

# A REVELATION CHARACTER SKETCH

## Revelation 1:4-5

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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 (Rev. 1:4-5).

One effective and interesting approach to studying history is by means of character sketches. For instance, when studying the American Revolution one might compare and contrast George Washington, the leader of the colonial cause, with the British monarch, King George III, or with the British military commander, General Lord Charles Cornwallis. We might consider the respective characters of able generals like the patriot Nathaniel Greene, for whom our city is named, and the traitor Benjamin Arnold. On the political front, one might conduct sketches of key figures in the signing of the Declaration of Independence, such as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Through studies of leading participants, we can often help history to come alive.

The book of Revelation, which takes the form of an historical letter, can also be appreciated better if we keep in mind the people who were involved. In the salutation found in Revelation 1:4-5, we meet the main participants. Included in this greeting are John the apostle, the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, and the triune God of grace and peace. In the background but very much present, was the diabolical Roman emperor Domitian, whose looming persecution supplied the setting in which the book of Revelation was given.

## JOHN THE APOSTLE

**I**n our study of Revelation's prologue (Rev. 1:1-3), we considered the compelling evidence that the "John" who wrote of Revelation was the apostle John. John is a major figure of the New Testament, having been one of Jesus' three closest disciples, "the disciple whom he loved" (Jn. 19:26), as well as the author of the Gospel of John and three epistles that bear his name. Revelation 1:1 identifies him as the "servant" of Jesus Christ. John MacArthur described him further as "the elder statesmen of the church near the end of the first century, ... universally beloved and respected for his devotion to Christ and his great love for the saints worldwide."<sup>1</sup>

In these late days of his life, John is revealed as a *faithful* servant to Jesus. If Revelation was written around the year 95 AD, John would have been about 80 years old. He was the youngest of the original twelve disciples, a teenager when he watched Jesus die on the cross and then raced with Peter to gaze inside the empty tomb. Few people today pursue any calling -mindedly over the entire length of their adult lives. But from the time when Jesus came to John and his brother James and pledged to make them "fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17-20), until the dying moments of his elderly years, a span of over sixty years, John had served as a witness of the gospel, an apostle of Jesus, and a pastor to the church. John's faithful service was extraordinarily valuable in the first century. Likewise, the lifelong faithfulness of any Christian today – faithful in his walk of faith and in whatever calling Christ has given him in the church – will leave a legacy that honors the Lord and blesses his church.

Early church tradition holds that in these late years of his life, John had been leading the church in the strategically important city of Ephesus. This fits the book of Revelation, since John writes this letter to churches in the province of which Ephesus was the leading city. This indicates that John was also a *humble* servant of Christ. The church in Ephesus was founded by the apostle Paul (see Acts 19). The elders of that church were converted by Paul and had a profound loyalty to that fiery apostle (see Acts 20:37-38). Moreover, Paul had placed his protégé, Timothy, in charge of the Ephesian church (1 Tim. 1:3). So John would have accepted this charge in order to complete

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 97.

someone else's work and as the successor to a lesser figure in the church. Many strong leaders today would refuse such a calling, putting a priority on their career aspirations, but John humbled himself to serve where he was most needed. Perhaps he remembered Jesus' high priestly prayer, in which Jesus asked the Father that "the love with which you have loved me may be in them" (Jn. 17:26). John exemplified Christ's spirit of love in humbly accepting the calling to shepherd the precious saints of the Ephesian church.

A third characteristic of John's ministry in Revelation is that he was still a *growing* servant of Christ. We might think that a great leader like John would have his life completely together by this late date. Yet Revelation will reveal him asking questions and even making mistakes as he embraces the upward call of greater communion with the Lord. If so great and veteran an apostle as John could marvel at the visions of this book and glory so whole-heartedly in the victory of Christ, we more humble servants surely can do no less, but should eagerly desire to grow in our knowledge and our faith in Jesus Christ.

## THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN ASIA

**T**he recipients of John's letter were "the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4). The Roman province of Asia first appears in the New Testament when Luke describes how Paul desired to preach the gospel there but was "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). Instead, according to a vision he received, Paul traveled to Macedonia and brought the gospel to the great cities of Greece. Only in his third missionary journey, beginning around 53AD, did Paul come to the leading Asian city of Ephesus. He stayed there for three years, building that important church, from which the gospel seems to have spread to the other cities of the province. Two of Paul's later letters, Colossians and Philemon, are addressed to believers living outside of Ephesus in the province of Asia.

John's letter was sent first to Ephesus and then advanced in a semi-circle through the province from the north to the east. After Ephesus, these churches were located in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The question is raised as to why John wrote to these churches. The answer is not that these were the only churches in Asia, since there were also churches in Colosse and Hierapolis. About twenty years later, John's disciple Ignatius of

Antioch would also write letters to the churches in Tralles and Magnesia. Moreover, there is no evidence to support the often-heard idea that these seven churches represent successive periods of church history.<sup>2</sup>

The best answer notes that the number seven stands for completion and in the Bible, starting with the seven days that completed the week of creation. With this in mind, while John wrote actual letters to these seven churches, their number was selected to represent the entirety of the church during the gospel age and the kinds of challenges that would beset Christians at all times. This may explain why John concludes each individual letter, writing, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, etc.). James Ramsey thus comments that “‘John to the seven churches of Asia,’ is equivalent to ‘Jesus Christ to the churches of every people and age,’ and therefore to us.”<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious from Revelation that John is writing to a church that faces violent persecution, although at the time of his writing it seems that the Asian churches had not yet suffered greatly in this way. Secular history does not record a great persecution of Christians during Domitian’s reign, although he did demand the imperial worship that led to persecution. The fact that John notes a single martyr by name, Antipas of Pergamum (Rev. 2:13), suggests that this was not yet a common event. However, the prospect of persecution was drawing near. By the year 113, a Roman governor in Asia Minor, a man named Pliny the Younger, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan requesting instructions regarding the Christians under his rule. The emperor, Domitian’s successor, replied that Christians were to be put to death. Those who denied Christianity would have to prove this claim by worshiping an image of the emperor. This shows that in the brief years between John’s letter to the seven churches and Pliny’s letter to the emperor Trajan, violent persecution did in fact descend upon the Christians of Asia Minor.<sup>4</sup>

The letters themselves show that with persecution drawing near, the chief problem of these churches was spiritual complacency. They had

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1909), note on Revelation 1:20.

<sup>3</sup> James Ramsey, *Revelation: An Exposition of the First III Chapters*, Geneva Commentaries (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 42.

<sup>4</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 5-16.

grown lax in their morals and doctrinal fidelity, and in some cases there was a lost zeal for the mission of the gospel. Jesus rebukes “sexual immorality” and “food sacrificed to idols” (Rev. 2:20), some “who hold the teaching of Balaam” and the “teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:14-15), along with Christians who “are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold” (Rev. 3:16). We see in these problems how the seven letters pertain not merely to ancient believers but to all Christians. Revelation therefore addresses complacent Christians who do not realize the trial of their faith that is drawing near. J. Ramsey Michaels comments: “To a considerable extent, it is a wake-up call to Christians who do not sense that they are in any particular danger – a tract for our times no less than John’s.”<sup>5</sup>

### THE GOD OF GRACE AND PEACE

**W**hile revelation is a letter written by John to the seven churches of Asia, the chief figure of this book is the God whose message John bears. This message is the most hopeful news anyone could ever receive: “Grace to you and peace” (Rev. 1:4). These two words formed the standard greeting of Christ’s apostles, some combination of them occurring at the beginning and end of nearly every New Testament letter.

“Peace” is the comprehensive term for the blessings that God gives to those who receive his favor. “Grace” describes the way that God grants this peace to sinners: as a free and unmerited gift through Jesus Christ. What greater need could the recipients of Revelation have than to enjoy the peace of God in a world of violent hatred and deadly temptation? Alexander Maclaren writes: “Surely the one thing that the world wants is to have the question answered whether there really is a God in Heaven that cares anything about me, and to whom I can trust myself wholly.”<sup>6</sup> By offering this peace only through God’s grace, the Bible reveals the true problem of our condition: as sinners, we are guilty before God and inwardly corrupted by sin. We can only be saved by God’s initiative in extending mercy to the unworthy and the weak. The God who gives peace by his own free grace is the only

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<sup>5</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, DATE), 17:119.

God who truly could meet the needs of the seven churches of Asia or of troubled people today.

In defining the God who gives grace and peace, John employs a carefully chosen trinitarian formula, expressing how peace and grace flow from each member of the triune Godhead. First, John says that grace and peace come “from him who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). These words refer to God the Father, alluding to the words God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Moses asked for God’s name and “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM,’” adding, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3:14). Similarly, John represents the God “who is.” God does not depend on any other source for his being but exists by his own power. The God “who is” eternally is sovereign over all things, not only in the present but also in the past and the future: “from him who is and who was and who is to come.” David Chilton writes: “as the early Christians faced what seemed to them an uncertain future, they had to keep before them the absolute certainty of God’s eternal rule... Threatened, opposed, and persecuted by those in power, they were nevertheless to rejoice in the knowledge of their eternal God... [and] His unceasing rule over history.”<sup>7</sup> God’s lordship over the future is essential to the message of Revelation, which foretells the history of the church and declares that “by virtue of his eternal existence,” God “exercises sovereign control over the course of history.”<sup>8</sup>

Grace and peace are extended not only from the Father but also “from the seven spirits who are before his throne” (Rev. 1:4). Some commentators suggest that the “seven spirits” are angels who go forth to do God’s will, noting that John later speaks of the seven “angels of the seven churches” (Rev. 1:20).<sup>9</sup> However, the expression certainly refers to the Holy Spirit, since the “seven spirits” are presented on a par with the Father and the Son. Moreover, “it is inconceivable that *grace and peace* can originate from anyone but God.”<sup>10</sup> G. B. Caird understood John as using “seven spirits” to signify “the Spirit of God in the fullness of his activity and power.”<sup>11</sup> John may also have had in

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<sup>7</sup> David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (Revised)*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 68.

<sup>9</sup> See David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Dallas: Word, 1997), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 60. Italics original.

<sup>11</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1966), 15.

mind the seven aspects of the Spirit, which Isaiah 11:2 said would come upon the Messiah: he is the spirit “of the Lord,” “of wisdom,” of “understanding,” “of counsel,” of “might,” “of knowledge,” and of “the fear of the LORD.” Finally, John likely draws this image from Zechariah 4:2-6, in which the ministry of the Holy Spirit is depicted by a lampstand with seven bowls, shining light into the darkness.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit goes forth from God’s throne with the ministry of applying grace and peace to believers. Being perfect and complete for this ministry, the Holy Spirit is all-sufficient to empower God’s people to conquer through faith in Christ. The sevenfold Spirit provides the power by which Christ’s churches serve as lampstands shining a gospel light into the darkness of unbelief.

### A THREE-FOLD DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST

**H**aving mentioned the grace and peace that flow from the Father and the Holy Spirit, John gives primary emphasis to God the Son: “and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth” (Rev. 1:5). The prominence given to Jesus here will continue throughout Revelation. We know from Scripture that the actions of the trinity are one: whatever one divine person does God as a whole is doing. Yet we may observe that the Father and the Spirit remain relatively in the background of Revelation, which is intensely absorbed with the glorious and victorious reign of Jesus as Lord of history and Savior of his church.

Revelation comes to its conclusion with Jesus Christ offering salvation through grace alone, apart from any merit or works, simply through faith in his gospel: “let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev. 22:17). Here at the beginning of Revelation, John introduces the same Savior through three key descriptions that correspond to his offices as Prophet, Priest, and King.

First, Jesus is “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5). This means that Jesus perfectly reveals God and his salvation to a darkened world. Having come from heaven and close communion with the Father, Jesus is able to make him known. He preached, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen” (Jn.

3:11). Hebrews 1:2 emphasizes that while formerly God spoke by other prophets, “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

Jesus revealed God’s holiness in the moral perfection of his life, God’s wisdom in the searching teaching of his parables, and his power in the miracles by which he cast our demons, healed the sick, and stilled the storm. But it was in dying on the cross that Jesus bore faithful witness to the grace and peace of God that sinners need. Christ’s atoning death revealed how terrible is the sin by which we have offended heaven, so that only the death of God’s perfect Son could gain our forgiveness. At the same time he gave testimony to the marvel of God’s grace in that the Father and Son designed this sacrifice to free believers from their sin. The grace John proclaimed is received only through faith in the gospel Jesus declared, through which we gain peace with God and are blessed with the peace of God in our souls.

Moreover, John writes of Jesus as the faithful witness to encourage his people who are about to experience persecution for their testimony to Christ. Jesus gave a faithful witness before the rulers of the world and suffered death for it. But Jesus also foretold his resurrection from the grave. By trusting his Word, Christians can know that persecution will never “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). If Jesus was “the faithful witness,” declaring God’s grace and peace to a sinful, dying world, let us not fail to bear our witness to the world in his name, whatever the cost.

Second, Jesus is “the firstborn of the dead” (Rev. 1:5). This speaks of Jesus as the one who conquered death by his resurrection and now rules as Lord over life and salvation. Moreover, as firstborn in the resurrection, Jesus guarantees that there will be a second, a third, and so on – all who are joined to him in saving faith will be resurrected with him into glory. Furthermore, it is by his resurrection that Jesus conveys grace and peace to his people today. Christ is enthroned at the right hand of the Father, ensuring by his unending high priestly mediation that there is always grace for sinners who believe.

Realizing that we serve a Christ who lives forever, Christians today, like the churches of Asia, should be willing to suffer for the gospel. James Boice wrote: “Not many in western lands are in danger of direct physical persecution for their testimony to Christ, but we are



under constant pressure to compromise in less obvious ways. Sin is treated lightly today... We are pressured to adopt the politically correct stance on moral issues and treat as normal behavior sins which the Bible says will bring the unrepentant to judgment... Jesus may be tolerated..., but woe to us if we bring him off the reservation and proclaim him as a true and relevant figure for our times.”<sup>12</sup> It is in the face of this kind of opposition that Christians must persist in declaring the grace and peace that only Jesus can bring. Paul reasoned: “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34).

John’s third description of Christ celebrates his royal authority: “and the ruler of kings on earth” (Rev. 1:5). This follows the teaching of Psalm 89:27, which says, “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”

What a blessing it is to know that the true Sovereign reigning over history is Jesus, the Lord of grace and peace. Alexander Maclaren writes: “His dominion rests upon love and sacrifice. And so His Kingdom is a kingdom of blessing and of gentleness; and He is crowned with the crowns of the universe, because He was first crowned with the crown of thorns. His first regal title was written upon His Cross, and from the Cross His Royalty ever flows.”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus reigns forever that he may send grace and peace to those who call on his name. He is the great Prophet, who bears true testimony of God’s grace and peace; he is the great Priest, who reigns forever above to intercede in the presence of the Father, securing grace and peace for those who pray in his name; and Jesus is the great King, under whose royal seal God provides the grace and peace that alone can secure eternal life.

## TO HIM WHO SITS ON THE THRONE

**T**here can be little doubt that when John completed his designation of Christ as “ruler of kings on earth,” his mind recalled the pretender to this same title, the emperor Domitian. For though Christ sits upon the throne of heaven, there sat upon the throne of

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<sup>12</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 2:11.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17:124.

Rome a ruler who was the most vile and dangerous of men. Domitian, whose character is the last we will sketch, lived a life of utter debauchery, destroying those closest to him and ruling an empire by sheer terror. James Hamilton writes: “Imagine living in a world ruled by a man who would leave his brother to die, seduce his own niece, kill people for making jokes about him, and then demand to be addressed as ‘Lord and God.’”<sup>14</sup> The Christians to whom John wrote Revelation lived in that very world, with Domitian’s and subsequent emperors’ malicious attention directed on them.

Revelation was written to show such frightened believers the truth of the world as seen from the throne where Jesus reigns. There is grace and peace from the Father, from the Spirit, and from Christ the Son, whose Word is truth, who conquered death, and who reigns to save his people who bear faithful witness in his name. Domitian reigned on a throne of earthly might, but enthroned as the Sovereign of heaven and earth, the Lord of all history, Jesus was able to declare of those who trust in him: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:2).

How different Domitian was in every way from the true sovereign, Jesus Christ. The ancient historian Suetonius writes that Domitian “became an object of terror and hatred to all, but he was overthrown at last by a conspiracy of his friends and favorite freedmen, to which his wife was also privy.”<sup>15</sup> Domitian had everything on earth but sought to take for himself the place of God. As the result, he was despised by all, betrayed by his wife and friends, and died to face the eternal judgment of the true and wrathful Sovereign. Meanwhile, Jesus, though himself eternally God, laid down his life to give grace and peace to sinners who receive him in faith. By his reign of love, he gained the loyalty and praise of his people forever, and as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth” he received from his Father the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9). For this reason all heaven declares: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev. 5:13).

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<sup>14</sup> James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 30.

<sup>15</sup> Suetonius, “Domitian,” in *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, rev. ed. Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 38 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard: 1997), VIII.XIV, p. 349