

The Three Birthdays of our Lord, Rev 1:5-6

Overview

We are accustomed to thinking of a single birthday for the Lord Jesus, conventionally celebrated as Christmas (Matthew 1-2; Luke 2). But the metaphor of birth is applied to him in other connections as well (Table 1, chart): Col 1:8 calls him “the firstborn from the dead,” and the Lord says to the Messiah in Ps 2:7, “this day have I begotten thee.” We will study these three birthdays of our Lord, three transitions in his existence that have a major impact on us. Rev 1:5 brings these three events together:

Rev 1:4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace *be* unto you, and peace,

- from him which is, and which was, and which is to come;
- and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne;
- 5a And from Jesus Christ, *who is* a) the **faithful witness**, and b) the **first begotten of the dead**, and c) the **prince of the kings of the earth**.

Then 1:5b-6 goes on to describes the impact of each of them on us:

Unto him that a) **loved us**, and b) **washed us from our sins** in his own blood, 6 And c) hath **made us kings and priests** unto God and his Father;

We often describe our Lord as “prophet, priest, and king.” Each of these titles aligns with one of our Lord’s birthdays.

Event	Described as Birth	Rev 1:5a	Impact, 1:5b-6	Title
Incarnation	Mat 2:1 ... Jesus was born in Bethlehem ...	the faithful witness	loved us	Prophet
Resurrection	Col 1:18 he is ... the firstborn from the dead	first begotten of the dead	washed us from our sins in his own blood	Priest
Return	Ps 2:7 this day have I begotten thee	the prince of the kings of the earth	6 hath made us kings and priests	King

Table 1: Three Advents of our Lord

Prophet: The First Advent

Rev 1:5 describes the Lord as the “faithful witness.” It does not mention his birth, but our Lord described his birth in terms of his ministry as a witness (chart),

Jn 18:37 To this end **was I born**, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.

This is the birth that we remember as Christmas:

Matt. 2:1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king,

One might receive many answers to the question, “Why did the Lord Jesus come to earth?” Most would probably have to do with his redemptive work. Those answers would not be wrong:

1 Jn 4:14 And we have seen and do testify that the **Father sent the Son to be the Saviour** of the world.

Luk 19:10 For the **Son of man is come to seek and to save** that which was lost.

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But we do not really understand his work as Savior unless we see it as fundamentally a work of revealing the Father to his creatures, which is the work of the Prophet. John introduces our Savior as the Word (1:1), and describes him as “declaring” the Father (1:18, ἐξηγέομαι G1834, to relate or explain something in great detail). The new creation of salvation, like the first creation (“God said ...,” Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26), is accomplished by the divine word. He is our Savior first of all because he penetrates our darkness and brings us the knowledge of God. Thus John is particularly fond of the verb μαρτυρέω G3140 “to bear witness,” which he uses 33x, more than a third of the instances in the entire Greek Bible and far more than any other book (the next being Acts at 11x). (The same Greek word is variously translated “testify,” “bear witness,” and “bear record.”) There are many who bear witness in John (John, the Father, the HS, the disciples), but foremost is the Lord Jesus. Of what does he bear witness?

First, he bears witness to *our wickedness*, including

- The unreceptiveness of his countrymen:

4:44 For Jesus himself **testified**, that a prophet hath no honour in his own country.

- The wickedness of the world's deeds:

7:7 The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I **testify** of it, that the works thereof are evil.

- Judas's sin:

13:21 When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and **testified**, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

The first thing we need to know in order to be saved is that we are lost. Sin seductively seeks to persuade us that we are not sinful. The Lord commanded his apostles to preach “repentance and remission of sins” (Luke 24:47), and his own ministry boldly bore witness to people's sin.

Next, he bears witness of *his own person and work*:

8:14 Jesus answered and said unto them, Though I **bear record** of myself, yet my record is true: for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.

8:18 I am one that **bear witness** of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.

Knowing that we are sinners, and that he is the Messiah, is not enough. He also bears witness to *the need to be born again*.

3:11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and **testify** that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

The witness that his first birth enabled teaches us all we need to learn in order to be saved—our need, the Lord's person and work, and the personal transaction by which his work is applied to our need.

Priest: The Resurrection

Rev 1:5 describes him as “the first begotten of the dead,” a reference to his resurrection, in terms that echo Col 1:18. In both places, the Lord is described, not only as being born by the event of resurrection, but as being the firstborn, implying that others will follow him. Paul makes the same point

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with another metaphor in 1 Cor 15:20 (chart),

Now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the **firstfruits** of them that slept.

This metaphor is also active in Peter's sermon at Pentecost,

Acts 2:22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: 23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: 24 Whom God hath raised up, **having loosed the pains of death**: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

"Pains" here is literally "birth pangs." Peter is describing death as a great womb that one day must be delivered of those it holds captive, in keeping with the Lord's words in John 5,

In 5:28 the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29 And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

The birth pangs associated with that great event began with our Lord's resurrection. Thus Acts 2:24 follows the pattern of the other two references not only in describing the Lord's resurrection as a birth, but in emphasizing it as the first of many resurrections. As Paul told Festus and Agrippa,

Acts 26:23 Christ should suffer, *and* ... he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

Our Lord's resurrection not only introduces our resurrection, but is also the foundation of it. Rom 4:25 teaches that he was "raised again because of our justification." The death of Christ does not prove that our sins are gone. Their effect continues as long as he is in the grave. It is his resurrection that shows that their power over him, and thus over us, is broken. The second birth of the Lord Jesus demonstrates the effectiveness of his priestly work in washing us from our sins (Rev 1:5b).

King: The Second Coming

Once we see the first two items in Rev 1:5 as births of the Lord, we naturally ask whether the third, his coronation as "prince of the kings of the earth," will also be a kind of birth. The focus here is on the Lord's return, when he ascends the throne of David in Jerusalem to rule over all the earth directly and physically during the millennium. In fact, one of the main prophecies of his coming rule uses the language of birth in just this context (chart):

Ps 2:6 Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. 7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou *art* my Son; **this day have I begotten thee**. 8 Ask of me, and I shall give *thee* the heathen *for* thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth *for* thy possession. 9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

What is "this day"? Is it the day of the decree in eternity past? The day of his physical birth? The day of his resurrection?

The title of God's Son here is clearly derived from God's promise to David:

2 Sam 7:12 when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, **I will set up thy seed after thee**, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and **I will establish his kingdom**. 13 He shall

build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 **I will be his father, and he shall be my son.**

The notion that the king was the son of the deity was common in the ancient world. One of the titles of Pharaoh was “son of [the sun-god] Re,” and the Ugaritic texts describe King Keret as the “son of [the god] El.” It is likely that the father-son relationship here is directly related to the Saviour's kingly position, rather than being a deep theological statement about the nature of the trinity.

From this perspective, “this day” in Ps 2 is probably the Messiah's coronation day, the day when he takes his throne upon the “holy hill of Zion,” and when the Father “give[s him] the heathen *for* [his] inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth *for* [his] possession.” In the overall history of the world, it is beginning of the millennial kingdom.

Application (Rev 1:5b-6)

Thus these three descriptions use the language of birth to describe three key transitions in the Messiah's history:

- His birth as a man;
- His resurrection in the glorified body that he now wears in heaven as our high priest and intercessor;
- His return to assume the physical rule of this world.

After 1:5a tells us who he is, 1:5b-6a tells us what he does in each of these capacities. We'll review these in reverse order.

He made us kings and priests

The correspondence is clearest in the case of the third. If he is “the prince of the kings of the earth,” he has authority to set up and put down those kings. He promised even the Laodicean church

Rev 3:21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

After he subdues the nation in Revelation 20, establishing himself as king of kings and lord of lords, we read of his faithful followers,

Rev 20:6 they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

He washed us

The clear correspondence of the third item in each list encourages us to examine the second and first. We have seen (Rom 4:25) that his resurrection is presented not just as his personal triumph over death, but as the evidence that we are justified and will one day be raised with him.

He loved us

The correspondence between “he loved us” and “the faithful witness” brings to mind the Lord's words in the upper room:

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John 15:15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you **friends**; for all things that I have heard of my Father **I have made known** unto you.

It is a sign of love when one person reveals their thoughts to another. God showed this in his dealings with Abraham:

Genesis 18:17 And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; 18 Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For **I [have] known him**, [in order] that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

As the following purpose clause shows, God's knowledge of Abraham is not acquaintance, but an intimate relation, expressed in the same terms as Adam's loving relation to his wife Eve, "And Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived" (Gen 4:1). God recalls his existing love relation with Abraham as the basis for his decision to reveal his plans to him.

So it is reasonable to see this action by the Lord as also linked to his birth, the first one, when he came as the faithful witness. It is a great privilege to think the thoughts of God, and one that we enjoy because he loved us and came to reveal the Father to us.

So at this season when we recall our Lord's birth in Bethlehem, we must remember that it is only the first of a series of important events. His first birth was to come as "the word of God," revealing to us whom the Father loved from eternity, our sin and our need for a savior. His second birth, from the dead, demonstrated that his priesthood was effective, and he had removed our sin. His third birth as king of kings and lord of lords, when he returns, will bring us into our full estate as kings and priests with him.