

TO HIM WHO LOVES US

Revelation 1:5-6

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Now to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Rev. 1:5-6).

Some of the Bible's greatest songs of praise occur in the book of Revelation, which frequently depicts the worship of heaven. The songs are striking for their focus on Jesus Christ. One point they make is that awareness of what God has done in Christ ought to move us to worship. Moreover, true worship is centered on who Jesus is and what he has done.

Donald Grey Barnhouse points out that Revelation's songs of praise increase in intensity as the book advances. He compares the situation to a man who receives a package and says, "Oh, thank you." When the package is opened, he sees a wallet inside. "Oh, thank you very much," he says. Opening the wallet, he finds some large bills. "Oh, thank you very, very much," he exclaims. Finally, he finds in a side pocket a check for a very large amount and cries, "Thank you, indeed, very, very, very much." Likewise, the praise to Christ in Revelation 1:6 reads, "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." In Revelation 4:11, the praise is more expansive: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power." By Revelation 7:12, there is full, sevenfold praise: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!"¹

While the doxology of Revelation 1:6 is only the beginning, it is nonetheless a great expression of praise to Jesus. When theologians

¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 24-5.

think of Christ they usually speak in terms of his person and his work. John's doxology touches on the "glory" of Christ's person, but is especially concerned with the marvel of his saving work. In praising Christ's work, John follows the same progression as when he described the Father in verse 4, as the One "who is and who was and who is to come." Similarly, Christ is glorified for his *present* love, for his *past* work of salvation, and finally for his *future* return in clouds of glory. In this study we will explore the first two of these: Christ's present and past work of salvation, and the glory they gain for his name: "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" (Rev. 1:5-6).

WHO LOVES US

When John praises Christ for his present work, he sums up the whole by speaking of Christ's love for his people: "To him who loves us" (Rev. 1:5). This is the great fact that the Bible declares to Christians: not just that Christ loved us in the past but that he loves us now. James Boice describes the love of Christ as "so great, so giving, so winsome, so victorious, so infinite, that we can only marvel at it. It is a love that reaches from the heights of divine holiness to the pit of human depravity to save and keep us from sin."² Perhaps this explains the popularity of one of our most enduring children's songs: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Christ's love is one with God's love for the world. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." However, the love of God may be the most misused of all Bible truths, especially since some people deny that a God who loves could ever show wrath towards our sins. While "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8) is one of the Bible's greatest truths, J. I. Packer points out that it "is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned."³ By virtue of his love, God is not morally indifferent, but is holy and just. He is the God who condemns and punishes the disobedient precisely because he is a God of love: a God who loves truth, righteousness, and holiness.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 3:2.

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 108.

I remember once meeting with a man who was about to abandon his wife and family. I urged him, among other things, regarding how angry his action would make God. After meeting with his liberal minister, he answered that he did not believe in an angry God but a God of love. I replied that God's love was precisely his problem. God loves his wife. God loves his own law. God loves the sanctity of marriage. It is precisely the God of love who is just in his condemnation of all that is faithless, evil, and unloving!

At the same time that God's love is not the only truth taught in the Bible, Packer adds, "God is love' is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned." God sent his Son to die for the forgiveness of his people, so for believers there is nothing to stand in the way of the fullest expression of God's love. In fact, everything that God does in and through Christ is an expression of his love for his chosen people. Packer writes:

The knowledge that this is so for him personally is the Christian's supreme comfort... Knowing this, he is able to apply to himself the promise that all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Not just *some* things, note, but *all* things! Every single that that happens to him expresses God's love to him."⁴

WHO FREED US FROM OUR SIN

In all of his writings, the apostle John never mentions the love of God without immediately presenting the death of Jesus for our sins.

So it is that having pointed out that Christ loves his people in the present, John praises Christ for the supreme expression of his love which took place in the past: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5). This is the first of two great saving works that John rejoices in as completed by Christ in the past. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). Jesus acted in this great love so as to remove from his people the just condemnation of their sins.

To say that Jesus "freed" us from sins, John uses the Greek verb *luo*, which normally has the meaning of "loosen" or "unfasten." It is used for the taking off of clothes or the unbuckling of armor. When used of persons, *luo* speaks of setting a prisoner free. For this reason, a

⁴ Ibid, 111.

noun form, *lutron*, came to mean a ransom price that is paid. From this comes one of the main words for redemption, *apolutrosis*, which speaks of the freeing of a slave by payment of a price.

John's statement that Jesus freed us "from our sins by his blood" makes plain the primary meaning of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. Jesus freed us by paying the penalty for our sins, substituting himself to die in our place. This is the significance of the words, "by his blood," which means, "by his sacrificial death." Putting these ideas together brings us the doctrine of *penal substitutionary atonement*. Jesus atoned for our sins by paying the penalty of our guilt as a substitute who made a sacrifice in our place with his own blood. Barnhouse wrote: "Ours were the sins; His was the blood. Let no man wonder hereafter if salvation is sufficient."⁵

In praising Christ for freeing us from our sins, John captures the experience of Christians at the moment when they believe in Jesus and receive complete forgiveness for their sins. Charles Wesley chronicled this experience in his famous hymn, "And Can It Be":

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light:
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed thee.

This stanza expresses how a believer feels when his or her sins are forgiven and it concludes by identifying the payment that was offered to achieve that freedom from sin:

Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?⁶

When John writes that we are "freed" by Christ's blood, he primarily means that we are set from God's wrath on unforgiven sinners. We are likewise freed from the fear of hell and the burden of guilt and shame upon our souls. Jesus said, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). We are set free from fear, knowing that in Christ we have become God's beloved children, destined to live in glory forever. We are freed from the binding influence of sin's

⁵ Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 24.

⁶ Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be That I Should Gain," 1738.

power. Although we are not free from trials, we are freed from the power of trials to steal our joy. What an incentive John provides for every sinner to turn in faith to Jesus – poor captives set free by God’s gift of his Son! Unless you are so blinded by the power of sin, so hardened in unbelief, and so deceived in the bondage of darkness, surely you must open your hearts to Jesus. John Newton wrote: “Let us love the Lord who bought us, pitied us when enemies / called us by his grace, and taught us, gave us ears and gave us eyes / he has washed us with his blood, he presents our souls to God.”⁷

WHO MADE US A KINGDOM

When John considers Jesus’ past saving work, he not only marvels at the removal of sin but also at the positive results of salvation.

Having freed us by his blood, Jesus “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6).

When John spoke of Christ’s blood, he evoked images of the Passover, by which the nation of Israel was delivered from death and set free in the exodus. God’s angel of death came upon Egypt, visiting every home except those marked by the shed blood of a sacrificial lamb. In this way, God was pointing forward to the death of Christ that truly removes the guilt of sin. John now adds more language that looks back on the exodus when he speaks of believers as a kingdom of priests. “You shall be my treasured possession among all people,” God told the Israelites, “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). In employing this language to speak of what Christ has done for believers, John makes clear that the New Testament church carries on the identity of Old Testament Israel. Moreover, this statement shows that Christians are saved not merely into an individual relationship with God but into a kingdom with fellow believers in the church.

First, John rejoices that Jesus has “made us a kingdom” (Rev. 1:6). Jesus is the King of kings (Rev. 1:5), and Christians are the kingdom over which Jesus rules. We normally define a kingdom in terms of the territory it controls, but Jesus’ kingdom is defined by faith in his Word. “I am a king,” he told Pontius Pilate. “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world--to bear witness

⁷ John Newton, “Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder,” 1774.

to the truth” (Jn. 18:37). To believe in Christ is to gain citizenship in his kingdom, transferring our allegiance from the world to him.

While we live in the world, we become pilgrims on earth whose hope is in the age to come. Paul wrote: “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20).

Christians not only are Christ’s kingdom, but all through Revelation Jesus declares that believers enter into his kingship. He states that Christians who persevere in faith will receive “authority over the nations” (Rev. 2:26) and will “sit with me on my throne” (Rev. 3:21). In Revelation 5:10, the worshipers in heaven praise Christ for making his people “a kingdom and priests to our God,” and add, “they shall reign on the earth.” Kings reign by conquering, and believers conquer in Christ’s name through the gospel. Kings establish their laws, and Christians enter into his reign by teaching and obeying the commands of Scripture. The key earthly institutions of Christ’s kingdom are the church and the Christian family. In these realms, Christ’s name is to be worshiped, his Word is to be preached and obeyed, and his gospel is to be advanced. We pray, as Jesus taught us, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10).

In addition to making his people a kingdom, Christ is praised for making them “priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6). This, again, picks up the language that God used about Israel in the exodus: it was a nation that served a priestly role on earth. Whereas the Gentile peoples were “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12), this holy nation was to live in the light of God’s presence. The priests of the Old Testament had permission to come into the tabernacle for fellowship and service with God. Likewise, because of Christ’s priestly offering to free us from our sins, Christians have liberty to draw near to God with no barriers hindering our fellowship with him.

John says that we have been made priests “to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6), which speaks of our service to God in Christ’s name. The New Testament speaks of the Christian’s priestly service in three ways. First, as a kingdom of priests we render true worship to God in accordance with his Word. Hebrews 13:15 urges us: “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the

fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” This reminds us what is the chief purpose for coming to church week after week. Many evangelicals today, if not most, believe that the church exists either to meet the spiritual needs of Christians or to reach out to the world. Both of these are by-products of true worship: biblical worship does bless believers and evangelize the lost. But the true and primary reason to come to church is to fulfill our priestly role of offering worship to the true and living God, who is worthy of all our praise.

Second, priests bear testimony of God’s glory and grace to the world. This was Peter’s emphasis when he described Christians with the very language John uses in this doxology: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Priests are those who are privileged to know God through Christ: we are then to represent God and call out to the world with his gospel so that sinners may be reconciled to God and joined to his worshiping throng.

A third passage that uses priestly language for believers is Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Christians do not offer an atoning sacrifice, since Christ has once-for-all freed us from our sins by his blood. Instead, we offer the priestly thank offering, using the whole of our lives to say “thank you” to God.

It is vital to emphasize that when John praises Christ for making a kingdom of priests, he is not referring to some select minority within the church. In Christ, all believers are priests unto God; one cannot be a Christian without being a priest. This teaching was known in the Reformation as *the priesthood of all believers*. This doctrine stands in stark contrast to the priests of the Roman Catholic Church, who occupy a privileged status above the people before God, serving as mediators of God’s saving grace. According to the Bible, however, there are only two kinds of priests in Christ’s kingdom: Christ the high priest and all his people who are a kingdom of priests in his name. Certainly, there are differences among believers. There are a variety of gifts and callings within Christ’s church. There are pastor-teachers and church officers like deacons and elders to serve and lead the church. Yet there are no priests other than the entire body of

believers, who are all called into the ministries of worship, evangelism, and holy, sacrificial service. It is not merely a few who are called to worship, witness, and offer holy lives: the kingship and priesthood of all believers is essential to the life and work of the church.

Yesterday my family was present at a swimming pool on the campus of Clemson University where Josh Davis, a three-time Olympic gold-medalist, was giving a clinic on swimming technique. At the end of his instruction, Davis gave a motivational speech on how the youths could become Olympic athletes like him. He concluded with a witness that was much in keeping with John's praise to Jesus Christ. Davis pointed out that nothing achieved in a swimming pool, whether medals, sponsorships, or fame, can give true fulfillment in life. "The greatest thing that has happened to me," this Olympic champion told the crowd of youths, "was to realize that God loves me and sent Jesus Christ to die for my sins and give me eternal life." What a pleasure it was to see this energetic Christian reigning with Christ by speaking forth his gospel truth and offering priestly ministry by appealing to sinners on Christ's behalf for salvation. Every Christian, whatever our worldly calling, is likewise called into priestly service on behalf of Jesus. Paul spoke for all believers when he wrote: "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

TO HIM BE GLORY!

Since Revelation 1:5-6 presents the first of many praise songs to the glory of Christ in the book of Revelation, it is fitting that these verses conclude with the first doxology to his praise: "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Later doxologies will add blessings to the name of Christ, such as "thanks" (4:9), "honor" (4:11), "wealth," "wisdom," "strength," and "praise" (5:12). This first doxology lifts up the glory and dominion of Christ forever. "Glory" (Greek, *doxa*), refers to the splendor and worthiness of the exalted Christ. "Dominion" (Greek, *kratos*), refers to his right to govern as sovereign Lord. We do not bestow these honors upon Jesus, for they are his by right and by appointment of the Father. Instead, we recognize his glory and dominion and offer Jesus the praise he deserves for them. Osborne comments: "The adoration

of Christ in terms of his “glory and power” reminds the reader that only he (and not Caesar or any earthly power) is worthy of worship, for only he can effect redemption.”⁸

Donald Grey Barnhouse reminds us of the liturgical context of the book of Revelation and imagines this opening passage a worship service, with antiphonal voices singing. In verse 4, John extends to his readers grace and peace from the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Noting the plural and thus communal “us” and “our” of verses 5 and 6, Barnhouse envisions the congregation responding in joyful doxology, concluding: “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” He writes:

The grace and the peace have come upon the Church. The answer shows a yieldedness to Him. We are won by the attraction of His eternal love, though we had been captives in the chains of sin. The guilt and the chain had been dissolved together by His blood. We are freed...

Is it any wonder that the Church sings this great song of praise? He has redeemed us. He has made us a kingdom. We become priests to God and His Father. The redeemed Church boasts not in herself, but sings, “To him be the glory and the dominion.”⁹

When we recognize that the doxology of verses 5 and 6 is a response to the grace and peace proclaimed in verses 4 and 5, we realize that all true worship is a response to God’s revelation about himself. James Hamilton writes: “We see here the pattern of all worship: God reveals himself and his people respond with the praise due him. Glory and dominion belong to Jesus because 1) he ‘loves us,’ 2) he ‘freed us from our sins by his blood,’ and 3) he made us a kingdom and priests.”¹⁰ This shows why the idea of worship without the reading and teaching of God’s Word falls so far short of the biblical ideal. All through Revelation we will witness the most exalted worship, always in response to the revelation of the glory, grace, and dominion of God in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus taught: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). Our greatest freedom, purchased by Christ’s blood, is the worship of God as we are instructed by the revelation of his Word.

⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 67.

⁹ Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 23-24.

¹⁰ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 37.

Of course, the true way to praise the glory and dominion of Christ is not merely with our lips but with our lives. Are you living as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom, or are you still selling your allegiance to the powers of this world, for the sake of its pleasures and feeble security? Do you acknowledge in your lifestyle – in your use of time, talents, and treasure – that Jesus is your Lord? Do you live like the priest you have been called to be, coming often into God’s presence, helping others to know God and his gospel offer of salvation and offering a sacrifice of praise to his glory? If we know the truth of God in Jesus Christ by believing his Word, then we should respond by living as “a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6).

Finally, in order to live to the praise of God and of Jesus, his Son, we must begin where John began in the book of Revelation. John writes, “Grace and peace,” from the triune God. We too must start with the free gift of peace with God. How can we gain this saving gift? John answers, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5).

Have you brought your sins to be cleansed by the blood of Christ? If you have not, then you are an alien to his kingdom of grace, at enmity to God and subject to his just wrath. At the end of Revelation, Jesus speaks: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates” (Rev. 22:14). Yet, even now, as the true and great Priest, Jesus offers to free you from sin through faith in his cross, so that you might be reconciled to his God and Father and entered into his kingdom of love.

John concludes his doxology, saying with the church: “Amen.” That word means, “Yes, so let it be.” If you will add your “Amen” to the good news of Christ’s shed blood for sin, you will be set free from bondage, guilt, and condemnation: free to know and worship God through Jesus Christ. With the “Amen” of your faith in Jesus, you may enter his kingdom to marvel in the light of his glory and be blessed by his dominion forever.