

02-07-14a Revelation

Let's begin our study in the Word of God this morning by taking a moment at the outset to clear our minds and prepare our hearts and seek the ministry of God in the Holy Spirit as we look together at the truth of God's Word. Shall we pray? Father, we thank you for the opportunity to spend time in fellowship and study of the Word of God. We thank you that you have preserved your Word for us through the centuries and you've employed faithful men to translate, to preserve, to study, to elucidate the various parts and doctrines and principles and promises of your Word.

We thank you most of all for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, about whom all of your Word centers and it's through your Word that we learn of him and we grow in grace and knowledge of him. We thank you for his ministry on our behalf in not only saving us but in keeping us and presenting us faultless before your throne. We pray that our study this morning will contribute to that end.

We pray for those who are not with us that you'll grant them safety and opportunity to find application for the Word that's resident in their hearts. We pray that our lives will reflect your glory and we pray that our nation as a whole through its leadership and through its military and its presence in the world will continue to be a beacon of light for the Gospel and for the spread of the truth of your Word. And we ask now that your blessing will be on us.

We pray that we'll understand your Word correctly, that God the Holy Spirit will be able to take it and use it to transform us and conform us to the image of the Savior. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

For a scripture reading this morning, turn with me to Psalm 53. Psalm 53. This is subtitled in the New King James Version, The Folly of the Godless and the Restoration of Israel.

It is dedicated to the chief musician. The tune to which it was set was Mahalat. It is a contemplation, as it says here, or masculine, of David.

The fool has said in his heart there is no God. They are corrupt and have done abominable iniquity. There is none who does good.

God looks down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. Every one of them has turned aside. They have together become corrupt.

There is none who does good. No, not one. Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? There they are in great fear where no fear was, for God has scattered the bones of him who encamps against you.

You have put them to shame, because God has despised them. Oh, that the salvation of Israel

would come out of Zion, when God brings back the captivity of his people. Let Jacob rejoice, and Israel be glad.

This psalm has been oft quoted in discussions and studies regarding total depravity, the total depravity of man, because of verse 3 primarily. Every one of them has turned aside. They have together become corrupt.

There is none who does good. No, not one. The doctrine of depravity in the sense that we are incapable of doing that which is pleasing in God's sight as far as righteousness goes is true, but a lot depends on how you define depravity.

The relationship of this psalm to our study in the Revelation is primarily this. God does look at mankind, and God does distinguish us as individuals and also as groups, and God makes judgments based on not only our individual decisions and actions, the thoughts and intents of our heart, but also that of bodies, of people, or of groups. And God distinguishes groups because, as it says, birds of a feather flock together.

And we express the ideas that we have in terms of our associations and who we associate with tells something about us. Remember Paul told Timothy, bad company corrupts good morals. And we can define our future in some ways by the associations we choose to cultivate and maintain.

But here in Psalm 53, in both of those regards, with regard to the theological discussion of depravity and in regard to the choices we make in terms of association, we find that careful observation is essential. Look at verse 1. What is the subset of humanity that God is looking at here? It is category fool, category casile. That is the group that is being looked at.

That is a subset of the entire human race. The fool has said in his heart there is no God. David has not said in his heart there is no God.

Nathan the prophet has not said in his heart there is no God. The believers in the nation of Israel who are part of David's mighty men, who are either with him in the cave of Adullam or with him as king in Israel, we don't know exactly when in the career of David this masculine was composed, but David was surrounded by believers. And they are not saying in their heart there is no God.

There is a category called fool. And we are going to see that these are in fact people outside Israel. These are the nations that surround Israel, which makes me think that this was composed during the monarchy.

Because David is going to talk about, down in verse 4 and following, have the workers of iniquity, this is a synonym for the fools, do they have no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God. Israel as a nation calls upon God, but there are plenty of surrounding nations, you have the Philistines, you have the various other nations that David engaged in warfare that do not. And who don't believe that the God of Israel is any different than

their God, it's just another of a different kind.

They are those who encamp against Israel in verse 5. And God despises them. And in verse 6 he says, oh that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion. And so if there is any doubt, if you think, well the warfare figure is just that, a figure.

He talks about the captivity of his people, Jacob and Israel, in contradistinction to other nations. So what's the point here? David is contrasting believers and unbelievers. He is contrasting the nation of Israel and the surrounding pagan nations, who are military enemies, who are seeking to hold sway over Israel, hold them captive.

Not necessarily in a captivity such as we find in Babylon or Assyria, but the economic captivity, the constraints that are placed on the nation, they are not free to engage in commerce, they are not free to maintain their borders and so on because of incursions and towns and so on being attacked. So all of this is to say that the fool who says in his heart there is no God is by definition an outsider, a non-Israelite, someone who belongs to a nation outside of Israel. They are corrupt, they have done abominable iniquity, there is none who does good.

This of course is easy to see in the various types of behavior that were a part of the Baal cult, the Ashtaroth worship causing children to pass through the fire and a lot of the other abominable iniquities that characterized civilizations in the ancient Near East that were non-Israelite. These are the fool. So when in verse 2 God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, you remember that Israel are considered to be the children of God and are called that elsewhere in the scripture.

When he looks down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there are any who understand or who seek God, he says every one of them has turned aside, they have together become corrupt, there is none who does good, no not one. This is part of what underlies my belief that in the Old Testament age God organized civilization and history and humanity in such a way that people who he knew in his omniscience and foreknowledge would have a positive response to the ministry of the Holy Spirit at God consciousness. He in a sense made it convenient for their provision and for their instruction in the word of God to have them be born into the nation of Israel or into a nearby situation where either as a slave or as a mixed multitude type within Israel would have access to worship.

These surrounding nations, the ancient Chinese cultures and the various aboriginal cultures that may have existed on the earth at that time were characterized by this attitude. Every one of them has turned aside, they have together become corrupt, there is none who does good, no not one. Those in the near periphery of Israel were actually antagonistic to God and the things of God and certainly the people of God.

They eat up my people as they eat bread and they do not call upon God. God is anxious for humanity in general. It is not the will of God that any should perish but that all should come to

repentance.

But if they do not call upon God he is not going to be able to save them. So when you think about or if you hear Psalm 53 quoted in connection with the total depravity of man and that this applies to all of us unless and until God comes in with convenient grace or efficacious grace and changes us and gives us a positive response to himself. Just look at the context.

This is a Psalm in a national context of Israel versus the nations, the nations versus Israel, David as king and there is in fact a group of people who do call upon God, who do righteousness, that is my people who are being eaten up by this group. This group encamps against the people of God and they are put to shame because God despises them. Obviously God does not despise Israel they are his chosen people and he is going to deliver them.

Oh that the salvation of Israel would come out of Zion. When God brings back the captivity of his people let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad. This is obviously Jacob and Israel are set in distinction to the fool.

So we find two things here. First of all we need to be careful about drawing blanket conclusions by taking verses out of context such as Psalm 53. And secondly we find that God does look down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there are any who understand and who seek God and God takes note.

God looks at you and God looks at me even as believers to see what our attitude is. Are we asking? Are we seeking? Are we knocking on the door? And God evaluates us on that basis. That is what God is doing in the situation we find in Revelation chapter 2. As we return now to our study in the book of Revelation we are addressing ourselves to the letters to the seven churches.

We have begun by an introduction looking at chapter 1. We have noted the authorship which I believe is John the Apostle. He is the only one who can introduce himself very simply as a brother and companion in tribulation with no other substantiation for his qualification to deliver a message directly from God to such a wide audience. There is no other John of ancient history.

We know of several other men named that but none of them have the standing to simply say I John your brother and companion in tribulation that could deliver this. We also know from the early church historians that John the Apostle had a ministry to the churches in Asia. It was an itinerant ministry.

He visited these churches. He cultivated and trained the elders in those churches. Polycarp who was one of those trainees of John's has written about John's ministry in that area.

It would be expected that John could simply use his name and they would know who is being spoken of. They probably also knew that John was exiled to the island of Patmos. Without any further review let's move forward.

We have talked about the fact that he is addressing these churches. He says in verse 9 that he is a companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ. We talked last week about that patience.

He was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. Now it is commonly understood that this was an exile. That he was there as some form of retribution for his preaching of the gospel.

But this is an educated guess. There is nothing here in Revelation that says he was exiled. There is no specific historical evidence that proves he was exiled.

But knowing from Polycarp and Ignatius and others that John had this traveling ministry, why would he go to Patmos? There was nothing on Patmos. It is a very steeply sloping island off the coast of Asia Minor. It is about 65 miles west of Ephesus, the nearest of these seven churches.

He could easily have found a place of retirement or a place of rest at any one of these seven churches and several others that we know were in Asia Minor. Why is he in Patmos? Well, it is isolated and it was by all the evidence that we have a part of the province, the Roman province of Asia Minor. And if the proconsul or the governor of that province wanted to exile someone and get him out of circulation, this would be a great place to do it.

So the circumstantial evidence is strong that John was forced to remain here because of his teaching of the word of God, because of his testimony of Jesus Christ. And I find at the end of verse 9 here another evidence that John the Apostle was the author because we know from the close of the Gospels and the first chapter of Acts that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned the eleven remaining disciples and eventually the Apostle Paul as eyewitnesses because they had seen and heard and been with the Lord Jesus. Because the sort of human viewpoint effort to replace Judas on the part of Peter in the early chapters of Acts was based on this idea.

They needed to find someone. When they chose Matthias, he was chosen on the basis of the fact that he had been with the Lord, was an eyewitness. And when John here says it's not only the word of God but the testimony of Jesus Christ that he is exiled for, that he is on the island for, I think this is an allusion or a reference to the fact that he is the John who was the eyewitness and the first person listener to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So he is in the island that is called Patmos. He is separated from these churches. He can no longer travel and spend time at each one individually as he did.

He had a sort of a circuit riding ministry to those churches but he can no longer do that and this is the occasion for writing a letter. Otherwise he could have simply gone to each of these towns and cities and delivered the word in person and it was a part of the will of God. And there is an application of this.

You think about the persecution of the church and you think oh what an awful thing. Christians being thrown to the lions, the Jews and Christians being scattered throughout the Roman Empire. How can this possibly be good? You remember if you saw the movie *The Robe* and *Quo Vadis* and some of the other movies that were made about the first century church.

Spartacus I think is the other one I was trying to think of. But it's a graphic portrayal, Hollywoodized I'm sure, but nevertheless of the persecution and the increasing pressures that came on people who believed in God and certainly who believed in Jesus Christ. It was very graphic in that movie that people who were well off and had estates and homes were driven out and were deprived of all of their possessions.

It was very cruel and unjust and you think what an awful thing that for the testimony of Jesus Christ and if they were faithful and refused to bow the knee to the emperor as a divinity and so forth that they suffered horrible persecution. How could this be a good thing? Well, it is difficult for us to see in the near term how our difficulties and our sufferings and the challenges that face us can serve any good purpose. All we see is the loss and the suffering that is involved.

But here is a good example. I'm sure that John was not happy about being deprived of fellowship with all of these groups of believers and he could justify to God in prayer a hundred different reasons why God needed to release him from this exile and allow him to continue his traveling face-to-face ministry. There is a lot that has been said in our circles about face-to-face teaching and the benefits that it has.

But we don't all have the opportunity to attend a church that is full of believers of like mind and so on. Some of us are scattered in far off places. Some people who are hearing the sound of my voice are not doing so here.

It is by means of tape. We think, well, how can that be a good thing? Surely it is the will of God that we have fellowship and that we have closeness and so on. But look at John.

The fact that he is exiled occasions the writing of this letter. You think about the importance of the book of the revelation of Jesus Christ down through history. Where would we be without this last great book of the New Testament? We would know nothing, among other things, of the Lake of Fire.

There is a lot we would not know about the 70th week of Daniel. There is a lot we would not know about rewards which we are going to be seeing for the faithful in the church. We wouldn't have this testimony directly from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in this age.

We would not have the description of the New Jerusalem. We would not have the description of the kingdom of the Father and the river flowing out from beneath the throne and the tree of life with its 12 fruits and the city built four square. There is so much information that if John had simply gone and delivered it verbally and it had not been written down, where would it be?

Wouldn't you love to hear the sermons that Paul the Apostle preached in the various towns that he visited in Thessalonica and in Philippi and in Colossia and in Ephesus and so on? We don't have those because he was there in person.

What we do have are the letters that he wrote when he was imprisoned, when he was in chain, when he was suffering separation from those people that he longed to be with. It is the fruit of that exile and that imprisonment and that suffering that has nourished the church for 2000 years. It is an example of the way God can use.

Many times we have no idea what God is going to do. The first example that comes to my mind is Carrie Ten Boom and her sufferings in the prison camps in World War II and the things that her father taught her when she was a girl. I was rereading the journals of Jim Elliott earlier this week and he had no idea that his journals would ever be read.

He had no idea that his life and his ministry to the Akka Indians down in South America would ever be documented or notable to anyone and yet his martyrdom along with four other missionaries, Nate Saint and the others down there, not only brought his life and his study of the Word of God to light, but enabled Elizabeth Elliott, his wife, to have a very fruitful ministry over these last 45 years. We just don't know, even in this life, what God can do with things that are seemingly insignificant, seemingly unknown and unobserved. Eye has not seen and ear has not heard.

It hasn't even entered into our hearts and minds the things that God will do. We should not be discouraged if we find that our tribulations are ongoing and there doesn't seem to be a real purpose or goal in it. Look at John.

He is off on an island all by himself and out of nowhere he is in the Spirit. He is doing what he is supposed to do. He is maintaining his relationship with God.

He is in an attitude of worship. He is in the Spirit on the Lord's day. He says, I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.

What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches. This introduction, the first words in red, if you have a red letter Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ speaks with a loud voice as of a trumpet. This is not a still small voice.

It's not a whisper. This is a loud trumpet-like voice. This would startle one.

If you had a trumpet go off behind you while you are praying or you are in the Spirit and you are meditating on the Word of God and suddenly you hear this loud voice saying, I am the Alpha and Omega, it would be startling. It would be shocking. John doesn't turn around until the voice finishes.

If it was a mild distraction, he would turn around to see what it was. But some things are so

alarming that we freeze in place. Evidently that is what John does.

My question is, why does the Lord Jesus speak in a loud voice as of a trumpet? And why is it compared to a trumpet? It could be the sound of rushing waters. It could be thunder. It could be a lot of different things that voices when God speaks are compared to.

But here it is the voice as of a trumpet. Well, the trumpet in the Old Testament is not a brass trumpet and in the New Testament for that matter. In the Israelite context, this is the shofar.

This is the ram's horn trumpet. This is what the elders of Israel used to assemble the tribes. This is what was blown as Joshua and the people of Israel marched around Jericho.

The ram's horn trumpet would be like a police car siren today. It is something that calls attention in a state of alarm. This is an alarm warning that goes off.

You see in the European movies all the time that two-tone horn like they use in France and England. It immediately gets attention and it has the highest priority. This is the point.

What is about to be spoken has the highest priority. If you whisper something, this implies that it is something to meditate on, to think on and contemplate. You get in a reflective mood.

But a trumpet like voice says this is highest priority. This is something for immediate action. Drop everything else and pay attention to this.

The words themselves begin with identification. He says, I am the Alpha and the Omega. I am the first and the last.

Well, John is ultimately qualified to interpret these words. The Alpha and Omega. The A and the Z in the Greek alphabet.

What I find interesting here is John and the other disciples, their native tongue was Aramaic. Jesus spoke Aramaic. We know this from some of the quotes in the gospels.

The teaching of the Lord Jesus as he traveled up and down in Galilee and in Israel when he went down into Judea and Jerusalem and Transjordan. He taught in Aramaic. He spoke the language of the people.

But it is interesting he does not say I am the Aleph and the Tav. He says I am the Alpha and the Omega. Which in my mind tells me that at this point Jesus is not only referring to the Greek alphabet but is probably communicating to John in Greek.

These churches that he is going to address in Asia, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea are not in an Aramaic speaking part of the world. They are outside Israel, Asia Minor, Roman province. The language, the lingua franca there is Greek.

So Jesus is I think speaking to John in Greek. He does not have to translate this. I think if he was speaking Aramaic he would say I am the Aleph and the Tav.

I am the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet or the Aramaic alphabet. Instead he says I am Alpha and Omega. So we do not use some of the tools of scholarship that we do in the gospels for example in retroverting Greek back into Aramaic to understand what vocabulary might have been used by the Lord Jesus.

I think these are the actual words that he spoke. Now why does he say as his first point of introduction I am the Alpha and Omega? Why is this important? Of all the ways that Jesus could introduce himself he could say I am the Lamb that was slain, I am the Son of God, I am the Child of Mary. If the Catholic view was current he would identify himself as the Son of God through Mary.

I am the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. All of his different titles. He chooses one that we really have not encountered before in the New Testament.

Jesus did not call himself the Alpha and Omega in the gospels. He says I am the A and the Z if he was speaking English. I am the first and the last.

The last time John saw Jesus he was going up in the Ascension and they had this familiar relationship. John with his head and Jesus bosom at the table type of relationship. But Jesus here speaks and it sets a formal tone.

He does not say hey John turn around it is me. This is not Jesus by the seaside roasting a fish after the resurrection. This is a formal appearance and a formal announcement.

You notice a lot of times that I think about President Bush. He used to be Governor Bush. He used to be just GW.

He used to just be at Texas. He was the part owner of the baseball team here in Dallas and so on. People who know him well and who have known him from his early days probably still call him W or GW or George in private.

But those same people introducing him at a formal occasion would not say and we find it inappropriate. It strikes our ear funny. In fact I will tell you a story if you are familiar with Bob Thieme.

There has been some antipathy or he is not exactly one of the graduates that Dallas Seminary tends to claim. Dallas Seminary has lots of literature where they talk about all of their illustrious graduates but they don't ever mention Bob Thieme. That is not all their fault.

I will just give you one anecdote as to the reason that there is not the warmest of relationships there. He was invited to come to Dallas Seminary and speak years ago. Dr. Walvard was still the

president of the seminary at that time.

So at the chapel here is Bob and he came up and he was going to address the assembled students and faculty there and the place was packed. Dr. Walvard was up on the platform and gave an introduction of Bob Thieme. So he sat down and Bob came up and I don't know if he was nervous or what the case was but as he came up to the lectern he turned around and looked at Dr. Walvard and said, Well thank you Johnny.

But he referred to Dr. Walvard as Johnny in intimate familiar terms in front of the whole assembled school and I think by anyone's measure that is not really good taste. It is not tactful and it just rubbed everyone the wrong way and contributed to those who were looking for an excuse to dislike him. But we have settings where we are intimate and familiar and use nicknames and there are other times where we refer if someone has a title or an honorific it is the occasion to use it and people who may have known the president all his life will say thank you Mr. President or thank you President Bush even in private meetings because he is now the president.

So we have some understanding of this and in verse 11 when the Lord Jesus speaks and with a voice like a trumpet says behind John I am the Alpha and Omega. This tells John don't expect us to break bread and have some fish and sit around and reminisce. This is a formal occasion.

This is business. This is not personal. I am the first and the last.

The other thing about this is because again Jesus could still have used almost any of his formal titles but Alpha and Omega tells us this is emphasis on Jesus deity rather than his humanity. He doesn't say this is the virgin born one who walked among you. I am the crucified Christ.

He doesn't even say I am the Messiah. When he says I am the Alpha and Omega this is God the second person speaking as God the second person of the Trinity. It is his deity that is Alpha and Omega not his humanity.

His humanity had a starting point. Jesus Christ was not human when he participated in the creation of the world. He was not human when he superintended in the history of Israel and the Old Testament saints.

Alpha portion of that is what John talks about himself in John 1 and following. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. This is not the word that became flesh.

Well it is but it is not emphasis on the time and the fact that he became flesh and dwelt among us. This is that eternal word that is always a part of the Trinity. First and the last.

Thirdly the thing that this does is it emphasizes that human situations are set in time. God knew beforehand. God was here beforehand.

The Lord Jesus Christ knew about it beforehand. He will still be here and he knows about the future. He is in the future just like he is in the past.

God says his first and foremost name is I am. God is present in the past. God is present in the future.

We have a hard time understanding that being linear time bound creatures. But God's eternity means that he exists in eternity past. He exists in eternity future.

It ought to comfort us. It ought to encourage us to know that there isn't anything that we can choose. There isn't anything that we can encounter.

There isn't any circumstance. There isn't any fact or factor in our lives that God does not see from the standpoint of the future just as he sees it from the standpoint of the past. That's why his plan is perfect.

That's why his provision is perfect. That's why anything and everything that happens to us is part and parcel of the plan and purpose of God for us. The eternity of the Lord Jesus Christ is a reminder that even as he knows our humanity and our weaknesses, he was tested in all points like as we are.

He views us from the standpoint of eternity and we are judged from the viewpoint of eternity. And so Jesus here, the Lord Jesus, as second person of the Trinity, as the Alpha and Omega, announces that title, states that as the footing for this meeting and says you are going to see something and you are to write it in a book. So John is told ahead of time so that he knows.

I better pay close attention to these details. I'm going to need to write this down and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia. Now again, we are faced with this issue of seven.

We talked about this in relation to our study of biblical numbers, but why these seven churches? We know, for example, that there was a very thriving church up in Magnesia. There were several other churches in Asia Minor that are not mentioned here that were large and important. Why these seven churches which are in Asia? So that's one question we want to answer for ourselves.

The second point of observation from verse 7 and 8 is it is not just chapter 2 and 3 that are delivered to the seven churches. It is the entire book of the Revelation. All 22 chapters were written in a book and sent to the seven churches.

Now the church is not going to be involved in the tribulation. We know that and that classifies us as pre-millennial, pre-tribulational in our theology. There are sound biblical reasons for that.

But if all of this from Revelation 4-19 is going to take place after the church is gone, then why would it be sent to the churches? We touched on this earlier in the introduction to the book. All of these things have been written for our instruction. The future history, if you will, of those who are

classified as Old Testament saints and those who come to faith in the 70th week of Daniel are Old Testament saints.

They are heirs of the Old Testament promises and covenants. It is the last seven years of the same age in which Daniel, Joseph, David, Moses, Elijah and the rest of them lived. But the 39 books of the Old Testament were written for our instruction and these chapters of Revelation are written for our instruction as members of the church.

So first of all we know that these seven churches are representative. It is addressed specifically to them but by extension it is addressed to us. You and I are the church at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos and so on.

These things are written for our instruction. We should be instructed by each of the seven letters and we should be instructed by the contents of the rest of the book of Revelation. But our representatives, in the same way that Jesus spoke to specific crowds, the Old Testament books were addressed to specific generations in Israel, this Revelation has a specific target audience and characteristics that they possess are going to relate and be applicable to us in terms of interpretation and application.

We need to pause here and take our break. When we come back we are going to answer the question why these particular seven and then we are going to move forward and see why the Lord Jesus Christ is presented with the appearance that he has as he speaks these words to John. But let's pause here and take our break.