

The Real Jesus

Revelation 1:9-20

In his book *In Christ Alone*, Sinclair Ferguson speaks of a mythical person who is loved and trusted by many. This mythical person is celebrated particularly around Christmas. He is full of good cheer and does all that he can to satisfy the wishes of all those who have been good. You may think I am speaking of Santa Claus. But the mythical creature I have in mind could be aptly named *Santa Christ*. The benefit of Santa Christ is that he is available all year long and is more concerned about you as a whole person.

Santa Christ, of course, takes different forms according to personal preferences. But the general idea is that Jesus exists as a kind, affirming heavenly being who doesn't judge but accepts and affirms all people as they are – regardless of faith or obedience.

I'm sure you've met people who believe in Santa Christ. They confidently affirm their faith in him and are assured of his unending love for them – though they profess no creed, attend no church, and follow no moral guidelines beyond what is commonly accepted as reasonable.

A few weeks ago now, we took the H.S. Theology class to Rivertown Mall and broke into small groups to talk with people about what they believe. My group came upon two young women who happily assured us that they were Christian – but as best as we could tell, attended no church and believed that people should have the right to determine for themselves what they believe about God and morality. But they believed Jesus was readily available to help them whenever they needed it. Their Jesus is Santa Christ.

We just need to realize that we live in a day of mass confusion concerning who Jesus really is and what he is actually like. And that cultural confusion impacts us – maybe our Jesus is more like Santa Christ than we would care to admit.

- If you spend more time in prayer asking Jesus to give you things than you do praising and thanking him for who he is – you might believe in Santa Christ.
- If your Jesus never frightens you with his power and holiness and glory – you might believe in Santa Christ.
- If you complain about his failures to meet your needs without deep repentance concerning your failure to meet his commands – you might believe in Santa Christ.
- If you aren't that concerned about your sins because Jesus knows you're only human – you definitely believe in Santa Christ.

The book of Revelation is written to help people like us – people who are tempted to pretend that Jesus is something other than he is. In our text this morning, John has a vision of King Jesus - a Jesus quite a bit more traumatizing, shocking, and overwhelming than the gentle, user-friendly version we've become accustomed to. John is stunned and stupefied at the crushing majesty of this Christ. The Jesus of Revelation is an awesome, overwhelming, holy, sovereign, judging and destroying, glorious, and good Jesus. His dazzling splendor reduces John to quivering flesh.

I. The Context

A. Identity

John's introduction is a lesson in the believer's identity. Notice what he says:

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus....

John begins by taking his old apostolic arms and folding them around all the family of God, identifying with all his brothers and sisters in Christ. "I'm your brother." The fellowship of believers is deeply significant. It is both a communion in Christ and **partnership** in the kingdom of God. It is a fellowship in the family AND in the family business!

Growing up on a family farm meant that we were not only members of the Van Dyke family, we were also co-participants in the mission of North Evergreen Farm. To be a member of the one made you a participant in the other.

John defines this partnership with 3 words – **tribulation, kingdom, and endurance**. All three realities are "in Jesus." They speak to our shared identity and calling in Christ.

The distinguishing characteristic of a Christian is the reality of true, organic, actual, unbreakable union with Jesus Christ. Jesus is not simply the person in whom you believe – Jesus is the person in whom you live and move and have your being!

Consequently, in Christ, we are brothers and sisters and co-participants in the Kingdom of God. John has already reminded us, in verse 6, that Jesus has made us a kingdom, and now he speaks of the realities of that kingdom. What realities does John have in mind?

Tribulation and patient endurance.

It is precisely because we are in Christ that we will find ourselves in tribulation and suffering. And the task of the children of God in this world is to experience and patiently endure trouble for Jesus' name. That, in a sense, is the job description of kingdom citizens.

This is not hypothetical. The early church was already experiencing this reality. John was not the only believer suffering for his faith. Many were. Christians around the world today are suffering because of their union with Christ.

Mindy Belz, *World* magazine: "The persecution index is rising...You know this is true when you see headlines of major newspapers devoted to the latest Boko Haram violence against Christians in Nigeria or Muslim mobs chasing a poor Christian family in Pakistan. Last year, 1 in 9 Christians experienced serious persecution – a 14% increase over the previous year."

The people of God are undoubtedly the most persecuted and oppressed people in the world. We have enjoyed the blessings of peace in this country – but we are in the minority, as 70% of our siblings in faith are experiencing persecution of one sort or other.

What we need to understand is that this is a kingdom reality, a kingdom phenomenon. It is normal – not strange. It's a truth we need to take to heart. We don't have a robust theology of suffering in this country. We tend to interpret suffering as either God punishing us or God forgetting about us. But that isn't true. In fact, the precise opposite is true. **Philippians 1:29**:

²⁹For it has been granted to you (by God) that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,

This is what John means by "participant." We are not merely **subjects** of Christ's kingdom – we are **participants**, and we participate by faithfully enduring the suffering that comes to us for Christ's sake. Our calling is not only to believe in Jesus but to stand with Jesus and for Jesus, bearing witness to his person, his saving work, and his

current reign as sovereign Lord over every man, woman, and child. This is the mission and message of the kingdom! And for this we will be opposed.

John was a living example of this. Why is he writing from the prison island of Patmos? He tells us that it was *“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”*

One of my commentators made the point that in the modern Western world Christianity was assumed to be about good morals and religious values, just like all the major world religions. But John’s words defy that assumption. The commentator says,

“John is quite clear why he has been sent to Patmos. It is certainly not because he had religious values. The Romans soldiers did not come knocking on his door in Ephesus saying, ‘John, we understand you are a man of faith and you have values which are shared by all the major world religions – so you are being sent to do hard labor on Patmos.’”

That’s not why he was there! He was there because of *“the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”* He was on Patmos because he insisted on proclaiming that Jesus Christ is both the only possible hope for sinners and the only sovereign Lord and King.

That’s what offends the world – Jesus.

That’s why the church will suffer – for the sake and name of Jesus.

That’s why we need to see all that Jesus is and all that He is doing in his glory.

And that is why John is commanded to write what he sees and send it to the church.

¹⁰“Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches,....”

What did he see?

II. The Vision

A. Lampstands

The first thing he saw was 7 golden lampstands. Seven is the number of fullness, and we are told in verse 20 exactly what they symbolize:

“the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

The imagery comes straight from the temple of the Old Testament. If you remember, one of the items in the holy place was a golden lampstand. One of the tasks of the priests was to make sure the wicks were trimmed and the oil was replenished so that the light of the lamp shone continually, representing the presence of the living God who is light.

We also have a vision of a lampstand in the prophecy of Zechariah. Zechariah was writing to God’s people during a time of persecution and oppression. The people had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity and Zerubbabel was trying to rebuild the temple in the face of great opposition. In chapter 4, God gave Zechariah a vision of a lampstand whose oil never ran out. The point being that the work of rebuilding would be accomplished:

“Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord Almighty”.

The Spirit of God is the power of God at work in this dark world building the temple of God.

That's a wonderful insight to John's vision. He also is writing to God's people in a time of persecution and oppression. And God is building his temple by his power in this dark age. But he is doing so through a greater Zerubbabel – Jesus Christ himself.

Matt. 16:18: *"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

The Spirit of Christ is present, powerfully at work to accomplish this glorious task! Why does God choose the symbol of a lampstand to signify his church? Because the Church is called to shine the light of the gospel and glory of God in Jesus into the darkness of this world.

"You are the light of the world."

This is why the church must be a **faithful** witness. If we fail to be a faithful witness in the darkness of this world, if we hide our light because of cultural oppression, and if we taint the light through cultural accommodation or false teaching, we are violating our mission as the church and will come under the judgement of Christ.

(What do you do with a burnt-out light bulb? *Laodicea*)

However, AS we lay hold of our calling, we have the tremendous assurance of Jesus' presence and power in our midst so that we cannot fail even if, and particularly when, we die.

And the key to that sort of perseverance, courage, and conviction is a clear, compelling view of Jesus!

B. The Son of Man

When John turned to see the voice that was speaking to him, he saw glory--overwhelming, knee-buckling, assumption-shattering glory.

1:13 "and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest."

The title "son of man" comes from the visions of Daniel 7 and 10. The title refers specifically to Jesus as the Divine Judge of all the earth. **Daniel 7:13–14 (ESV):**

*¹³ "I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came **one like a son of man**,
and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.*

*¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

What did John see when he saw Jesus? He saw the Sovereign King and Ruler of all the Earth! There is a wonderful reminder of the glory of Christ in the text that isn't visible in the English translation. In the original Greek, verses 14-16 are one long sentence, listing various things he saw, all connected with the word *and*. Count them. John begins in verse 14 by describing his hair and then his eyes, then his feet and then his voice, and having seven stars in his right hand, and a two-edged sword coming from his mouth, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. Seven. The number of fullness, completion, and perfection.

What is the nature of the fullness and perfection of Christ revealed here? It is the fullness and perfection of his role as Sovereign Lord and Judge of all.

- *The hair of his head is white, like snow*--a white head was a sign of age and wisdom. Jesus is the Ancient of Days, the perfection of wisdom and knowledge.

- *His eyes were like a flame of fire*--the eyes of King Jesus are eyes that see all things. Nothing is hidden from the eyes of Jesus. He sees the secret thoughts of your heart, and he sees the secret motives behind your words. Nothing is hidden from him.

Hebrews 4:13: *And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*
Even the church.

Revelation 2:18–19: *“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.’¹⁹ ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.*

He sees in order to judge – in order to render unto those who are faithful the blessings of the kingdom and to those who are unfaithful the judgements.

- *His feet are like burnished bronze, refined in the fire*--representing absolute purity.
- *His voice was like the roar of many waters*—a thunderous voice of power and authority.
- *In his right hand he held seven stars*—the angels of the 7 churches are in his hand.
- *From his mouth a sharp, two-edged sword*--Jesus is the Warrior King who will judge the nations with the word of his mouth.

Isaiah 11:4: *He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

Does your Jesus do that? The Jesus of Revelation does. He wants the church to know this!

Rev. 2:12: *“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.’”*

Rev. 19:15: *“From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”*

One of the most painful experiences in life is to be devastated by a condemning word. Particularly if it's true. On the last day, Jesus will destroy his enemies with his word. He will speak absolute truth concerning what they have done, what they have failed to do, what they deserve, and what they will receive – the fire of hell. And so it will be.

- *And his face was like the sun shining in full strength*--far too brilliant to look upon.

And John does exactly what we would all do – ***“I fell at his feet as though dead.”*** I wonder if that would be a good verse to hang over the doors, the last thing we see before coming into the auditorium for worship. The modern church has embraced a casual attitude to worship. There isn't that much difference between worship and going to a concert. Remember, John knew Jesus personally and first-hand. You would think, if anyone had the right to be casual and comfortable around Jesus, it would be John. But there is nothing casual or comfortable about his experience of Jesus. He was utterly undone and overcome. *“I fell at his feet as though dead.”* The sheer glory of Jesus was too much, the weight of his glory crushing the life of John, his dear friend and servant. This is the real Jesus. The Jesus of Scripture and the Jesus of human history. The Jesus who actually lives and reigns. The Jesus you and I will meet – just as certainly as you are sitting here this morning.

III. The Victor

17-20 *“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*

“Fear not.” Why not? Because this majestic Jesus is the Jesus who died for sinners and rose again triumphant. Jesus wants John and the church to see him as he truly is. And Jesus, as he truly is, is an unspeakably mighty King and infinitely Sovereign Lord, with nails marks in his hands.

A. His Victory

“I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold (look, see) I am alive forevermore.”

The real Jesus is no mythical creature, but the very Jesus who walked this earth, who carried a cross to Golgotha and was crucified there. He died for sinners, bearing their crimes and satisfying the demands of justice. All the wonders of the gospel are in these words: “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.” Death is under the sovereign authority of the one who died for us. Death really has been conquered--by Jesus--for us. His victory is our victory!

B. His Authority

“And I have the keys of Death and Hades”

Keys are signs of ownership and authority. When you buy a car, they give you the keys. The jailer carries the keys to the cell. The banker has the key to the vault. Jesus has the keys of Death and Hades. Everyone who enters the realm of death does so only by the authority and word of Jesus.

R.C. Sproul, in his book *Surprised by Suffering*, writes,

“Jesus holds the keys of death. He holds the keys because he owns the keys. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. The angel of death is at his beck and call. Above all the suffering and death stands the crucified and risen Lord.”

Those who die in the Lord are not lost but blessed.

Rev. 14:13: And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors...”

R.C. Sproul wrote, “My father taught me how to die.” R.C. was only 17, and not a believer at the time. But his father was, and R.C. says,

“I will never forget the last words my father spoke to me. We were seated together on the living room sofa. His body had been ravaged by three strokes. One side of his face was distorted by paralysis. He spoke to me with a heavy slur. His words were difficult to understand, but their meaning was crystal clear. He uttered these words: ‘I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.’ These were the last words he ever spoke to me. Hours later he suffered his fourth and final cerebral hemorrhage.”

Only later, when R.C. was converted, did he understand the precious truth of those words: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Isn’t that what we want to be able to say? How can that be? How will that happen? By keeping our eyes on the real Jesus! The one who died for us and was raised for us, and who promises to keep us with all his power until we see him in all of his glory.