

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

September 23, 2018

I Am Alphabet

Dr. Mark Batterson

Well, before we jump into the message this weekend, I want to share a win. We took one small step, one giant leap last weekend we launched our first network church in Nashville, Tennessee. (crowd clapping) Yeah. For eight years, a Curtis and Sarah Parks were a part of this church, a Curtis served as a campus pastor, as a worship leader. They felt called to go back to their hometown and guess what we did? We commissioned them and blessed them and supported them and this feels a little bit like a birth announcement, but I think we have some pictures of our brand-new baby church, one week old and fun to see folks who are their serving and loving. A few of our staff went and said it felt like NCC, which I think is pretty awesome. And so, can I say thank you for your generosity, it helped make this possible and cannot wait to see what God is going to do. So, can we just pause for a moment and pray and I'm going to tell you why? Because, I remember our inaugural service when Lora and I had 19 people. I wondered if anybody was going to show up the next week. And I bet Pastor Curtis and Sarah are kind of like, oh boy, and week two, here we go. And so, we want to just pray for them, lift them up. And so, Lord, we thank you for bridges, Nashville, we bless them. God, may you continue to favor them. We pray that you would help them help people find their way back to you. God, we thank you in advance for those who will find faith, find healing, find grace, find forgiveness, find hope, and we pray, may Your kingdom come, and your will be done in Nashville, Tennessee as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.

If you have a Bible, you can turn to the last book of the Bible. We are in a series titled, Dear Church in the book of Revelation. There are seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. These seven letters are part of a, shall we say, apocalyptic book. It can be a little confusing, but I want to make sure that we understand that these letters were personal letters. This week I spent a few days in Colorado with Dick Foth, Dick and Ruth were part of that original 19 way back in 1996. And check this out Dick and Ruth had been married for 55 years, that is a deep well of wisdom that's a double nickel. And so, we're sitting around the table eating some of Ruth's homemade apple pie and she is dropping like truth on us and which is awesome because Dick and Ruth would be the first one to say, Dick does a lot of talking, Ruth not so much. And so, I learned something about Ruth that made me love her even more and I got Dick's permission to share this. I'm just kidding, I got Ruth's permission too. Every Sunday night Ruth sits down, and she writes letters to widows who are shut in. I want to say something right here. You may feel like, ah, I don't know if I have a calling or gifting or ministry. I want you to hear you do. Here's the deal. Dick travels the world speaking right, and we're the beneficiary because he's part of our teaching team, he is going to be here in a couple of weeks. But ministry is not something you do on a stage. I think it looks a lot more like writing letters to widows and I think it's pretty close to James 1:27

²⁷Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows who are in their distress.

When you're a widow who is shut in, it's easy to feel forgotten. It's easy to feel left behind. And I just had this mental image now of Ruth writing these letters longhand. It's her way of saying you are not forgotten. It's her way of saying you are not left behind. You are loved and remembered and honored. And so, as Ruth was sharing this with us, Dick kind of slipped off and then he came back with a few books and he explained what they were. Whenever Ruth spends time with her 12 grandchildren, she journals what they did and what they said, and when they turn 16, those grand-kids get a book with moments and memories and lots of love.

Now, why am I sharing this? Well, one, I think it's an awesome idea. I mean about writing letters to widows and keeping journals for grand-kids. But I share that to share this, I think these seven letters in Revelation are pretty close to what I'm describing. These were personal letters, they were written with blood, sweat, and tears, they were written to and from people who would die for each other, and did just that. And I'll share of those stories a little later.

And so here we go. Revelation chapter two, verse eight

8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

9 I know your suffering and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown

Verse Eleven,

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Each of these seven letters is addressed to a unique church, in this case, the church in Smyrna, and that is not insignificant, but instead of focusing on who it's for, I want to focus on who it's from. Almost like a jigsaw puzzle with seven pieces. These letters are a composite picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. The letter to the church in Ephesus says that he is the one who walks among the seven lamp-stands, to the Church at Philadelphia he's the one who holds the key of David, to the church in Laodicea he is the amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's new creation. I like that. And I'll talk more about that in week seven.

Let me zoom in on verse eight.

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last,

depending on your translation, the Alpha and Omega, or the beginning and the end who died but came back to life again. Can we stop right there? Like we just keep reading, right? But do we get this? This is some serious authority at the beginning and the end, he is our cosmology, he is our eschatology, he's also the one who died and rose again. Listen, when Jesus walked out of that tomb on the third day, all bets were off. All things are possible.

I was in Colorado this week before I connected with Dick and Ruth Foth, I was at a gathering with some pastors and leaders. I was not expecting to walk into the room and the first person I meet is Evander, the real deal Holyfield. And so, I gave him a little playful punch. No, I didn't. I was curious to see how that ear was doing after the bite fight. Evander said something, and I quote, "I believe that God had called me to be the heavyweight champion of the world". Now those words pack a punch, pun intended. Why? Because he was the heavyweight champion of the world. Now if I'm saying that, are you buying what I'm selling? I don't think so, but when it's someone who has been there and done it, you can't argue with it. He is the real deal. You cannot argue with him who died and rose again. He is the beginning and the end. Do you understand what I'm saying? These words pack an incredible punch. The power of prayer, it's not the words we choose. The power of prayer is the God that we pray to. We are praying to him who is the first and the last. We are praying to him who died and rose again. When we forget who we're praying to, we pray impotent prayers, but when we remember who we're praying to now, we pray with bold humility or humble boldness. You take your pick.

At some point, you've got to stop talking to God about your problems and start talking to your problems about God. You have to declare who he is, his love, his goodness, his power, his grace. Now there are more than 400 names for God in the Bible and each one reveals a different dimension of who God is. He is wonderful, counselor, mighty God, Prince of peace, everlasting father. He is father, son and spirit. He is the way, the truth and the life, but I, I rather like this catch all; he is the Alpha and Omega. I want to make sure we understand that but let me go back to the book of Exodus because there's this moment where God reveals his identity in a rather curious way to a man named Moses at a burning bush. When Moses asks his name, God says, I am.

Well, when was the last time you introduce yourself that way? Because I think people are waiting for what's next. You are who? It's almost like God leaves this unresolved chord, this unanswered question, this unfinished painting, I am. And then you get to the Gospels and the Gospel of John and Jesus begins to answer the question, doesn't he? I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the vine. I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life. You get to John 11, I am the resurrection and the life. And he begins to fill in the blank and then you get to this last book of the Bible and it's like God fills in the blank one last time, says, I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Here's what God is saying, Alpha first letter of the Greek alphabet, Omega last letter of the Greek alphabet. What God is saying is I am A to Z, I am the alphabet.

Now we take the alphabet for granted and I think it's because it's the first thing we learn but stick with me. There are 35 million books in the library of Congress a few blocks from here, and guess what? Every single one of them only uses 26 letters. And yet they are vastly different. They're as different as Dr Seuss and Dr Phil. Without the alphabet none of those books exist; with the

alphabet endless possibilities. Everything from the Magna Carta, to the constitution, to the Bible itself. I think God is saying I am the alphabet. He is establishing his authority, not just cosmological, are eschatological, his authority right down to the jot and tittle, the least letter in the alphabet. And so, listen, yes, it's for the church in Smyrna, but I'm more concerned about who it's from; from the first and the last him who died, but he rose again.

Verse nine. He says,

9 I know your suffering and your poverty—yet you are rich!

What an interesting juxtaposition. This letter addresses two issues that I think we face maybe in different degrees at different times, suffering and poverty, suffering goes without saying. Last weekend, Pastor Joel talked about the emperor Domitian who a crazy, they hunted Christians like wild game and then put these Christians and to colosseums for blood sport. There was tremendous suffering and they were poor, and I'll tell you why, because when they made their profession of faith, it would have disqualified them from being a part of any of the trade guilds. In other words, it was occupational suicide. When they profess their faith in Christ, they were taking a vow of poverty and so they're persecuted and they're poor and it says, yet you are rich.

I know people who are materially rich and relationally poor, and we call them rich and I know people who are materially poor and spiritually rich and we call them poor and I wonder if we have it backwards. Had a mentor, a pastor's pastor, if you will Dr Robert Rhoden wrote and said something 20 years ago, I've never forgotten. He said, the world measures success by how much you make and how many people serve you. He said God measures success by how much you give and how many people you serve. Now I think that his right side up.

Let me get kind of practical right here because I wonder if some of us, in a different form or fashion are experiencing some of the suffering or maybe some of the poverty that is talked about in this passage and, I want to help us. There's something in psychology called a downward counterfactual. Simply put, it's comparing your current situation, no matter how bad it is with something that's worse. Now in upward counterfactual does the exact opposite; it's comparing your situation with a situation that's better and it has a depressing effect. And so, I think if we're focused on what we want instead of what we have, we're in a little bit of trouble. Listen, joy is not getting what you want, joy is appreciating what you have. And I think sometimes we've got to get a reality check, in fact, I think our mission trips they're reality checks, many of our problems are first world problems. The downward counterfactual and upward counterfactual are why studies have that a bronze medalist are happier than silver medalist. Now that doesn't make any sense because the silver medalist beat the bronze medalist. But Vicki Medvec did a fascinating study and found that the reason is pretty simple. Silver medalists are focused on how close they came to getting gold and so they're disappointed. Bronze medalist focus on how close they came to not getting a medal at all and are grateful for what they have. Now listen, I think this is more than just the Jedi mind trick. I think this is Philippians 4:8 If anything is good or right or pure or just think about such things. We cannot control our experiences, but our explanations, our perceptions and standing on the promises of God, it changes the way we engage, the circumstances that we find ourselves in. I'll be honest, I think these letters really are more mindsets and it's almost like Jesus is getting this church ready because he knows some

persecution is coming their way and I think sometimes we've got to brace ourselves for some of these difficult seasons in life.

Verse 10, it says,

10 Be faithful, even to the point of death,

Let me go back a little bit.

10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.

By the way, 10 days, it's a little bit of a mysterious reference, but it's a number of completion in scripture. And so, the idea here is that there will be a season of suffering, but it will come to full term. This too shall pass. I think it's so important. Ecclesiastes three to understand that there is a time for laughter, a time for crying, a time for building up, a time for tearing down. Now, the beautiful thing at the end of this, and again, you gotta know what season you're in, is that it says God makes everything beautiful in its time, but we've got to understand the season that we're in. And so, he says, be faithful even to the point of death. These words were prophetic.

In 155 AD Roman bounty hunters tracked down the Bishop of Smyrna, a man by the name of Polycarp. Polycarp did not run, did not hide, he welcomed them into his house, he actually fed them dinner, but he made one request, let me pray for an hour. He prayed for two hours and it's said, by the end of that prayer, some of those bounty hunters had put their faith in Christ. Now that didn't keep some of those bounty hunters from binding his hands, dragging him into the Colosseum in Smyrna. And the Roman pro counsel told him to recant his faith and he would spare his life. Polycarp said 80 and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who saved me? Well, the die was cast, the crowd began to chant, let loose the lion. And then those who were in the Colosseum that day heard a voice, a voice from heaven and the voice said, be strong Polycarp, play the man. And that's what Polycarp did. The Roman Council chose death by fire, but as that fire was lit, Polycarp prayed this prayer. I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs. Second Century Christian, author and theologian Tertullian said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. I think we want to skip over these pieces of the story, but when we do, I don't think we appreciate what we have.

Now, this is where the plot thickens. According to tradition, Polycarp was disciplined by none other than John the Beloved. When John wrote this letter to the church in Smyrna, Polycarp didn't just read the letter. He heard John's voice. I don't pretend to know what was going through his mind as he was being tortured, this is many years after this letter was written, but I can't help but wonder if John's words in this letter are what gave him the strength to endure to the end, be faithful even to the point of death. Polycarp, the twelfth martyr of Smyrna did just that.

It's almost random, but I feel like I want to share it this week. In that gathering I was in, Greg Spear shared his story and I think it was about his uncle. I think his uncle served in the military,

served in Vietnam, took some bullets during battle and when they were extracted, the shrapnel, he put them in a bottle. And I can't remember Greg's point, but he said that occasionally he'd bumped into someone and he would take out that bottle and he would shake it and he would say, this is the price of your freedom. I think what this letter does is it just shakes the bottle a little bit. There are so many who have sacrificed so much so that we can enjoy the blessings that we have.

Pastor Joel asked a question last week. I'm going to ask it again this week. What have you sacrificed in your relationship with Jesus Christ? I think many of us follow Jesus right up to the point of convenience, but no further. In Philippians three, 10 it says,

10 I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.

Don't you love that? Don't you want that? Like, I want to experience that resurrection power, but it doesn't end there this is a two-sided coin. Paul continues and says,

I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death,

And it's so easy to read that, but this pushes the envelope.

I want to close with a promise; be faithful even to the point of death. And John then ends his letter to the church in Smyrna like many of the other letters with a promise. And the promise is this, the one who is victorious will not be hurt by the second death. The first death, it's a physical death, no one is exempt from the first death, but the second death is a different story. On Wednesday morning our city awakens to news that broke our hearts. The night before Wendy Martinez was jogging through Logan Circle, she was stabbed, she stumbled into a restaurant, the ambulance took her to the hospital and she fought to her last breath, but she did not survive. Wendy was part of our church family, she attended our Lincoln Theater Campus along with her fiancé of a week, Daniel. She was part of a team from this church that went to Palestine. And I think her mother said it best, she radiated love. Our hearts broke this week as we grieve with and pray for the Martinez family, but the story does not end there because the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in Wendy. And we know Wendy is she is in the everlasting arms of her heavenly father in a place where there is no mourning or crying or pain. Let's be honest with each other, it felt on Tuesday like evil had won the day, but I want to say that love wins.

Romans eight says that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, k neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I want to honor Wendy this weekend. Her life was devoted to Jesus. By the way, she was a marathoner, makes me think a II Timothy 4:7, she fought the good fight, she ran the race, she kept the faith and I think her life epitomized by a picture that at the celebration of her life this weekend, someone on that mission team, Theresa, shared this picture with me, I want to share it with you. I love this picture because I think it's a picture that's true.

I want to share two things in closing this weekend. John's Gospel records a story of grief. Jesus had a friend named Lazarus. Lazarus died, and when Jesus showed up, four days later when he went to that tomb, John 11:35, two words, shortest verse in the Bible, but it says so much. It says, "*Jesus wept*". We have a God who weeps with us, who understands our weaknesses and our pain and our grief. Why? Because he wasn't just the son of God; he was the son of man. Psalm 56:8 says,

8 You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected my tears in your bottle.

In ancient Rome, there were bottles called tear catchers. They were made of ornamental glass, they were about four inches in height, those who mourned literally filled those bottles with their tears, and then those bottles were placed on the tombs of those that they loved. The more tears collected, the more beloved the person was. Our tear catchers were filled this week. So, please hear this we do not mourn as those who have no hope. Why? Because our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ, the first and the last; him who died, but he rose again. And we stand on this ancient promise the one who is victorious will not be hurt by the second death.

In John 14, Jesus said,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

2 My Father's house has many rooms and I am going there to prepare a place for you.

Jesus prepared a place for Wendy place with her name on it, a place where there is no death or mourning or crying or pain. I want to remind us this weekend, the Gospel is not just good news when everything is going right. The Gospel is good news when everything is going wrong, when the bottom falls out, when the world caves in. Our hope is anchored to the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope is anchored to the ancient of days, our hope is anchored to the Alpha and Omega, our hope is anchored to the one who died and rose again.

I want to invite all seven of our campuses to stand. There's a song that I want us to sing together. It's an old hymn; On Christ, The Solid Rock I Stand. And I want us to make it our declaration this weekend.

[singing]

Verse 1

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name

Chorus

On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

Verse 2

When darkness veils His lovely face
I rest on His unchanging grace
In ev'ry high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil

Chorus

On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

Verse 3

His oath His covenant His blood
Support me in the whelming flood
When all around my soul gives way
He then is all my hope and stay

Chorus

On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

Verse 4

When He shall come with trumpet sound
O may I then in Him be found

Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless to stand before the throne

Chorus

On Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

Would you just bow your heads and close your eyes? If you're here this weekend and you need to anchor yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is your moment, this is your moment.

Lord, right now I pray for those whose hearts are reaching out to you, to those who find themselves in such a difficult place. God, I thank you that you are God with us, that you walk with us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, that you are the God of all comfort and we thank you that death and sin were conquered at Calvary's cross and so we stand on the promise and the hope that for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have ever lasting life, in that we give thanks and we anchor our soul. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Can I ask you to do one more thing? At all of our campuses just grab the hand of the person who's next to you, and I want to say this, God has given us a biological family, but he's also given us a church family. And these are the moments where we need each other, these are the moments that we're so grateful that God gives us those to rejoice with and to mourn with. And I think it makes sense that the little phrase at the beginning of this benediction, brothers and sisters, that's what we are. Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope for we believe that Jesus died and rose again. And so, we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep. Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with you all. In Jesus' name. Amen.