

LIFE WHO IS, WAS, AND IS TO COME

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

Anne Marie and I will never forget a beautiful Sunday morning in May 1988 when we stepped out of our cabin onto the deck of a Greek cruise ship. A mile away across the majestic blues and greens of the Aegean Sea, we could see a small barren island. It was the former Roman prison island called Patmos, ten miles long and six miles wide with a rocky shoreline, some barren hills, a small village called Skala, and a large monastery on a hill nine hundred feet above sea level, overlooking the bay. A fleet of motor boats was coming out from its harbor to take passengers to land. Once we arrived on land, another large Greek ship from Istanbul slowly glided into the harbor. On board the ship was the spiritual head of the Greek Orthodox church, who was coming to Patmos with a group of priests to celebrate the nine hundredth anniversary of St. John Monastery (as we had been informed by our captain), hold a service, and bless the faithful.

As we stepped onto the shore of Patmos, our hearts and minds could not help but immediately try to identify with the apostle John, imprisoned here in 95 AD; for it was here that our risen Lord Jesus Christ visited him and told him to write what we now know as the Revelation to John. We walked around the small village amidst the festivities for awhile, then wandered down a small alley that took us behind the village. We continued westward along some open fields, then along the water's edge and onto a small boat dock under a weeping willow tree. There with the sea breeze blowing in our hair, we sat down and put our feet in the waters that were gently splashing on the shore.

I took out of my pocket a New Testament and began reading to my wife, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet...and His voice was like the sound of many waters...." And we read our Lord's word to the seven churches of Asia. It was one of those moments in our life when we felt that time had stood still and we had moved away from earth and into eternity. We felt that we were kindred spirits of the faithful apostle John who had roamed that barren island so long ago as a prisoner, in reality not of Rome but of his risen and present Lord Jesus Christ.

Many pilgrims come to Patmos to celebrate the historical fact that the resurrected Jesus once visited John on that island some nineteen hundred years ago. But I wonder how many, including myself, then leave without the spiritual realization that Jesus is still alive and that he is longing to express his life within us and his love through us to all those around us. Jesus will continue to be alive and present forevermore, and yet that spiritual truth continually slips away from us. I hope our study today in Revelation 1:1-19 will again impress it on our hearts.

Before we look at Revelation 1:1-19 together, we need to go back and put the apostle John and the island of Patmos in context. The church of Ephesus, fifty miles away on the western coast of Turkey, had been established by our Lord Jesus through Paul and his disciples in 53-56 AD. Out of that major seaport city over the next couple of decades, at least seven other churches were established in the immediate surrounding areas of Turkey. We know that just before the death of Paul and Peter in 62 AD, Peter wrote two letters of encouragement (1 Peter and 2 Peter) to those churches. We know that the Roman emperor Domitian's persecution of the church overshadowed Nero's. And in 90-95 AD, John the apostle, prophet, pastor, and evangelist who was ministering in Ephesus was caught up in the dragnet and exiled to the island of Patmos. We have no recorded evidence that John had visibly seen Jesus since his ascension in 33 AD, so you can understand his surprise, fear, and joy when after some sixty years the Lord appeared to him in all his glory and power!

Jesus: still alive!

Revelation 1:1-3

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-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 he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

The Revelation is the unveiling of Jesus as the risen and glorified Son of the living God. It unveils God's plan for the future of the world through his Son's second coming, the establishment of his kingdom on earth, the final judgment of humanity, and the hope of the new heavens and the new earth. The Revelation is a book of hope and instruction for believers as well as a warning for unbelievers. Eugene Peterson wrote in *Reversed Thunder*, "The intent of revelation is not to inform us about God but to involve us in God."

Jesus: King of kings

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the 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 the tribes of the earth will mourn over 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."

The seven churches that were in Asia were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These seven churches were all faithfully serving the Lord Jesus at the time of this writing, but they were also in need of spiritual encouragement and cleansing. Because this letter was one of prophecy, these seven churches are also symbols of the different kinds of churches in every generation as well as symbols of our own hearts.

Before John started into the actual revelation, he greeted them with grace and peace from God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son. He reviewed (1) God's attributes as the Father, the person of the Holy Spirit, and our risen and glorified Lord Jesus; (2) the blessings he had given his disciples because of the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; and (3) and the hope of the second coming of Jesus.

John described the Father's existence with the phrase "Him who is and who was and who is to come." This has the same meaning as Jehovah or "I AM," the self-existing one. And he is our eternal heavenly Father; he extends to us on a continuing basis his unmerited favor and eternal peace because of our personal relationship with his Son Jesus Christ.

The Seven Spirits is another name for the Holy Spirit. The number seven symbolizes completeness, fullness, or perfection. Isaiah had written some seven hundred years earlier about the coming Messiah and the Holy Spirit (11:1-3; see also Revelation 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6):

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him---
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,

the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord---
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord."

John then reminded us of our Lord's ministry and his present and eternal rule as a result of his incarnation, resurrection, and ascension. Jesus is given three distinct titles. First, he was the faithful witness in his incarnation. John had written of Jesus in his gospel (1:1-5, 11-12), "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it...He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...."

Second, Jesus was the first-born of the dead in his resurrection. Paul had written some forty years earlier to the Corinthians (15:20), "...Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Others had been raised from the dead, but they had all died again. Jesus was the first one to be raised by his Father from the grave and also to be given an imperishable body fit for eternity. His resurrection from the dead gives all who love him the hope that they too will be raised from the dead. Peter had written to the suffering Christians among the seven churches in 62 AD (1 Peter 1:3-4), "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you..."

Third, Jesus became the ruler of the kings of the earth in his ascension. John will write farther on in this revelation (17:13-14) that in time there will be a battle between the Lamb of God and the beast with his army: "These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful." And a bit farther on John will tell us (19:11-16) that he saw the heavens open, and he saw the Word of God sitting on a white horse and coming with his army behind him on white horses to smite the nations. "And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, 'KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.'"

John went on to describe how our wonderful Lord Jesus, the Son of the one and only living God, offers us three distinct blessings: First, Jesus loves us. As central as that truth is to us as Christians, it may be the hardest to internalize. John reminded the suffering Christian community that Jesus in his incarnation loved us so much that he was willing to shed his own blood on the cross for our sins. And once we have placed our faith in him as the Lamb of God and the only one who could take away the sin of the world, we stand before him as his beloved children (see John 1:12). John had written earlier, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are" (1 John 3:1). At this moment in time our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ loves us deeply---in spite of all our failures, problems, weaknesses, confusion, unfaithfulness, and present sin. For he cannot change his loving nature.

A friend called me recently and asked me to write to his son who, he told me, had gone to prison. This father was writing, and doing everything he knew to love and support his son. I realized that it had never once occurred to him to think his son was any less his son, even though he had become a criminal. He was wonderfully illustrating God's own character of loyal, unending love towards us. And even when we don't yet have a relationship with God, his word tells us that he loves us: "For God so loved the world...." (John 3:16). As the old hymn says,

"Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so...."

The second blessing John mentioned was that Jesus released us from our sins. When we have placed our faith in him and his personal sacrifice on the cross, our sins are forgiven and forever forgotten. And then he breaks the power of sin over us and gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we have the power to choose not to sin (see Romans 5-8). And finally he will one day remove from us the presence of sin forever.

Third, Jesus then made us to be a kingdom of priests to his God and Father. Peter had written some thirty

years earlier to the suffering Christian community in these same churches, "...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The priest of the Old Testament was ordained by God as a bridge between him and both the people of Israel and the world. The priest was called to help people, by his own life of love and truth, to come into a personal relationship with the one and only living God. Jesus is now our High Priest, "...able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). And now all we who love Jesus are called upon to do the same, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the communities that we have been called to live in. We are to understand from God's point of view that we are a kingdom of priests telling the blind, lame, captives, and downcast that there is access to our merciful God, forgiveness of their sins, and the hope of eternal life in his Son Jesus.

One member of our body, Terry Dudley, is a priest our Lord has placed in the Navy. After graduating from the US Naval Academy in 1993, he was assigned temporary duty at the US Embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay. Terry has lived out his Christian life both in his naval duties and in the surrounding community. For instance, he initiated a project for himself and his fellow sailors and marines to repair and upgrade a school for the mentally retarded; then arranged for the school to receive two tons of humanitarian materials (books, food, medicine, etc.). He taught English weekly at the United States-Uruguay Cultural Alliance and brought moral lessons to every class. When he had an opportunity for a temporary assignment in Spain, he decided to stay in Uruguay instead to encourage his commander, whom he had led to the Lord two months earlier, and a young woman who was an agnostic. Later she too accepted Christ as her Savior. As the Assistant Navy Representative to Uruguay, Terry was awarded the Joint Services Commendation Medal (an extremely high award for a young officer). He is just one among our wonderful Lord's kingdom of priests!

"Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him." In Jesus' first coming he arrived very quietly in a stable in a backwater village called Bethlehem. But no one, either Jew or Gentile, will miss or be left out of his next coming. The prophets Daniel (in 7:13) and Zechariah (in 12:10) as well as the apostles Matthew, John, and Paul spoke of this day. He will come to conquer evil, set up his kingdom on earth, and judge the nations. It will be a great day for Christians but a horrible time for unbelievers.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega..." All that has been revealed to John is true and will take place because God has put his signature on it. God the Father is the total summary of life; the A-W, or the A-Z. All of life is contained in him. He always was, is, and will be. He is the ruler of the past, present, and future (see Isaiah 44:6-8). If we do not have a personal relationship with him through his Son Jesus, we have nothing that is of eternal value (and in time we will enter into an interminable existence of utter isolation).

Jesus is not only the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. But in him is eternal life because he is....

Jesus: Prophet, Priest, King, and Chief Shepherd

Revelation 1:9-16

I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the

sun shining in its strength.

Let me paraphrase what John said: "I write to you as a fellow sufferer who also lives within the spiritual kingdom of heaven, trusting in Christ to work out his will in my current imprisonment for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let me share with you an amazing experience I had recently. One Sunday as I was in the Spirit, who led me beyond my present circumstances so that I could think spiritual thoughts and fill my heart with the hope of things to come, I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet [see Revelation 4:1]. The voice gave me an order that I should prepare to write down in a book all that I was about to see, and then send the book to the seven Christian churches..."

"I turned around hoping to see who was talking to me in such a powerful voice, and the first thing I saw were seven golden lampstands, which I would later be told were a symbol of the seven churches that were the beacons of the light of the truth of Jesus Christ in our dark society. And in the middle of the seven lampstands I saw one like a son of man (son of man is another way of saying he was the Messiah; the prophet Daniel had previously experienced one like a son of man in Daniel 7:9). He was clothed in a robe reaching to the feet and girded across his breast with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white like white wool or even snow. His eyes were like flames of fire, and his feet were like burnished bronze when it has been caused to glow in a furnace. His voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars; and out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. And his face was like the sun shining in its strength."

John wanted his readers to understand that he had been visited by the risen Jesus now in his full deity. He also wanted them to realize that this Jesus was the promised prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15 when he was told by Him to write about the prophecy of "...the things which must shortly take place...." (Revelation 1:1); the high priest (see Hebrews 5:8-9); "...He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father...." (Revelation 1:6); king (Ezekiel 34:23-24) whom the whole world would fully acknowledge at His second coming (Revelation 1:7); and finally he wanted his readers to realize that this Jesus was the chief shepherd of Ezekiel 34:7, who continues to watch over his church and leads it with his word of truth (see Psalm 23 and Revelation 1:16).

It is very interesting that this is not the same picture we find of Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances on earth. At those times he was still approachable, like an ordinary man in his appearance. Here he was more like the way he appeared before Peter, James, and John on the mount of transfiguration: "...His face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light" (Matthew 17:2). When the Father spoke and said, "This is My Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5), the three disciples became terrified and fell face-down on the ground.

John witnessed the wonderful spiritual reality that Jesus was alive and the eternal Prophet, Priest, King, and Chief Shepherd, and not only that, but that he was....

Jesus: alive forevermore

Revelation 1:17-19

And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."

Last year I was invited to go fly-fishing in Montana with some brothers from this church. On our last day out, I was in my boat with a guide floating a few hundred yards behind the rest of our fishing party. Suddenly, what began as a mild and somewhat sunny morning changed to a darkened sky, rain, and even hail accompanied by thunder and lightning. Just as we were going over a small waterfall in the middle of the river, I braced myself for the drop and unwittingly put my fly rod straight up in the air. And the next thing I knew, a lightning bolt struck right at the tip of my pole, and I heard an instant thunderclap! A fisherman on the shore dove for cover under a tree, and we fell to the bottom of our boat in terror. We experienced the power of God as I certainly never had before. I think this was in a small way like what John experienced when he saw and heard the risen Jesus in all his glory. He fell at his feet as if he were a dead man.

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last...." Jesus was saying that he is eternal (see Revelation 2:8). In Revelation 22:13 Jesus will also say to John, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." This truth had been reflected by Isaiah in 41:41; 44:6. And then God had told Isaiah in 48:12-13,

"Listen to Me, O Jacob,
Israel, whom I have called:
I am he;
I am the first and I am the last.

My own hand laid the foundations of the earth,
and my right hand spread out the heavens;
when I summon them,
they all stand up together."

No one who has placed his trust in the risen and eternal Jesus ever has anything to fear.

"...And I am the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore...." He was saying, "I voluntarily went to the cross as the innocent Lamb of God who could take away the sin of the world, and in doing that I died physically [see John 1:29]. By my death I held back the wrath of God from all those who place their faith in Me as their Savior. Those who once were to be judged will now be called 'children of God' [John 1:12]."

Jesus personally suffered the death we deserved for our sins against God, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. But on the third day as he had prophesied, God the Father raised him from the grave; and it was the privilege of the angels to announce to the women who came to anoint his dead body with oil and incenses, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:5-7.) He was not there; he had risen. And he is alive forevermore.

Then Jesus told John, "...I have the keys of death and of Hades" (see Colossians 1:13-14). He alone can rescue us from the pit of hell, sin, shame, and the power of Satan if we will but turn to him, the living One.

"Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things." Jesus was saying, "All these past, present, and future things should be a great source of encouragement for all the believers in each generation until I come again, as well as a warning for all those unbelievers who will still have an opportunity to come into a living relationship with me before I come again as the Judge of the world."

Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, and his goal in the age of the Spirit is to build his church. As he continues to do that in every generation, the truth that should continue to motivate his disciples is the spiritual reality that he is still alive and has not for a moment broken his promise, "Surely I am with you always, even until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). This promise was demonstrated to the disciples first in Galilee and then in Jerusalem over the forty days leading up to his ascension. It was demonstrated in his visible appearance in the lives of Stephen, Peter, and Paul. And now sixty years later on the island of Patmos it was demonstrated to John when he experienced this personal and visible appearance of the risen and always present Lord Jesus. He saw Jesus alive forevermore as our Prophet, Priest, King, and Chief Shepherd, who will soon return to set up his kingdom on earth.

In our present generation, as our Lord Jesus Christ continues to build his church in times of blessings and times of spiritual warfare, we may need to ask ourselves two important questions:

1. Do we really believe that Jesus is alive and living within us right now?

2. Do we really believe that he wants to build his church in and through us, his kingdom of priests, as we depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to express his love, mercy, and grace toward our fellow Christians and toward the dark and corrupt society around us?

I hope our answer is, "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!" Because if it is yes, then our present corrupt and dark communities will be greatly changed to his honor and glory and our personal joy and fulfillment, until he comes again.

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