

Revelation 1:1-8

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[0 : 00] I have three tasks for you today.

Or let me perhaps rephrase that. God has three tasks for you today. I wonder if you're up for these three tasks.

Now, if you're anything like me, you're perhaps thinking, well, tell me what they are first. Well, you are to receive, you are to give, and you are to listen.

Now, you might still think that that's a little bit sketchy, and you may be unwilling to commit to that, while you still don't really know what that is all about. Let me flesh it out a little more.

You are to receive greetings from God. That's your first task. You are to give praise to God. That's the second task. And you are to listen to a message from God.

[1 : 06] And we find all of these things in the passage that we're going to be looking at this morning. Three tasks for God's people this morning. Before we think of each of them, let's just identify them in the passage, so that you can see that this summary is, at least in some measure, fair or true to the material that we have here in the second half of the first chapter of Revelation.

Notice there in verses 4 and 5, very especially there with the words beginning, grace and peace to you from Him who is and was and is to come, and it continues.

So what do we have there in these two verses? Well, we have greetings, and they are greetings from God directed to us. Last Sunday morning we already established that the recipients of this letter are the servants of Jesus in every generation.

So that includes us. And so we can rightly take this greeting as a greeting from God directed to us.

But then in verses 5 or the second half of verse 5 through to verse 6, we have John erupting in praise to God.

[2 : 35] Verse 6 ends with the words, To Him be glory and power forever and ever. And this is the language of praise. And so the chapter continues with this little section or these couple of verses that describe for us praise to God.

And our task is to join with John in praising God in the manner that he does so. But then finally in verses 7 and 8, we have a message from God.

For us as readers of the letter. A message that begins with this call to look. Look, he is coming with the clouds.

And then the message continues. And we want to listen to that message that God has for us. So these are the three tasks. We need to receive greetings from God.

We need to give praise to God. And we need to listen to a message from God. So let's think of each of them. One by one. First of all, receive greetings from God.

[3 : 41] I wonder, have you ever received a greeting from somebody very important? As I was thinking about that, I can't remember. I guess you would remember if it had happened.

I can't remember ever receiving a greeting from somebody very important. But as I was thinking about this, I was thinking about my own parents who are about to celebrate in a couple of months' time their 60th wedding anniversary.

Now that's quite an accomplishment in itself. And in the light of that, I was making inquiries as to what I need to do to ensure that they receive a greeting card of congratulations from the Queen.

Now, if you do meet my parents between now and April, I'd appreciate it if you don't make mention of this. You know, it is supposed to be a surprise. But I was making inquiries.

What you need to do, what information you need to provide to ensure that this happens. Now, that's pretty special to get a greeting card, congratulations from the Queen.

[4 : 44] But special though it is, my mum and dad on receiving the card will know very well that the Queen, lovely lady though she is, doesn't know them from Adam.

You know, it's nice, but it's hardly personal. You know, you can't imagine the Queen there in Buckingham Palace and saying, Ah, yes, John and Catherine, what a lovely couple, yes, I must send them a card. It'll be nice to get that card.

But, as I say, it's not really very personal. But amazingly, and we maybe lose the wonder of this, amazingly, here at the start of Revelation, you and me, yes, you and me, receive a greeting from God.

This morning, God is greeting you. As we read these words, we are receiving a greeting from God. And let's explore what the greeting is, and then a little bit more carefully who the greeting is from.

Now, we've already identified who it's from, but we can explore that a little bit more, as you'll see, as we turn to the text. But first of all, what is the greeting? How does God greet us this morning?

[5 : 52] Does He say, well, all the best, you know, have a great day? What is the greeting, the content of the greeting? Well, the content of the greeting is really just two words. We find those words there in the second half of verse 4.

Grace and peace to you from... And then we have this wonderful description of God that we're going to look at in a moment. But the content of the greeting is simply this.

Grace and peace to you. Grace and peace. Charis is the Greek word. Such a significant Greek word that speaks of God's grace, of that unmerited love that we sinners are the objects of.

And peace, the Greek word that is the equivalent to that very significant Hebrew word, shalom. And this is not just some formula. You know, we can maybe read it, and it sounds like a formula because we often read these words.

We maybe read the letters of Paul, and we find similar language, grace and peace. And we might think, well, it's just a formula. But this is no formula. It's certainly not just a formula.

[6 : 57] The God who wishes His people grace and peace showers grace and peace on His people. We are the objects of His grace, of His unmerited favor.

And by the gracious giving of Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus, God has secured peace for His people.

We are granted and we enjoy peace with God. We are granted peace with one another. Where the dividing walls of separation are torn down, and we are made into one people.

But we are granted peace in our own hearts, all secured by the gracious giving of Jesus to be our Savior. This is the greeting that God extends to us.

Grace and peace to you. But let's think a little bit more about who it is from. Who extends this greeting to us? Now we've already acknowledged that the greeting is from God.

[7 : 58] But let's examine this a little more closely. What we find here in verse 4 and what follows, we find that the greeting is extended to us from the triune God.

From God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And let's just examine that and discover that and confirm that for ourselves as we look to what the passage says.

So first of all there, following the greeting itself, grace and peace, we read, grace and peace to you from, so we're being told who is extending the greeting, grace and peace to you from, from Him who is and who was and who is to come.

This name or description of God. Perhaps on this occasion particularly being applied to God the Father is rooted in the divine name revealed or explained to Moses by God.

As recorded for us in Exodus 3 and verse 14. I am that I am. Yahweh, I am that I am. He is the one who is. And that name is the one that's being employed here or a form of that name.

[9 : 14] This verb to be at the heart of the name of God. Grace and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come.

This is a name that reveals for us the eternal nature of God. And of course to be a weight of and to cling to a confidence that our God is the eternal God is a truth that every generation of believers needs to know and hold firmly to.

But perhaps for the original recipients of the letter, this was particularly poignant and indeed inspiring. That their God was the God who is and was and is to come.

Don't forget that the recipients of this letter, the original recipients of the letter were, many of them, under the yoke of eternal Rome as Rome was often described.

Under the yoke of an empire that proudly boasted of its never-ending power and glory. But the reality, of course, is that emperors come and go.

[10 : 28] They're like the flowers of the field that blossom for a moment. Even if that moment is centuries of human history. But then when the time comes, they wither and die as was true of Rome.

But not so the God who speaks grace and truth to his people. He is and was and is to come.

But notice a striking detail in this name grounded in the divine name as employed or coined by John. Do you notice the order that is employed there?

We might expect, logically, I guess, the order to be the one who was, the one who is, and the one who will be.

Past, present, future. If we were writing this, if we were thinking of the way of expressing it, perhaps that's how we would express it. The one who was, the one who is, and the one who will be.

[11 : 31] That seems a reasonable way of expressing it. But that's not what we find. Rather, the order is the one who is, who was, and who will come.

Why do we have the present reality of God emphasized in this greeting? Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.

I wonder if what's going on here is that God is impressing on his people. And those who are reading this letter, this reality that he is now.

He is now. Even and especially in the midst of trials and persecutions, he is. Yes, he was. But he is.

He is now. He rules now. He governs now. He loves now. He provides and protects his people now. But there's one more intriguing detail in the manner in which this name is framed.

[12 : 40] The future tense in the name is not who will be, but rather who is to come. Who is, who was, and who is to come.

And so even in the name, there is this intriguing anticipation of a future coming of God. And implicit in that, on behalf of and in favor of his people.

But let's just park that now and come back to it in a moment. So the greeting is from God the Father. But the greeting is also from God the Spirit.

Notice there in that same verse. Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come. And from the seven spirits before his throne.

Now we're identifying the seven spirits spoken of here with the Holy Spirit. But is that legitimate? Is it right to do so? Might it be that such an identification is due more to our desire to see the Trinity in this greeting than to what the text actually says?

[13 : 52] Well, I think there are a couple of reasons why we can justifiably identify the seven spirits spoken of here with the Holy Spirit. First of all, the one identified as the seven spirits in the text is placed in the greeting between God the Father, the one who is and was and is to come, and God the Son, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and so on.

So even the placement of this reference to the seven spirits would lead us to conclude that here it is indeed the Holy Spirit who has been spoken of.

One way of thinking about it is to pose the question, who else could it be? But perhaps of even greater significance is the symbolic significance of the number seven that we already noted just very fleetingly last Sunday morning.

Number seven in the Bible, and very especially in the book of Revelation, represents or symbolizes perfection or completeness rather than plurality.

We think of seven, well, there must be seven things, distinct things. But here the number seven is being used to represent this sense of perfection or completeness. And so the title here, the seven spirits, ascribes perfection or completeness to the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 25] Some translations look to capture the sense of the expression with the rendering, the sevenfold spirit. But there's a third piece of evidence, and it's the allusion in this name to language that is found in the prophecy of Zechariah.

Now, Zechariah is referred to again in these verses we read from chapter 10. But the reference here is in Zechariah chapter 4 and verses 2 to 7.

For reasons of time, we won't read those verses now, but perhaps if you wish to do so later on in the afternoon, do that. But what you'll find when you read those verses in Zechariah chapter 4 is that in that passage, in a vision that the prophet Zechariah is granted, there is reference to seven lamps.

And these seven lamps are said to represent or point to God's Spirit, in whose strength the returning exiles would overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles and enemies.

And then you have in those verses in Zechariah the very memorable words of God, not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, a Spirit represented in the vision by these seven lamps.

[16 : 41] And so given that here in this chapter, just in a couple of verses on, there'll be explicit reference to the prophecy of Zechariah, it seems reasonable to understand that here too there is an allusion to that same prophet and his visions.

And so for any number of reasons, and certainly as we draw them all together, I think we can justifiably conclude that the one here spoken of as the seven spirits before his throne, before the throne of God, is to be identified with or speaks of the Holy Spirit of God.

And when we think of the language of God concerning the role and the ministry of His Spirit, when He cries out, not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, it reminds us that how as God's people we ever stand in need of the Spirit of God who empowers and enables us to persevere in any and every circumstance.

Be that surrounded by the rubble of a desolate Jerusalem, as was the case for the returning exiles. Be that facing the brutality of the emperor of Rome, Domitian, or whoever it might have been at the time of writing.

Or be it God's people today standing up for God's truth in a country that prides itself very foolishly as being the most progressive country in the world.

[18 : 09] And so we stand in need of the Spirit of God to embolden and enable and equip us. And so this greeting is from God the Father, it's from God the Spirit, but it's also a greeting from God the Son.

Again, notice the greeting to Him who loves us and is free, sorry, grace and peace to you from Him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits before the throne and from Jesus Christ.

And from Jesus Christ. And Jesus is identified with a rich threefold description that is drawn from the Messianic prophecies that are found in Psalm 89.

And we'll sing from Psalm 89 to close our service. And again, for reasons of time, we can't go to the psalm and carefully identify each of them, but I would encourage you to perhaps later on read the psalm and confirm what I'm going to be saying now.

Jesus here, look how He has described this threefold description of Him. Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness. That's the first manner in which Jesus is described, the faithful witness.

[19 : 18] In verse 37 of Psalm 89, there is a reference to a Messianic figure spoken of in the same language as a faithful witness.

And Jesus is the faithful witness of God. Jesus is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld His glory as He, in His person, in His teaching, and in His ministry, testified to God.

This greeting is from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. But then Jesus secondly is described as the firstborn from the dead. The firstborn from the dead.

Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead. Again, back in Psalm 89, we find that same language, certainly the language of the firstborn. In verse 27 of that psalm.

Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. The one who died and rose again for His people. Where this title, firstborn, points not only to the objective reality of the resurrection.

[20 : 22] It certainly does that. But it also points to the status of Jesus as the preeminent one over all the cosmos. The firstborn.

The one who enjoys preeminence. We hear an echo of this language, or a parallel perhaps, rather than an echo of this language, in what Paul says as he writes to the Philippians.

And he speaks of how Jesus, having humbled Himself and come into this world and been obedient to His Father, He was then exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name.

The firstborn from among the dead. The title firstborn also serves to identify the resurrection of Jesus as the guarantee and precursor of resurrection life.

For all of His people. For you and me, as servants of Jesus and disciples of Jesus. So, Jesus is directing His greeting to us. And who is this Jesus?

[21 : 26] Well, He is the faithful witness. He is the firstborn from the dead. But then thirdly, He's described as the ruler of the kings of the earth. Again, you see that in verse 5.

And the ruler of the kings of the earth. And again, this very same language we find in Psalm 89. And in the same verse 27, where He is spoken of as the firstborn.

Now, this title for Jesus, the ruler of the kings of the earth, is a fascinating title that is only fully understood when we appreciate the manner in which the Roman Empire exercised its authorities over its conquered territories.

So, we remember, we're conscious that this book has been written within the context of Roman dominion and Roman power. And many of those who were reading the letter were the victims of persecution at the hands of Roman power.

But the interesting thing is to consider how Rome extended its power. Rome's strategy was not principally to depose the kings of its defeated foes, but to absorb them under the dominion of the empire and the emperor.

[22 : 47] And when we understand that that was the manner in which they exercised their authority and extended their rule, we can rightly describe Domitian, who we believe was the emperor at the time that the letter was written, if the consensus to you of the timing of the writing is correct.

But whether it was Domitian or whoever the emperor might have been, we can describe such an emperor as the ruler of the kings of the earth. You see, that's the way it worked. He was the ultimate ruler over all these other kings.

There were many kings within the Roman Empire. You say, well, how come? Could there be many kings? Yes, there were many kings, but they were all vassal kings. They were all subject to the emperor.

They exercised their authority by delegation from the emperor. And so, yes, many kings, but over all these kings there was one ruler, and that was the Roman emperor.

He was the ruler over the kings of the earth. And yet here, and I think it's almost required to see this as deliberate on the part of the writer, here you have this radical usurping of the apparent reality where Jesus is identified as the only and ultimately true ruler of the kings of the earth.

[24 : 07] And, of course, his rule included the Roman emperor himself, as it includes every emperor, king, and president throughout history.

So, this is the God who directs greetings to you this morning. This is a God who, to you this morning, pronounces these words, grace and peace.

God the Father, God the Spirit, and God the Son. Well, that's the first task, and more briefly, let's just notice the second and third. The second task that we're given is to give praise to God.

And let's just confirm that John, in the second half of verse 5 and then through to verse 6, is indeed directing praise to God. And the evidence is found in the final words of verse 6.

Very particularly these words, To Him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. This is the language of praise to God. But the striking element of this doxology is that this praise to God, it is, without doubt, the language of praise, the language of worship, it is directed to Jesus, to Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priest to serve His God and Father.

[25 : 24] So, without doubt, the praise has been directed to Jesus. It is praise that is only suitable for God, but it is directed explicitly and specifically by John on this occasion to Jesus.

Glory and power directed to Jesus. And why? Because Jesus is the eternal Son of God. And in the language of the Nicene Creed, very God of very God and so worthy of praise and worship.

But notice also that the praise directed to Jesus is born of an appreciation of the person and work of Jesus. Notice what is said of Jesus in these words of praise.

To Him who loves us. Now, as we make our way through Revelation over these next few weeks and months, I'm sure that even with all the effort that we might invest in our study, there will remain mysteries that we don't manage to understand, symbols that we don't manage to fully capture.

But even though that may well be our experience, there is one simple truth that we can cling to, a simple but glorious truth, and it is the one that is expressed here by John in his praise.

[26 : 47] Jesus is the one who loves us. To Him who loves us. And so if you don't work out what the number of the beast means, if you can't identify the horsemen of the apocalypse, don't lose too much sleep over it.

But be assured of this, that the Jesus who reigns is the one who loves us, who loves His people. To Him who loves us. To Him who loves us now.

To Him who loves you now. So this is the first wonderful truth that Jesus, or that John acknowledges in his words of praise. To Him who loves us. And then he goes on, and has freed us from our sins by His blood.

This is the most powerful way in which Jesus has demonstrated His love for us. Rescuing us from the guilt and condemnation of our sin by His atoning death, by His blood in our place.

Who loves us, has freed us from our sins by His blood. And then thirdly, we're told, and He has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve His God and Father. And this points to the purpose of our salvation.

[27 : 56] To serve God as priests in His kingdom. This is the fulfillment of the prophetic aspiration and intention of God expressed to Moses and recorded in Exodus chapter 19 and verse 6 where God says to Moses, Although the whole earth is mine, you, that is Israel, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And of course, the reality of that only came to ultimate fruition in the establishment of the church where we all share in the priesthood of all believers made into a kingdom of priests.

In what sense are we priests? What is our role as priests? Well, in the language of Paul, as he writes to the Romans in chapter 12, at the beginning of that chapter, he speaks of all of us as God's people offering up our very lives as living sacrifices.

And this is the work of a priest to offer up sacrifices. Our sacrifice is our very life. As priests, we intercede for the world as we pray to God on behalf of our broken, pain-filled world.

As we testify to that self-same world of the love of Jesus as faithful witnesses in the very mold of our Savior. And so we join with John in giving praise to God in the person of Jesus, the one who loves us, who has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father.

[29 : 26] Well, let's move on to the final task that we have, and that is to listen to the message from God as we find it in verses 7 and 8. And there are two things that we need to note here.

First of all, the source of the message and then the content of the message. Well, the source of the message, again, is fairly straightforward to identify. This is a message from God.

The message is given in verse 7, and then if there were any doubt, in verse 8, God identifies himself as the one extending the message. He gives the message, and then he says, I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The message is from God. The one who describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega. As we know, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. And what we have here in this name or this title of God is the employment of a literary technique that involves the stating of opposites to highlight everything in between the opposites that are named.

And so the sense of this name, the Alpha and the Omega, is that God is over all and in all. He is the Alpha and the Omega and everything in between. And then God identifies himself in the language we've already encountered as the one who is and was and is to come and then finally as the Almighty.

[30 : 46] He and he alone, not any passing emperor, is the Almighty. But the content of the message in verse 7. And the content of the message is composed or crafted with the use of two Old Testament passages.

The ones that we read just a few moments ago in Daniel and in Zechariah. In Daniel chapter 7 and verse 13, Daniel anticipates the enthronement of the Messiah, of King Jesus.

Now how is this passage in Daniel or this picture that Daniel paints, how is it employed in this message from God? Well, we can pose three questions to try and capture the heart of the matter.

There in verse 7, look, he is coming with the clouds. This is from Daniel, this language. He is coming with the clouds. Well, who is coming? Well, Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming. With this in mind, we remember the name of God in the greeting, who is, was, and is to come.

God comes to his people in the person of his Son. How is he coming? How is Jesus coming? Well, we're told in the clouds. In clouds in the Bible and very especially in the Old Testament, but also in a measure in the New.

[31 : 58] Speak of majesty and glory and their presence often serves to denote the presence of God. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, coming in the clouds. When is he coming?

Well, there is some debate as to how we are to understand this reference to the coming of Jesus. But I think we can see this principally or ultimately as a reference to the second coming of Jesus, to judge the living and the dead and to usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

This is the message. But the message goes on and the message goes on drawing from that passage in Zechariah that we also read in Zechariah chapter 12. Now, in the original prophecy in Zechariah, the mourning that is spoken of refers to the mourning of repentance of those who acknowledge that they have pierced God in some sense by their sin and rebellion.

Those who pierced him as the language is picked up here in Revelation. Now, in the New Testament, we find this mourning, this kind of mourning, strikingly exemplified in the people's response to Peter's sermon at Pentecost.

Remember when they heard Peter preaching and at the conclusion of his sermon, we read that they were cut to the heart and cried out, what shall we do? This is the kind of mourning that Zechariah was prophesying the people of God would engage in, mourning for their sin, but embracing the one willing and able to forgive them.

[33 : 30] But here, as this same language is employed in Revelation, the language is used in a very different way. The mourning is the mourning of the enemies of God who see Jesus.

And recognize their guilt, but do so tragically when it is too late for repentance. Let's just read the verse. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, his people and those who are not his people.

And even those who pierced him and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him. And so I think we do rightly identify this mourning as the mourning of men and women who acknowledge that which they had never acknowledged.

But it's too late to repent. It's too late to enjoy forgiveness and reconciliation. That day has passed. And all they can do is lament and mourn.

And so this is the message from God for you this morning. This is God's message for you. Jesus is coming. Be prepared.

[34 : 36] Live in the light of his coming. Serve him with all your heart and strength. Look forward to that glorious day when he will return and endure suffering today in the light of that day.

But friend, if you as yet are not trusting in Jesus as your Savior, I would urge you this morning to turn to him in repentance and faith.

If you fail to see Jesus today and mourn for your sins today, you will certainly see him when he comes on that day in the clouds.

And you will mourn, but it will be too late to repent. So three tasks for God's people this morning. Receive greetings from God.

Give praise to God. And listen to this message from God. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

[35 : 43] We thank you for the great privilege that is ours even this morning to receive greetings from the triune God. We thank you that you are indeed the God who showers grace and peace upon us.

You are the God who deals with us graciously and secures for us a peace. We thank you that we can join with John in praising you and praising your son, Jesus, the one who loves us, the one who has freed us from our sins by his blood.

We thank you that you are the God who speaks to us and brings us this message of encouragement and challenge, but also of warning that there is a day coming when we will look to the skies and we will see Jesus in the clouds.

Every eye will see him. Help us on that day to rejoice at his coming and not to mourn the mourning of those who have failed to repent.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.