

“THE END OF EVERYTHING...OR NOT”

April 27, 2025

Revelation 1:4-8

A man arrives at the **gates of heaven** and is met by St. Peter. St. Peter says, “Welcome! To get into heaven, you need to spell one word correctly.”

The man asks, “What’s the word?”

St. Peter replies, “Love.”

The man spells it correctly and is allowed in.

A few years later, St. Peter asks the man to watch the gate for him while he takes a break. As he’s sitting there, his wife shows up.

Surprised, the man asks, “What are you doing here?”

She replies, “I had a heart attack. Is this heaven?”

The man nods and says, “Yes, but you have to spell a word correctly to get in.”

She asks, “What’s the word?”

The man smiles and says, “Czechoslovakia.”

Speaking of heaven, this morning we open the **book of Revelation**. But before I begin this sermon, I think there are some understandings we need to have about **Revelation**. For **one**, this book is actually a Pastoral letter to the churches of Asia Minor or what is mostly the country of Turkey in our time. The churches that are named were the ones located on the Roman postal route; thus it was passed around between those 7 churches and all the other churches along the way.

Secondly, Revelation is a challenging book because it is steeped in Old Testament prophecy, symbolism, and apocalyptic literature, none of which most of us are familiar with. This kind of letter was written to people who were under persecution to give them hope and encouragement. The symbolism is often misunderstood and even abused to sell popular books and make predictions about the future, but know it is critiquing Rome and its hostility towards the Church. It is coded so further animosity is not directed at Christians.

Thirdly, while there are end time references in Revelation it actually ends on a high note, with a new beginning and the saints living in the presence of the Lord God. Thus, the letter is both scary and hopeful at the same time. The bottom-line proclamation of Revelation is **God Wins**.

Lastly, the Greek word for "apocalypse" does not mean **catastrophic end time event** or great disaster, like many a movie has portrayed. It's original meaning is **uncovering or revelation**. It signifies the lifting of a veil, the disclosure of something hidden, or the manifestation of things not previously known. Apocalypse means new discovery or new understanding that has far reaching implications.

With these understandings in mind, the question we ought to ask is what new revelation or discovery is John bringing to us? In this chapter, the revelation is not about the future, but about Jesus Christ. John, as prophet and pastor, continued to wrestle with the significance of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. What did those events mean

to the early church and its role in the world? What do they mean to us today?

I. NAMES MATTER

A Granddaughter asked her grandpa: “After 65 years of marriage you still call grandma **darling, beautiful and honey**. What’s the secret?”

Her Grandpa replied, “**Tell you the truth. I forgot her name five years ago and I’m scared to ask her again.**”

What’s in a name? William Shakespeare asked this question in *Romeo and Juliet* all the way back in 1597. He fostered the idea that names don’t really matter; you may call someone whatever you want, but it won’t change their essence. However, many cultures and traditions would disagree with the great English bard. Many ancient societies took naming newborns very seriously. It was believed that the name a child received at birth would define their character traits or even their entire life. And I would argue that names matter because they can give us identity, indicate who our people are, and where we come from.

The same could be said for Jesus. One of the most important questions in this life is, “**Who is Jesus Christ for Us?**” It is a significant question because it reveals our understanding of God and of ourselves. As John’s understanding of Jesus grew, he introduced three new names for Jesus. “**The Faithful Witness, The Firstborn of the Dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth.**” These are significant titles.

Jesus is the "faithful witness." In Greek, the words for "**martyr**" and "**witness**" are the same. What are the martyrs, after all, but faithful

believers who by sacrificing their own lives under persecution demonstrate the truth of God's love and power? It's a message John's readers, in those seven hard-pressed churches of Asia Minor, were hungry to hear. In 2:10, John addresses their specific situation: "**Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**"

Like Jesus, our role is to faithfully proclaim the word of God, even in the face of persecution. But understand that a witness is someone who speaks from **firsthand knowledge** about God. In other words, we can't be faithful witnesses without walking with Christ in the first place.

Jesus is the Firstborn of the Dead – This does not mean Jesus is some kind of Zombie from the Walking Dead TV series. In the Old Testament, this word "**firstborn**" is weighted with meaning. The firstborn was the forerunner in that ancient culture. The firstborn gets the best of everything — the first bite of food at the banquet, and the lion's share of the family inheritance, and the power to decide family matters.

John tells us that Jesus is the firstborn son who occupies first place in power and honor in the Kingdom of God. He is the Lord of life and death. Jesus is the one you want to know because even death cannot defeat him.

Jesus is the Ruler of the kings of the earth - John calls Jesus "**the ruler of the kings of the earth.**" When you think about it, that's a rather

audacious phrase, considering what happened to Jesus at the hands of the Romans. They brutalized him: stripped him, beat him, threw a kingly cloak around his shoulders and jammed a crown of thorns down upon his brow. They mocked him and finally hung Jesus out to dry as a political criminal.

How can John refer to one such as him — this weak and tortured man who, assailed by the world-consuming power of Rome, appears to be anything but kingly, let alone as "**ruler of the kings of the earth**"? He's able to do so because of the power of the resurrection.

In returning from the dead in full strength, Jesus has done something no earthly king has ever done. Even the renowned Julius Caesar, conqueror of the world — whom some worshiped as a god — collapsed in a bloody heap on the floor of the Roman Senate. Moments before, he had been the mightiest man on earth. Following the attack, his lifeblood flowed out of him, as did his imperial power.

John writes, "**Look he is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. So it is to be. Amen.**" These phrases are taken from the prophets Daniel and Zachariah. They pronounce the end of all the bestial empires whose reign is based on oppression, exploitation, greed, and military might. To the enemies of Christ, his return is a threat. And rightly so, because one day all these so-called empires and rulers will be replaced by the one true King, whose reign has no end.

II. THE RESULTS MATTER

A cab driver arrives in heaven.

St. Peter gives him a gold staff and a silk white robe and sent him on to his reward.

Waiting next in line was a Preacher.

St. Peter looks at the record, furrows his brow, and says “we will let you in, but take this wood staff and this cloth robe.”

The preacher was shocked. “I was a man of the cloth. I faithfully preached every week. Why does a cabbie get rewarded higher than a preacher?”

“Up here we reward results,” St Peter replied. “Whenever you preached, people slept. Whenever he drove, people prayed.”

The names of Jesus matter, but even more so **the results of Jesus matter**. John writes, **“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”**

The result of Christ is three-fold.

1. **Loves Us** – Jesus made known to us the continuing love of God. What a difference it makes to know the Lord of all the universe loves us, wholly, wondrously, and purposefully without end. Jesus brings us the good news that the universe is not working against us. We are the beloved.
2. **Freed us from sin** – This in the past tense meaning mission accomplished. We can stop running back to the **old life**, full of

- deceit, lies, and defeat. By turning to Jesus each day we discover a victory like no other. This leads us to the third result.
3. **Made us a kingdom** – Jesus gives us a place in the royal the court of God. We have been adopted as the children of the living God. Even if we had no family or come from a dysfunctional family, we now are part of the family everlasting.
 4. **New Role** – The last result of the resurrected Jesus is we have received a new purpose. We are to function as priests of God. This was the old vision for Israel – to be a nation of priests, what Protestants call the **priesthood of all believers**. Our role is to intercede on behalf of people. To pray, to bear witness, and to reconcile relationships. We are to preach and live in the peace, grace and love of Christ.

III. WHAT DOES JESUS MEAN TO US?

Professor Stephen Hawking was a brilliant English theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and author who was director of research at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge. Between 1979 and 2009, he was the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, widely viewed as one of the most prestigious academic posts in the world.

At one time Professor Hawking was seeking a **theory of everything**, a **singular theory that was** an all-encompassing, coherent theoretical framework of physics that fully explains and links together all aspects of the universe.

Upon considering Godel's Theorem, he concluded that one theory of everything was not obtainable. Hawking wrote, "**Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory that can be formulated as a finite number of principles. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind.**"

The irony is we Christians have had the theory of everything for a very long time. John wrote, "I am the **Alpha and the Omega**, says the **Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.**" While a cosmic Jesus is difficult to comprehend, Revelation claims that the unifying principle of the universe is God. God is absolutely complete all unto God's self. The boundless life which embraces all and transcends all creation is the Lord eternal who was before time and will exist long after time ceases. This is the God who has dominion over all things.

We have a difficult time navigating the small world we know let alone the whole of the cosmos. I take comfort in knowing there is a God who not only holds everything together, but who also made it possible for us to know, to be loved, to live with purpose, and calls us to God's self. The revelation is God has a face, in Jesus Christ. Now that is good to know. **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, April 27, 2025

Second Scripture Lesson

Revelation 1:4-8

⁴John 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,

⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,

⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.