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I am the Alpha and the Omega

Revelation 1:8-18

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This past week we finished our seven week *Who Is Jesus* series on the “I am” sayings of Jesus from John’s Gospel and I hope you feel you learned a little bit more about who Jesus is and what he offers all of us. We have received some very good input from people who were in the small groups and we look forward to hearing from more of you. Since we’ve been through these sayings from John it seemed to me it would be a nice way of closing this emphasis to look at one more “I am” saying related to Jesus – this one in the book of Revelation. Revelation is a type of writing called “apocalyptic.” The word “apocalypse” comes from a Greek word (apokalypsis) meaning “disclosure,” “unveiling,” or, surprise, “revelation.” Apocalyptic literature frequently reflects a negative view of the world and expresses hope for salvation in a new creation or another life.

Revelation - and it is *Revelation*, singular, not “revelations,” has strong, reassuring visions for the church in crisis. The church has seldom had times when there was no crisis. The gospel was born during and grew in crisis. The book of Acts and the letters of Paul describe how the church developed in and survived crises in its early years including the arrests, imprisonments, beatings and even the deaths of those who were closest to Jesus – such as James and other early witnesses like Stephen. The first-century church was confronted by the tremendous power of the Roman Empire and especially the Emperor Domitian who ruled from 81-96 and demanded to be worshiped as “Lord and God.” For refusing to do so, many Christians were put to death (6:9, 13:15); others like John (1:9) were exiled. During this time of hardship, John recorded visions that he shared with his brothers and sisters in Christ in seven specific congregations in seven different cities in what is now part of Turkey that are clearly named in verse 11.¹ One reason why Revelation is so hard to understand and so frequently misinterpreted is precisely because the message is communicated in visions, mysterious figures, and extraordinary metaphors to prevent the imperial police from recognizing that this book is for persecuted Christians, assuring them that, despite the worst that the Roman Empire could do, **God reigns supreme, and Jesus, who died and is alive forevermore (1:18), has the power to overcome all evil.**

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

¹ The specific letter for each church begins at the following verses - Ephesus 2:1, Smyrna 2:8, Pergamum 2:12, Thyatira 2:18, Sardis 3:1, Philadelphia 3:7, and Laodicea 3:14.

9 I, **John, your brother who share with you** in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos *because of* 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 loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying,

"Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands I saw **one like the Son of Man**, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. 14 His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "**Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.**"

Let's pray: Lord God, you who are Creator of the Universe and the Power behind all powers, we are here today as your people to praise you, to hear your word and to pray that your truth might guide us in our every action and thought.

Help us come from our scattered lives to focus on your eternal reality.

Assure us once more of your presence with us in all circumstances and help us to surrender ourselves completely to your loving care and to follow your path in holy obedience and joy. Be present with us and bless us -we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

The Book of Revelation is the only place where this image of the Alpha and the Omega occurs and it is used three times.

1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, *the Almighty*.

21:6, "Then he (Jesus) said to me, "It is done! **I am the Alpha and the Omega**, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

22:13, "**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet – they are used as a way to communicate God’s existence at the beginning and the end of everything. This is an idea which is spoken of in the Old Testament in Genesis 1:1 (KJV), which says, **“In the beginning God…”** In the prophet Isaiah we heard earlier, Isaiah 44:6-8, *“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: **I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.***

***Who is like me?** Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.”* (Isaiah 44:6-8) Isaiah 41:4 says, *“Who has performed and done this, **calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last.**”*

It is literally mind blowing to think about God being the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. Preacher and author John Piper wrote about it this way: *“I can’t urge you too often to meditate on the staggering truth that God is the absolute alpha. Find some serene moment of your life and let the truth take hold of you that God is the **FIRST** -- the **BEGINNING**. Before him there was nothing. There was no “before him”. Just think of it! For millions and billions and trillions of unending years God existed and never had a beginning. He is the beginning. From everlasting to everlasting, he is God (Psalm 90:2). There never was a time when he was not.*

*We might marvel that God is infinite, eternal and unchanging in his justice, wisdom, power, goodness and truth. But when you pause to think that he never chose to be this way, nor did any one else choose to make him this way, it staggers the mind. The justice and wisdom and power and goodness and truth of God are eternal reality. The character of God is not what reality brought forth. **It is reality.** God did not emerge out of many possibilities. Everything emerged out of him. He determines all possibilities. God is not a piece of reality that you try to fit in with other pieces. **He is the first and the last and the all-encompassing reality: “In him we live and move and have our being”** (Acts 17:28).”*

Not only is God the beginning and the end of all things, John says, God is the Almighty. “The Almighty” is a favorite description of God that occurs **nine times** in Revelation – (the only other place is 2 Corinthians 6:18).

Revelation affirms the ultimate sovereignty of God Almighty which is important to Christians living in difficult times. We all need assurance when it looks like the world is a

total mess that God is still powerful, that God's will ultimately will be done on earth as it is in heaven. To persecuted believers, being reminded of the timelessness and the mighty power of God regardless of current events, is helpful. It helps to give us an eternal perspective and reminds us that whatever the crisis, in one way or another it will pass away, but God will not.

It also helps in a crisis to hear from someone we know, trust, and respect. John is known to his hearers. He is a brother and fellow participant in **the persecution, the kingdom, and the patient endurance** which all Christians share "in Jesus." He is not someone who writes from the comfort and safety of the rear echelon to tell troops on the front line what a fine job they are doing and how, "*We're all in this together.*" John writes from Patmos, a small island about 75 miles west of the city of Ephesus. John had been banished there by the government for being a leader in the Christian movement, in John's terms "*on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*" John had been banished for preaching the Christian message. John shares the life of his churches in three areas – the **persecution, the kingdom, and the patient endurance**. By "*persecution,*" John doesn't mean the ordinary problems of human life but that time of terrible trouble which he believes will precede the End. John interprets the social discrimination and government persecution which threatened the churches as the beginning of the labor pains that must precede the birth of a new world (Rev. 12:1-6). We are not being persecuted because gasoline costs \$4.00 a gallon or because it's hard to make a left turn this weekend. Inconvenienced maybe, upset, perhaps, persecuted? Far from it. Persecution involves being imprisoned, beaten, tortured, exiled, and even killed because of our faith in Jesus. We have no idea, most of us, certainly not me, what that is like, but John does, John shared that experience with his churches.

He also shared in the "*kingdom.*" At that moment for the hearers of John's revelation, the kingdom of God is present though it seems small and hidden, though it seems threatened and manifest in the form of suffering exemplified by the cross. John points to the future to give them courage by reminding them a time is coming when the rule of God and Christ will be clear for everyone to see. The third thing John shares with the churches is "*patient endurance.*" Patient endurance is what is required of believers as we hold on to our faith in the confidence that Christ's Lordship is real, though it doesn't always seem to be visible in the violent, greedy, corrupt world in which we live.

The rest of the passage from Revelation 1 goes on to describe an indescribable vision John had of the risen and exalted Jesus Christ. What John narrates took place on “the Lord’s day,” Sunday, the day when Jesus’ resurrection was celebrated and served to distinguish Christians from Jews. His vision comes at the time when he knows the churches on the mainland are gathered for worship.

John receives the vision when he is “in the Spirit.” He does not seek it; there is no fasting or prayer. It simply comes to him. John presents Jesus as the transcendent ruler of the cosmos. John uses the language of the scriptures to paint the picture of the risen Jesus. Of the 404 verses in Revelation, 275 include one or more allusions to passages in the Old Testament. The details describing Jesus are carefully chosen: “The long robe” is the priestly garment (Exodus 28:4, 27).

The “golden sash” is the royal emblem of the king.

The dazzling white hair is a reference to the ancient of days (Daniel 7:9).

“Feet of burnished bronze” and “the voice like the sound of many waters” are from the description of the heavenly messenger in Daniel 10:6 (Ezekiel 43:2).

John is seeking to express the inexpressible, to describe the indescribable – the transcendent glory of the exalted Jesus Christ.

The only weapon the exalted Christ has is his word, the sharp two edged sword that comes from his mouth. (See Isaiah 11:4, 49:2, Hebrews 4:12-13).

Jesus’ primary action, like that of the Creator in the beginning (Genesis 1:1-2:4), is **to speak**. The risen Christ says, “**I am the first and the last, and the living one.**”

The message to the threatened Christians in John’s churches is that the One who calls them to be faithful even at the cost of their lives (2:10) is the one who is in their very midst, embracing them all. Jesus will be there at the End to vindicate and receive them, since he is the one who has already gone before them through the reality of death. Jesus says he has taken death into his own experience, has overcome it, he now has the keys of death and Hades, he has power over life and death. Christians are not promised that if they are faithful they will be spared from the injustice of death by the Roman courts; but that in and through death they will be met by the One who has conquered death and abides as the living one.

The risen Christ has appeared to John so he can take a message to the churches. The churches, the lampstands among which Jesus walks have a mission to be the bearer of God’s light to the nations (Matthew 5:14-16).

The church is not abandoned to carry out this mission alone; Jesus walks among the lampstands, he walks among the church. The hand that holds the stars touches John and gives him a job to do. Jesus appears not to dazzle but to communicate the message that the Almighty God is the beginning and the end of all things so we need not fear. The exalted and risen Christ is in the midst of the church in times of trial, hardship, and persecution we have not been abandoned.

And we as believers are called to be faithful witnesses to what we have seen and heard about Jesus. We are to endure and share in hardship and suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3). We are to be signs of the kingdom as we live out the gospel in our time, and we are to patiently endure suffering if it comes in the hopeful expectation that one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and forever.

Prayer - Almighty, Most Holy God, faithful through the ages, we thank you for being with us in all our beginnings -- and in all our endings -- and everywhere in between. In school and work, in all seasons and stages of life, in times of joy and heartache, even to the end of our life help us to remember you are with us and to do what you ask us to do - we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessing

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Go now to keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.

Revelation 7:12, 14:12