

## REVELATION 1:4-7 A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

“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 firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and 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 tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”<sup>1</sup>

**W**e often read the initial words of apostolic missives so quickly that we miss important truths. The Apocalypse is one such book that we must not read so quickly that we fail to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The prophecy is in the form of a letter—a letter from God that was written to be read in seven churches in the Province of Asia. John’s opening sentence might lead some to believe that these were the only churches then in existence in that Roman province, though that is clearly not the case. We know, for instance, that churches also existed in Colossae [COLOSSIANS 1:2] and in Hierapolis [COLOSSIANS 4:13]. It is also likely that there were then churches in Miletus [ACTS 20:17] and in Troas [2 CORINTHIANS 2:12]. What is important for us to know is that these churches were not dissimilar to any seven churches in this day. Some were commended; some were censured.

John begins this letter by pronouncing a divine blessing on the churches; then, he dedicates to Jesus Christ all that he is about to write. The purpose of this message is to encourage Christians by drawing attention to John’s initial description of what Jesus has accomplished for us as Christians. I am intrigued by the fact that John dedicates this book to Jesus Christ. It would not have been difficult to imagine that he would dedicate his book to the Father. Among modern worshipers, many of our brothers and sisters would perhaps dedicate such a missive to the Spirit of God. John is not ignoring the Father, for he will speak often of the Father throughout the letter. Neither is he ignoring the Spirit of God. In fact, John is Trinitarian in his theology since he states that the letter is from the Father and from the seven-fold Spirit (probably a reference to ISAIAH 11:2), as well as being from Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the book is dedicated to Jesus Christ.

In part, I believe this is because the letter is inspired by the Spirit of God. When the Master prepared to depart this earth, He prophesied that the Spirit whom He would send would guide the disciples into truth, glorifying the Son in all things [JOHN 16:13, 14]. Here, we see the Spirit directing John to glorify the Son, just as Jesus promised.

I claim no mystical insight into this book that attracts such incredible attention, but I do have a desire to glorify Christ the Lord by reminding each of us that though He is coming for us very soon, He has already richly provided for those whom He loves and whom He has redeemed. Focus then on the greeting John pens to seven churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**GREETINGS FROM THE SON OF GOD** — “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 firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” John pronounces a benediction for those who are reading this book—grace and peace emanating from the Triune God. Each Christian reading this book should take courage from the knowledge that God begins His missive by identifying Himself as the Triune God. Grace is mentioned as being given by the Triune God because we who believe are the recipients of His love and mercy. Peace is identified as flowing from the Triune God precisely because our sin is forgiven and we are accepted in the Beloved Son. What a rich heritage is ours as worshippers of the True and Living God.

While John presents the truth that the Triune God reigns in Heaven and rules over the earth, he quickly shifts his focus to the Son of God. Jesus Christ is identified as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” This is not the only time John refers to Jesus as the “faithful witness.” In **REVELATION 3:14**, the Reigning Son of God is presented to the Laodiceans as “the faithful and true witness.” When John identifies Him as the “faithful witness,” he is undoubtedly referring to His confession before Pontius Pilate. Paul testifies that “in His testimony before Pontius Pilate [Jesus] made the good confession” [**1 TIMOTHY 6:13**]. Let’s review Jesus’ testimony before Pilate.

Pilate queried Jesus, “‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?’ Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?’ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.’ Then Pilate said to him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice’” [**JOHN 18:33-37**].

“You say that I am a King.” The New American Standard version supplies one word in English to bring out the strength of the Greek: “You say *correctly* that I am a King.” Jesus boldly attested that He was King of the Jews. This confession must be seen in the light of His confession before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin when asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Jesus firmly replied, “I am” [**MARK 14:61, 62**].

Because Jesus is “the faithful witness,” all who are born from above will likewise witness truly. In the letter to Pergamum, Jesus says, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” [**REVELATION 2:13**]. The redeemed of the Lord are bold and will prove faithful when challenged by the wicked. Thus, we Christians are encouraged to “stand firm.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is also identified as the “firstborn of the dead.” The term does not mean that He was first in time, but rather it speaks of Him as first in pre-eminence. The Greek term *prōtōtokos* has no chronological implication; rather the word speaks of rank. Jesus is pre-eminent since He is the first to conquer death. Paul presents Jesus as “the firstfruits of those who are asleep” [**1 CORINTHIANS 15:20**]. Paul testifies that the Son of God “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” [**COLOSSIANS 1:15**].

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<sup>2</sup> See also **1 CORINTHIANS 16:13**; **GALATIANS 5:1, 2**; **2 THESSALONIANS 2:15**; **1 PETER 5:12**

Let's expand on that thought by reading Paul's words. "[Jesus] is ... the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" [COLOSSIANS 1:15-20].

Therefore, since Jesus is "the faithful witness" and because He is pre-eminent, He has been appointed "the ruler of kings on earth." There is a day when Jesus shall reign over all the earth and the redeemed—those whom He has saved—will reign with Him. Though the world now ridicules the child of God and dismisses the gentleness that we display as we declare the love of God as we call all people to life in the Beloved Son, we are assured that the Lamb of God will return as the Lion of Judah.

Paul declares of the Master, that "though He was in the form of God, [He] ... made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" [PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11].

In a powerful prophecy of the Day when Christ shall reign, the Psalmist writes:

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,  
'Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.'

"He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
'As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.'

...

"Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. "

[PSALM 2:1-6; 10-12]

Jesus is “Lord of lords and King of kings” [REVELATION 17:14; 19:16]. He shall not merely receive the title; He is even now “Lord of lords and King of kings.” There awaits a day when the Lord Jesus shall return, and with Him will be all who have been redeemed from out of the earth. They are “called and chosen and faithful” [REVELATION 17:14].

**GREETINGS TO A PRIVILEGED PEOPLE** — “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.” The text declares that Jesus “loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood.” We who are Christians are the redeemed of the Lord. In making that declaration, most of us understand that we have received great privilege. I wonder if we truly understand how great the blessing we have received in Christ actually is. To say that Jesus loves us has become so commonly acknowledged that it seems rather mundane.

Children love to sing, “**Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.**” The song should not be restricted to our children since the truth applies to all mankind. In the texts behind the King James Version of the Bible, the Greek words translated “loved” and “washed” were both aorist tense, indicating that these actions were accomplished at some point in time, never to be repeated. However, the original text actually used a present tense verb, indicating ongoing linear action. The Saviour “loves” us—continuously, always and forever. To be certain, Jesus has “freed us from our sins” through His sacrifice that was offered once forever. By the one act of the Cross, our liberation from sin was accomplished, and now the Lord Jesus Christ loves us and shall always love us. The Word of God declares, “by a single offering [Christ Jesus] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” [HEBREWS 10:14]. “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” [HEBREWS 10:10].

Undoubtedly, the Lord loved us; the evidence for this is the cross. We are taught to “walk in love, *as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” [EPHESIANS 5:2]. Paul expresses the confidence experienced by each believer with these passionate words, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” [GALATIANS 2:19b, 20].

At the cost of His own blood, Jesus has freed us from our sins. This is what is meant when it says that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” [GALATIANS 3:13]. This is what the Apostle Paul means when he declares that the Father has sent His Son “to redeem those who were under the law” [GALATIANS 4:5]. The word used in either instance is a word that means, “to buy out from.” The word means that someone has paid the price to buy people or things out of the possession of another that holds that person or thing in his or her own power.

The passage in an older version reads as follows: “Unto him that loved us, and *washed* us from our sins in his own blood.” This is a mistranslation of the Greek text. In the limited Greek texts available to the translators of the King James Version, the word that was translated “washed” is the Greek term *louísanti*. Today, we have many more Greek texts available, and we know that the word John actually used is *lúsanti*, which is translated “freed.” There is but one letter different in the spelling of *louís* and *lús*. To the ear, the two words are homonyms—they sound identical. It would be easy to confuse the two words, and it is probable that an ancient scribe did confuse the two words. What seems certain is that we are not “washed in the blood,” but we are “freed by the blood.”

**GREETINGS TO A RESPONSIBLE PEOPLE** — Jesus made us “a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” John appears to be quoting from **EXODUS**. On the holy mount, Moses received a divine pronouncement designating Israel as priests: “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” [**EXODUS 19:6**]. What was intended for Israel has now become reality for Christians. It is even possible that John is here quoting the Apostle Peter [see **1 PETER 2:9**], since Peter’s letter was being circulated at that time.

By His death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ established a twofold office, not only for Himself, but also for all who believe. Our identification with His resurrection and with His kingship means that we, too, are considered resurrected and exercising rule with Him because of His exaltation: He is “the ruler of kings on earth,” and therefore, He “made us a kingdom.” We not only have been made part of His kingdom by being designated as His subjects, but we have also been constituted kings together with Him and we share His priestly office by virtue of our identification with his death and resurrection. Inauguration of both functions is apparent when we see the contrast between the future announcement of **EXODUS 19:6** (“you *shall* be...”) and the proclamation of an accomplished fact in the text (He has “made us...”).

Jesus has declared us royalty. Through Him we may become the true sons of God; and, if we are sons of the King of kings, we are of lineage than which there can be none more royal. Nor is this the only time John identifies us as a kingdom and as priests. In **REVELATION 5:9, 10**, John records the song the redeemed shall sing in Heaven.

“Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
and *you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,*  
and they shall reign on the earth.”

John also pronounces a benediction on those saved during the Great Tribulation, “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and *they will reign with him* for a thousand years” [**REVELATION 20:6**]. Moreover, of all who are redeemed—saved and set free from sin—the Word of God declares that they “will reign forever and ever” [**REVELATION 22:5**].

Under the Old Covenant, only the priests had immediate access to God. When a Jew seeking to worship entered the Temple, he could pass through the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of the Women, the Court of the Israelites—but there he must stop; into the Court of the Priests he could not go; no nearer the Holy of Holies could he come. In the great vision of distant days, Isaiah said: “You shall be called the priests of the LORD” [**ISAIAH 61:6**]. In that day, every one of the people would be a priest and have access to God. That is what John means; because of what Jesus Christ did, access to the presence of God is now open to every man. There is a priesthood of all believers. Now, we can “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” [**HEBREWS 4:16**], because for us there is now a “new and living way” into the presence of God [see **HEBREWS 10:19–22**]. Indeed, we Christians are “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” [**1 PETER 2:9**].

Would you like to know how to act like divine royalty? Do you wonder how you are to perform your priestly function? Precisely how we who are Christians are to exercise these functions lies in understanding how Christ Himself functioned in these two offices. The Saviour revealed God's truth by mediating as a priest through his sacrificial death and uncompromising "faithful witness" to the world, and He reigns as King ironically by conquering death and sin through his victory in the Cross and His subsequent resurrection from the dead. Believers spiritually fulfill the same offices in this age by following His model, especially through being faithful witnesses, mediating Christ's priestly and royal authority to the world.

"There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time" [1 TIMOTHY 2:5, 6]. Paul states that He has been appointed a preacher and an apostle to declare that very truth. In a similar manner, each Christian has been appointed a priest of God with the priestly duty of declaring that same truth to all who will receive it. The Word declares, "Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. Declaring this truth is now our priestly duty.

I suspect that we are more focused on the privilege of royalty than we are on the responsibility of royalty. An account of Princess Wilhelmina of the Netherlands made an impression on me. Her father died when she was ten, and she became Queen, with her mother acting as Regent. On her first appearance on the balcony of the Royal Palace at Amsterdam, she is said to have asked, "Mama, do all these people belong to me?" Queen Emma answered, "No, my child, it is you who belong to all these people."<sup>3</sup> It was a wise though gentle reminder that royalty carries with it responsibility. Just so, as a divine kingdom, we have awesome responsibility imposed upon us.

**EXODUS 19:6** summarises God's purpose for Israel, stating that the Israelites were to be a royal and priestly nation mediating the Lord's salvation by witnessing to the Gentiles, a purpose which the prophets repeatedly blame Israel for never fulfilling. Like Old Testament priests, the people of God now have free, unmediated access into God's presence because Christ has removed the obstacle of sin by his substitutionary blood. Christians are appointed to reflect the light of God's presence to the world.

God's glory is secured through Christ's work and the service of His people as kings and priests. That God is to receive glory means that He alone is worthy to receive credit for the salvation that we now enjoy. Dear people, when you come to church, when you worship, singing the hymns of Zion, when you pray and plead for the salvation of others, when you tell others of the goodness of God and stand for Him, you are doing so much more than merely fulfilling a duty—you are exercising your prerogative as royalty. You are acting as a priest of God, giving the message of life and glorifying His Name.

If you will be a royal people, and if you will be priests of God, you will live godly lives that reflect the presence of the Lord. You will witness to the grace and mercy of Christ the Lord, and you will call others to life. You will pray for the salvation of the lost and you will seek Christ's glory in all that you do. Thus, you shall be a kingdom and priests to God, knowing that you are saved to be God's servants and His heralds.

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<sup>3</sup> The account is taken from the article, "Worried Queen," Time, November 27, 1939, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762871-2,00.html>, accessed 21 June 2011

**GREETINGS TO AN EXPECTANT PEOPLE** — “[Jesus] is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him.” The words sound a missing note in contemporary preaching—modern worshippers have forgotten that Jesus is coming again. He appeared once to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin, and He has pledged on His Holy Word that He shall return to reward all that look for His coming and to judge all wickedness and to put away all sin. Such knowledge must serve to spur us to tell the world of His mercy while it is day.

I came to faith in a time when there was great emphasis on the return of the Lord. Today, we seldom hear of the return of the Christ. In Canada, we have things so good that we really are no longer looking for the coming of the Lord or for the end of this age. Our homes are filled with “things,” and we have convinced ourselves that the acquisition of more “things” will give meaning to our lives. However, deep down, we are empty and we know that our present unfulfilling existence cannot be all there is to life.

The sense of disquiet that pervades our lives and disturbs our well-being is especially pronounced for us as Christians. We not only know that this life is a mirage—a mist that must soon dissipate—but we know quite well that the time is short. As a young Christian, I heard many older saints quote a couplet urging immediate service.

**Just one life, ‘twill soon be past;  
only what’s done for Christ will last.**

The urgency of the hour is emphasised repeatedly throughout the writings of the Apostle. For instance, Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-7].

In the encyclical we have received as the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle warns those who follow the Master, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Awake, O sleeper,  
and arise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.’

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” [EPHESIANS 5:6-16].

If the days were evil when the Apostle wrote, how much more urgent is the hour today! You may recall that the Roman Christians (and thus, all Christians) were admonished, “You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” [ROMANS 13:11-14]. If salvation was near at that time, how much nearer must salvation be now!

Thomas Chalmers was one of Scotland’s greatest preachers. In his early ministry, though he was a minister, he was an unconverted man pastoring a small congregation. Secretly, he wanted to be a professor of mathematics at the University of Edinburgh and devoted most of his time to that end. During that time, he wrote a pamphlet expressing the view that a minister could easily discharge his pastoral obligations in two days, leaving the remainder of the week free for the pursuit of any avocation on which he set his heart. Then came Chalmers’ conversion and his spectacular God-blessed ministry.

Much later in his career, while attending a conference of the leaders of his denomination, Chalmers was confronted by one of his fellow ministers, a man who was jealous of Chalmers’ success. That fellow servant of God read to the assembled synod the pamphlet penned by Chalmers in his unconverted days. “Did you write that sir?” he demanded. “Did you write that?”

Chalmers was stung to the quick. “Yes sir,” he said, rising to his feet, “I wrote it, strangely blinded as I was. In those days, I aspired to be a professor of mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. But what, sir, is mathematics? It is magnitude and the proportion of magnitude, and in those unregenerate days I had forgotten two magnitudes—I had forgotten the *shortness* of time, and I had forgotten the *length* of eternity.”<sup>4</sup> It is easy for us to become so consumed by the moment that we forget the magnitude of eternity in contrast to the brevity of time.

In our text, John echoes the words Jesus spoke as He prepared His disciples for His exodus. “Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake” [MARK 13:32-37].

Are you a Christian? What are you doing to prepare for eternity? Are you now living to fulfil the divine designation as a king and as a priest? Are you now intervening for the souls of lost friends or of family members who are surely headed for eternal disaster? Are you witnessing to the grace of God? Wake up! Now is the time to serve, for the Master is coming back and the time for service will soon be past.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Garden Blaikie, *Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1896), pp. 23-4, cited in John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation* (Moody Press, Chicago, IL 1974) 27-8



For you who share our service and somehow yet remain outside the precincts of grace, you must know that the call of Christ is a call to real life. That life is offered freely for any who will receive the forgiveness of sin. The Son of God died because of your sin, presenting His life as a sacrifice because of your helpless situation. Unlike us in our helpless condition, He conquered death and was raised from the dead so that you might now enjoy His life and never again be threatened by your own sinful condition.

The Word of God calls you to “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, so that you shall be saved.” The explanation for this is that “with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Word continues by declaring that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our call for you today—to believe that Jesus died because of your sin, to confess Him as Master of life, come, while there is time. To identify openly with Him in believer’s baptism as He has commanded, come, and angels attend you in the way. To place your life and fellowship in this good church, do this while there is yet time to serve. Come, now, and do all that the Lord commands. May He be glorified as you accept His call to live openly, boldly as a Christian. You may be assured that “He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him.” “Even so. Amen.”