will be eternal. And if it's less than that, it's not hope.

And the world needs to find a different word for it. Because only we bear that kind of hope in this world. Real hope.

[ 19 : 21 ] We've got to see, we don't fit in because we live trusting God that He will bring about that full hope for us.

Now that's the big idea tonight. Again, I tell my son that every sermon needs a big idea, that we are misfits. But what's the so what of this? How does it land in our life? What difference would it make if we really believed that we do have a different authority?

That we do tell a different story? That we do have hope? How would that change the way we live tomorrow? Let me just offer a few suggestions. Here's the first one.

First, you live for one audience. All of us, you know, we're so consumed with how people think about us. We all have some group. Maybe it's a peer group. Maybe it's colleagues that define success for us.

Maybe it's our mother and father. Maybe it's a spouse. Maybe it's just the voice within our own head that we listen to. We live for these audiences. When you begin to see the authority of the triune God and believe in His hope, one of the things that happens is you begin to live for one audience.

[ 20 : 40 ] You begin to live for the one who is and was and who is coming. You begin to live for Jesus, who's the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler who loved us and freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom so that we can serve His Father.

You begin to see that this is the only audience that matters. So I can forget how my colleagues define success. I can forget how I've disappointed my parents.

I can forget how I view myself because all that matters is how God sees me. There's the liberty of actually just living for Him.

The second way that this ought to land into our life, this is that as Christians, we ought to have a different perspective on death.

I love this phrase. This is Revelation 12, verse 11. It speaks of how these martyrs, these saints, have overcome the beast by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony.

[ 21 : 50 ] They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Now we know what that means in the context of the martyrs, that they don't love their life so much as to shrink back from death.

They offer their life to God knowing that God can give it back. We know what it means in that context. What does it mean for us? You know, most of us, we love our life so much that we shrink from death.

Youth do this. Do you know how youth do this if you're a teenager here tonight? Do you know how you do this? It's through this whole ethic of YOLO, right? You only live once. This idea that there is death, I'm going to shrink back from it, I'm going to maximize my experience of life, I'm going to live for self while I have energy and opportunity, and I'm going to say that this is the good life and that I'm a Christian too.

Right? That's shrinking back from death, that's loving your life in a way that doesn't actually attest that, look, whatever death is, we've got life on the other side, so I don't have to maximize my life from me.

If I've got strength and opportunity in my life, I can maximize it for Jesus and for His glory. Let's flip the table.

[ 23 : 12 ] What about if you're elderly? You know, the elderly people in our society, they do the same thing. They fear death, they shrink back, they cling to their life, and you know how they do it?

With this phase of life we call retirement, right? Where after you've given your life in a profession, before there's no strength at the end, you have this little haven of time where you can just focus on yourself before it's too late and death comes near.

Of course, this is, you know, this is letting go of the whole hope of the gospel because what we ought to be is a people that, yes, we see death on the horizon, but guess what?

Death doesn't govern how I live my life because Jesus has conquered death, so what life I have left to live, if anything, is about preparing myself for Him and living as a testimony that my hope is real, that I don't have to get the most out of this 10 years of life because I got eternity on the other side.

You know, what happens when you actually begin to see, again, the story, the authority, the hope of revelation is what revelation actually begins to squeeze into us is the mindset of a martyr.

[ 24 : 36 ] There's a little phrase and it echoes through the whole of revelation. You see it for the first time in verse 2. The word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

we as a people are called to be a martyr in the sense of bearing testimony that everything we believe about Jesus is true.

And what happens when revelation begins to get into your blood, get into your thinking, is that your life begins, and it's a process and it relies upon the grace that we've spoken of already, but your life begins to be one statement that conflicts with all of the statements of the world that Jesus is the authority, that God has told us a story, and that part of that story is a hope worth living for.

And as we begin to be that kind of people, as that story, that vision begins to become a part of who we are, we can't help but begin to not quite fit in.

As the rest of the world lives fearing death, clinging to life, not having hope, and thinking that the best of this life is the peace and the generosity that whatever society around us can offer.

[ 26 : 09 ] And we say, no, there's more, and the more is in Jesus. And that's how we don't want to fit in. That's how we don't want to be misfits.

That's how we don't want to be like those tour guide, or the tour guide I told you about at the beginning, who was so like everyone around him that the people who wanted to see and be led couldn't identify him.

We want to be different enough that the world can see, look, there's something about us worth asking about, worth following. There's a God worth getting to know.

And he brings peace, he brings grace, and he brings hope into this world. Let's pray and ask the Lord to let this word take root in our lives.

Father, we come before you to depose the self. Lord, the self is the great antichrist, if we want to call it that, of our society.

[ 27 : 14 ] It is the great authority that sets itself in opposition to you. There isn't a Caesar, Lord, in this part of the world that proclaims himself to be son of God.

Lord of Lords, but Lord, in its own way, the self is proclaimed to be the Lord, the God of each individual. Live for the self, be true to the self, affirm the self, worship the self.

This is the religion that we hear all of the time. And it's a religion that produces spiritual cowardice. It's a religion that makes us narcissistic and makes us lose our focus on Jesus.

And Lord, we just pray that tonight that again, that something of this incredible world of revelation, that it would break in and disrupt our thinking. That we would see again the incredible hope that you have given us in the gospel.

And that we would hold fast to that hope. That we would meditate on it. That just as John, as he took that scroll, as he chewed on it, it was bitter in his mouth, but then it was sweet. Or it was sweet and then it was bitter.

[ 28 : 24 ] Lord, we just pray the same, that Lord, we digest the word that you have given us. We know that that word, that there is a bitterness to it. That it's not easy to follow the way of the cross, but there's a sweetness nonetheless.

And it's utterly worthy of being followed, the message of the cross, because ultimately it leads to life. So Lord, we just, we come before you and we thank you that you are at work.

We thank you that you speak peace and grace into our life tonight. We thank you that our salvation is not dependent upon us, that our sanctification is not dependent upon us.

But Lord, rather that the whole triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is at work to bring about the perfection of your creation.

Lord, we eagerly await that day where we see the new city unveiled without sorrow, without grief, without sin, without destruction, without injustice, without all of the things that we see in the present world.

[ 29 : 28 ] But Lord, until that day, help us to keep our eyes fixed on what our mission is. Lord, day in, day out, to die, to sin, to live to Christ, to be washed in your word, and to eagerly await the return of our King.

Lord, we thank you for this word. Again, put a handle on it. Put something on it that we can carry it with us through this week. Make it change us for your glory, for our good. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.