

# Easter 2007: Revelation 1

## Introduction

The resurrection is central to who Jesus Christ is. The four gospels differ on the details of the Lord's life that they record, but all four record the resurrection. Paul insists that if Christ be not risen, his preaching is vain, our faith is vain, and we are yet in our sins [1 Cor 15:14, 17]--in other words, the Savior is no Savior, and the Messiah is no Messiah after all.

So it should be no surprise that when the book of the Revelation introduces the Lord Jesus, a primary feature of that introduction is his resurrection. Nothing is said about his life in Nazareth, or his other miracles. The focus is on him as “the first begotten of the dead” (1:5), “he that liveth, and was dead, and ... [is] alive for evermore” (1:18). Today, we begin by considering these introductions.

The description of the Lord in Rev 1 forms the context for the letters to the churches in ch. 2-3. Each letter refers to some aspect of the description. One church, Smyrna, is reminded that the Lord is the risen one. Next year, Lord willing, we will then turn to the letter to Smyrna to see how the resurrection of the Lord encouraged them, and how it should encourage us.

The Lord is introduced twice in ch. 1.

- In 1-6, John describes him in the blessing with which he opens the book, following the same pattern that Paul uses in his epistles.
- In 17-18, he reports how after the Lord appeared to him on the Lord's day, the Lord introduced himself.

## 1:4-6, John's Introduction

John prays that his readers may receive grace and peace from the triune God, to whom he ascribes glory and dominion for ever. The reference to the Lord's resurrection comes in the description of the triune God

**4 from him which is, and which was, and which is to come.**--This is his description of the Father, in language attested as well in the Jewish rabbis (see Gill). The eternality of the Father is emphasized throughout the Revelation, with the titles “Alpha and Omega” and “beginning and end” (1:8; 2:16). Not until 22:13 are these ever applied to the Lord Jesus; the reference in 1:11 is not in the majority text.

**and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne.**--The idea of “seven spirits,” rather than just one, comes from Isa 11:2, which prophesies of Messiah,

the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD;

God's Spirit appears in different ways in his different ministries.

**5 And from Jesus Christ.**--Here is the third member of the trinity. He in turn is characterized in three ways. Each one emphasizes his relation to one of three important actors in the drama of salvation, and each is the cause of the next.

**who is the faithful witness.**--This title describes his relation to the Father. Here is the point that we have seen repeatedly throughout John, that Jesus came, not on his own account, but as the representative of the Father, faithfully carrying the message the Father gave him.

His faithfulness in witness is the reason that the Father raised him from the dead and exalted him (Phil 2:8-9; Heb 5:7 “was heard in that he feared”).

**and the first begotten of the dead.**--This tile describes his relation to his redeemed children. He was dead, but has risen, and he has done so, not alone, but as the first to be born from the womb of death. This is what makes him “the firstborn among many brethren,” Rom 8:29.

Peter was the first to introduce this imagery of resurrection as birth, in his sermon at Pentecost, Acts 2:24,

Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains [birth-pangs] of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Paul repeats the image in Col 1:18, and uses a related image, “firstfruits of them that slept,” in 1 Cor 15:20.

**and the prince of the kings of the earth.**--The Lord is related not only to the Father and to his redeemed people, but also to all who live upon the earth and those who exercise power over them, over whom he rules. This preeminence is the direct result of his resurrection:

Eph 1:20-22 [God] raised him from the dead, and set *him* at his own right hand in the heavenly *places*, 21 Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: 22 And hath put all *things* under his feet, and gave him [as] the head over all *things* to the church,

The manifestation of this preeminence is a major theme of the book of the Revelation, which culminates in the Lord's recognition as “king of kings, and Lord of lords” (17:14; 19:16).

## **1:10-16, John's Vision of the Lord**

The description of the exalted Lord is drawn mainly from Dan 10, with elements from Dan 7, Ezek 1, and Isa 49. The visions of Dan 10 and Ezek 1 overwhelmed their seers and put them upon their faces to the ground, and so John responds.

John is overwhelmed at the sight, like numerous OT saints. Jacob (Gen 32:30) and Manoa (Judg 13:22) marveled that they could see God and yet live; Ezekiel (1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13; 43:3; 44:4) and Daniel (8:17; 10:9) fell on their faces before him. Gill traces this response to “the weakness of human nature, which ... is not able to bear the rays and glories of a divine person” and to “a consciousness of sin” in the presence of “the divine Majesty.” Compare Job's confession,

Job 42:5-6 5 I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. 6 Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes.

## **1:17-18, The Lord's Own Introduction**

The Lord moves immediately to comfort him.

**17 Fear not.**--What blessed words to come from the one to whom all power is given, in heaven and on

earth. Those whom he loves, who come under his special protection, need never fear.

He goes on to say four things that emphasize why John should not fear. Each is marked by a finite verb.

**I am the first and the last, and the living one.**--We should associate the first three words of v.18 with v. 17, since they have no verb of their own. (Note AV's italics.) The KJV division is motivated by the common association of the first two titles with Isaiah's descriptions of the Lord (an association that I accepted when I expounded this passage last in Dec 1993):

41:4 Who hath wrought and done *it*, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I *am* he.

44:6 Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I *am* the first, and I *am* the last; and beside me *there is* no God.

48:12 Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; I *am* he; I *am* the first, I also *am* the last.

It is true that our Lord, as God, is eternal. But there are three problems with this interpretation of this phrase at this point.

1. LXX of these three passages uses the word "first" that the Lord uses here, but not the word "last." In other words, the Lord is not explicitly citing the LXX.
2. As we noted on 1:4, until 22:13, the Father's eternal nature is never attributed to the Son.
3. It's not clear why his eternal nature should comfort John's natural response to his majestic appearance. Usually commands to "fear not" are followed by some comforting thought, not a reinforcement of the speaker's awesome majesty:

Judges 6:22-23 22 And when Gideon perceived that he *was* an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face. 23 And the LORD said unto him, Peace *be* unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.

Daniel 10:12 Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words.

Luke 1:13 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

The phrase "the first and the last" does not echo the LXX, but John would have recognized in it a common statement of the Lord in the gospels, one that he had heard many times:

Matthew 19:30 But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last *shall be* first.

Matthew 20:16 So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Mark 9:35 And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, *the same* shall be last of all, and servant of all.

Mark 10:31 But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last first.

Luke 13:30 And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

More likely, the Lord is here referring, not to his eternal nature as God, but to his humiliation and exaltation as man. The words refer to status, not to time. As man, he is the first, the highest ranked of

all creation—but also the last, who took the very lowest place when he bore our sin to the tree, of whom David spoke prophetically in Ps 22:6, “I am a worm, and no man.” As ch. 5 will show, he bears the marks of this paradox with him throughout eternity: he occupies the throne of God, but is still “the lamb that was slain.”

The third title, “the living one,” is critical to this understanding. If the Lord were only to say, “I am the first, and the last,” it would suggest that he is one of those who tried to set himself in first place, and then was put down to the last place. By adding “the living one,” he points to his resurrection, by which he has been elevated from his wormlike condition and given the name above every name, YHWH, the self-existent one.

Thus understood, the title is eminently suited to encourage John. “Fear not, John. It is natural for you to fear, because I am the first. But there is no need for you to fear, because I am also the last. I have borne your sin in stooping to death. It has no more hold on you. I now live, but as the one who was humbled for you. You can now stand confidently in the presence of my majesty.”

**18 I was dead.**--Literally, “I became dead.” His second self-description flows from the first. He is explaining how it is that such a glorious person could describe himself as “the last.” It is because he became dead.

The verb emphasizes the process, not just the state. His humiliation consists not just in his being dead, but in his taking on death because of our sin. The scriptures teach that “Christ died for our sins,” not that he was dead for our sins.

This self-description comforts John by reminding him more explicitly that his sin has been paid for.

**behold, I am alive for evermore.**--His third self-description again flows from the first, this time from the title, “the living one.” His sacrifice was once for all,

Hebrews 9:26-28 but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: 28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.

The encouragement for John here is that the resurrection proves the efficacy of the Lord's death. Cf. Rom 4:25, “raised again for our justification,” and Paul's main line of argument in 1 Cor 15,

14 if Christ be not risen, then *is* our preaching vain, and your faith *is* also vain. ... 17 if Christ be not raised, your faith *is* vain; ye are yet in your sins.

There is no gospel apart from the resurrection. Without fail, the gospel messages in Acts always present the resurrection. This is our hope of forgiveness, and it is John's hope when confronted with the Lord Jesus.

**Amen.**--Throughout scripture, “Amen” is always a response by a hearer to something that is reported. Here, we should understand it as spoken by John.

The Lord has twice described his humiliation and exaltation:

“I am the last, and the living one”

“I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore.”

He marks the last term with the command, “Behold, look, notice this.”

John's “Amen” acknowledges the Lord's command. “Yes, I understand what you are saying, and I

agree.”

**and I have the keys of hell and of death.**--The fourth verb marks the fourth self-description. He not only has experienced death himself, he has control over it and over hell, “hades,” the abode of the dead. We see these keys exercised later in the Revelation:

- at 9:1, when the demons are loosed out of the bottomless pit;
- at 20:1, when Satan is bound for a thousand years, and then loosed in 7;
- at 20:4, 12, when the dead are raised.

The comfort for John is that the Lord who died for him and rose again is completely in control of the greatest fear that we face. We will not enter that realm without his permission, and he has the power to deliver us from it again.

## Conclusion

One day we shall all stand before the Lord, and experience the terrifying vision that John saw. Like John, we shall be overcome with a sense of our own weakness and wickedness. In that day, the central fact with which the Lord will encourage and strengthen us is his resurrection.

- We need not tremble at our frailty because he understands it—he was the last as well as the first.
- We need not fear our sin because he became dead to pay our penalty and is alive forevermore to show the efficacy of his work.
- We need not fear physical death and the grave because he has the keys, and will release us when he returns.