

A Picture of the Risen Christ

A Sermon on Revelation 1:12-20

Preached by Paul Liberati, April 4, 2021

And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying, Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore – Rev. 1:17-18

As a former Roman Catholic, my early years were filled with pictures and statues of Jesus Christ. None of those images were accurate, they were just the product of human imagination, influenced by whatever style of art was prevalent at that time. And because of that—because I never had a true and accurate depiction of Jesus—I can say now that nothing I ever saw was able to help me in any real way. In fact, it was just the opposite. So long as I continued in the practice of using man-made images of Jesus Christ, I was only perpetuating my ignorance of his true glory.

Thankfully, over time I came to the realization that what I was doing was in fact wrong. I realized that it was all in direct violation of the second commandment, and so I put away all the pictures and paintings, all the statues and idols in my home. And as I did that, I remember reasoning through the process. One of the things I said to my wife was: You know, if God really wanted us to have a picture of His Son, He would've provided it for us, to be seen and used in the Church until His Son returns.

Well, in a sense, that is exactly what God has done for us in our text. In Revelation chapter 1, we have a clear and vivid picture of Jesus Christ in his resurrection glory. So here's a picture that God wants us to see; here's a picture that He wants us to use, both in the church and throughout the course of our Christian lives. The fact that today is *Resurrection Sunday* means that there's no better time for us to study this passage and to

look upon this One, who in verses 17 and 18 declares: *I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.*

A Message to the Church

Now, as we look at some of the details, the first thing we see is that in verses 9-11, John provides us with the context of the vision. He tells us that he was "*in the spirit on the Lord's Day*" and that he "*heard a voice that sounded like a trumpet.*" That indicates right away that what he heard was something of an official announcement. It was loud, it was startling, it was an authoritative voice with a very specific command. John was told to send to the seven churches a written record of everything that he was about to see.

The vision that John's about to receive is not a message for the world. It's not a political statement directed to the Roman Empire; it's not a military declaration directed to the Roman army. Rather, what John is about to see in the opening scene of his vision is (first and foremost) a message for the Church of Jesus Christ. You can see that, because as soon as John turns to see the voice, the very first thing he sees is the risen, glorified Christ *standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands.* These lampstands, according to verse 20, represent the seven churches of Asia Minor, and by extension, they symbolize the fullness of the people of God in every generation.

And, that's important, because what that means is that in terms of *interpretation* John's vision had a real historical context. But in terms of *application* the message of this vision is just as necessary and relevant for us today as it was for him. When I say that, I want us to think about it in the most concrete way possible: Everyone here in this room should understand that John wrote the details of the revelation of Jesus Christ not just for the churches of Asia Minor; but John had this vision and he wrote it down for the members of Church of the King in Roseville, California as well.

In Romans chapter 15, the apostle Paul gave us this principle and it teaches us about the *timelessness* of the word of God, in terms of its *application*. In verse 4, he says, "*For whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, so that we, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*" In other words, we need to

remember that the basic needs of the Christian Church never change. Sure, the circumstances may vary from generation to generation, but the word of God is always sufficient to meet the needs of the body of Christ in any given place and at any given time.

Jesus Engaged in Priestly Ministry

In fact, that's especially true, when it comes to the Vision of Jesus Christ that's in our text. You see, the very fact that Jesus is standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands tells us something important. And that is that, right now, and right here today, Jesus is still engaged in the work of his ministry.

Notice here that his clothing indicates a *priestly* ministry; the garment that he's wearing is representative of priestly attire. John says that his robe is "*long and it reaches down to the foot, and the golden sash is wrapped around his chest.*" The sash in this connection is very significant because it reminds us that there are at least two aspects to the work of Jesus for his people.

The Scottish Presbyterian minister, Alfred Edersheim, who was also an expert in Old Testament worship, says that in the days of Israel the High Priest always had two sets of clothing that he wore, and each set was of a different color. First of all there was the white linen vestment that he wore on the Day of Atonement. And then, there was a golden vestment that he wore for the rest of his priestly duties.

And so here the combination of the long robe and the golden sash is giving us a picture of an important truth, and that is, the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ has already been accomplished. The day of real Atonement is already past, and by the one sacrifice of himself upon the cross, Jesus made a full and complete satisfaction for our sins. In Hebrews chapter 2, it says that by his death, he made *reconciliation for the sins of the people.*

And so the atoning work of Jesus is finished and yet, as John sees the Lord, it's pretty clear that he's still functioning in some aspect of his priestly office. Now, what is that work that Jesus continues to do?

Examining the Condition of the Church

Well, later on in chapters 2 and 3, we get a better picture of that. And it turns out that he's taken up with the work examining the spiritual condition of his Church. And, not just examining, but addressing our spiritual needs.

Anytime he finds sin and spiritual sickness in the church, he's the one who warns and rebukes, and even disciplines the church. On the other side, of course, when he finds faith and patience and commitment to the truth of his word, then again, he's the one who gives us the grace and strength, and the necessary comfort, that we need to carry on. And so the message here is that Jesus, who died for our sins and rose again from the dead, is still very intimately involved in the lives of his people.

The opening scene, in verses 12 and 13, *should have been* an amazing comfort to the apostle John. After all, if you look back to verse 9, John described himself to the seven churches as their brother, *and their companion in tribulation*. So John was suffering at this time. He had already been banished to the Isle of Patmos for the word of God and he says: *for the testimony of Jesus Christ*. So here, as he looks up and he sees the risen Lord, standing in the midst of his people, he should have been reminded that even during the most difficult time of his life, the Lord had never left him alone.

In John 14, Jesus made us a very precious promise. He said that he would not leave us "comfortless." And that word there is actually *orphans* in the Greek, and so what Jesus is really saying, in verse 18, is, "I will not leave you *as orphans*." And to prove it, he gives us this clear and powerful vision of his abiding presence in the church and in our lives as well.

Congregation, let that be an encouragement to your soul. Let the Picture of the risen Christ remind you that even in the difficult trials of your life, Jesus will never leave you, but in fact, he's always there, attending to your needs.

Jesus Ruling in as the Mighty King

Well, that's the first thing that John saw when he turned around. But you know, if that was all that he saw, then again, it *would have been* a real comfort to his soul. He would

have walked that day away rejoicing in the Lord. But the truth is that there was more that John saw. And because of that, the vision had the very opposite effect upon his soul.

In verse 17, he says that when he saw the Lord, he was overwhelmed, and that he fell down at his feet, *as if he were dead*. In other words, instead of being comforted, John was afraid of what he saw. He was terrified at the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, part of the reason for that is that when Jesus appeared to John, John saw the Lord as *more* than a High Priest and *more* than a Savior for his people. But in fact he saw that Jesus was at the same time, King over all the Nations, and the Judge of all the Earth.

I say that because in verse 13 he refers to the Lord, specifically, as the *Son of Man*. And when he does that he makes a direct connection to the prophecy of Daniel chapter 7. And, the whole point of Daniel's vision was to teach us that after Jesus died on the cross for sin, after he was raised from the dead, and even after he ascended into heaven, he received an *everlasting kingdom* according to the purpose and the promise of God. The Bible says that his dominion is an *everlasting dominion* which shall never pass away, and his kingdom is one that will *never be destroyed*.

And so you see, when John turns and he looks upon the Lord Jesus Christ, he sees the offices of a lowly priest and exalted King. He sees a picture of One who serves in the midst of his people and rules in the midst of his enemies. And yet the vision is all one. The whole thing is bound up together in the one Person of Jesus Christ. When you think about that—when you think about these different aspects of John's vision—you realize what an unsettling thing that could be.

I'm always amazed when I read through the record of the Last Supper. Because when Jesus, right there at the table says, This night, one of you will betray me, the Bible says that each and every one of the disciples, turned and said to Jesus, *Lord is it I?* In other words, in that moment, none of the disciples felt safe. They didn't know if, by the end of that night, they would be a friend or an enemy of Jesus Christ. And so here, I wonder if that's a little bit of what John was feeling. Knowing that as a priest, Jesus is there to save, and as a King, he's also there to judge.

Jesus in His Divine Glory

In either case, that was only part of why John feared. And, as you look at some of the other details, you realize that it's probably not really what grabbed John's attention; it's not what caused him to fall to the ground as dead. Instead, I think the key to John's reaction is that, in addition to the Priesthood and the Kingship of Jesus Christ, John sees the true and *eternal nature* of Jesus Christ as the *Son of the living God*.

You see, for three and a half years, and maybe more because they were cousins, but at least for three and a half years, John had seen Jesus according to the flesh, with occasional and only partial glimpses of his glory. But here in this vision the veil is entirely taken away, and John falls to the ground because he cannot bear the glory of the Divine Son.

And Congregation, this goes back to what I said before; this is why I felt so convicted about the use of pictures and man-made images of Jesus Christ—it's because Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is the true and eternal God. And, what that means for us, on a very practical level is that if we cannot make pictures of God, then we cannot make pictures of Jesus Christ.

Now, the reason that I think the key to John's reaction is the Deity of Christ is because of the description he gives us in verses 14-16 of our text. In fact, if you study out the details very carefully, you'll find that almost point for point, the characteristics of Jesus correspond to the characteristics of God Himself, in many other places in the Bible.

For example, in verse 14, John says that his *hair was white like wool, and even as white as snow*. Here, we get a picture of not just the purity, but also the *eternality* of Jesus Christ! The "whiteness" of his hair signifies the *duration of his existence*. In fact, when we look back to Daniel chapter 7, we notice that the very same terms are used to describe the Father, when the Son of Man was standing before His throne. Daniel said that His Name was the "Ancient of Days" and the hair of His head was "*white like pure wool*."

And so there's no question that the message here in what John sees is that Jesus, together with the Father, is from everlasting to everlasting, having no beginning and no ending of days. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore!

And likewise, at the end of verse 14, John says that his "*eyes were like a flame of fire*" and his "*feet like fine brass that burned in a furnace.*" Again, if we look back to Daniel 7, and other passages, we see the same kind of imagery associated with God Himself. This is the imagery of judgment and purification. And so the message here is very simple: Just like fire can burn through the toughest layers of earthy material, so the piercing vision of the Lord Jesus Christ penetrates to the deepest recesses of the human heart.

In fact, in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus introduces himself to the church at Thyatira, saying, "These things says the Son of God *whose eyes are like a flame of fire and his feet like fine brass.*" And, in that section of his epistle, Jesus is confronting them about the sin of sexual immorality, and he says that if it does not stop, then he will come and he will purify the church in judgment. And it's there in that context of judgment, that he appeals to the nature of his own eyes. He says, "Then all the churches shall know that *I am he who searches the minds and hearts*, and I will give to each one of you according to your works."

And so yes, if we had time to study out all the details, we could easily show, point for point, that all the characteristics in this section, including the "*voice of many waters*" and his "*countenance that shone like the brightness of the sun*" — all of these characteristics correspond to the attributes and perfections of the Triune God. That they apply to the Son no less than they apply to the Father and the Holy Spirit as well.

Who Can Stand in His Presence?

But, as we think about that, let me ask you all a question: What would you have done? How would you have responded if you were in John's position on that occasion?

As I was preparing this sermon, I had to stop and ask myself that question: What would I have done? And you know, I realized that I really can't blame John for the fear and the trembling that he had. I think we all know very well that if we were there, every one of

us would have felt the same way. And, that's especially true, considering that in verse 16, John says that a sharp, two-edged sword was coming out of the mouth of Jesus Christ.

Now that is an intimidating revelation. If there's anything in all of the word of God that points to the wrath and judgment of God, if there's anything that suggests that right then and there Jesus was prepared for the destruction of his enemies, it's the symbol of the *sword of his mouth*.

In fact, at least two more times in the book of Revelation we see the very same picture, and it's always used in a context of judgment. Again, in Revelation chapter 2, in reference to the false teachers in Pergamus, he calls the entire Congregation to repentance for their complicity and their lack of action. In verse 16 he says to them, *Repent or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*"

In Revelation 19, we see the same thing. When Jesus, the Rider on the White horse, leads the armies of heaven into battle, against the beast, and against the false prophet and the rest of their followers, the Bible says that the weapon of his warfare is once again the *"sword of his mouth."* In verse 20, John says that Jesus takes the beast and the false prophet and he cast them both alive into the lake of fire. But in verse 21 he says, *"And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse; which sword proceeded out of his mouth."* You see, the sword of his mouth represents the judgment of Jesus Christ on everyone who disobeys his word.

And so going back to our text now: Is there any question that if we would have seen what John saw, that we too would have fallen to ground as dead, just like he did in our text?

Jesus Removes our Natural Fear

Well, here's the interesting thing. As soon as John falls to the ground, Jesus immediately wants him to know that in reality, there was nothing for him to fear.

And, Congregation that too is a message for us. It's a message that says, if we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, if we're trusting in the finished work of his death, burial, and resurrection from the dead, then we too have absolutely nothing to fear in the presence of

the Divine Son. In fact, that's exactly what he wants us to see. Because at the end of verse 17, as soon as John falls to the ground, Jesus responds to him with a word of peace *and a gesture of reassurance*. John says, *And he laid his right hand upon me saying unto me, Do not be afraid, for I am the first and the last. I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.*

A Picture is Worth 1000 Words

Now, most likely, many of us have heard the saying that "a picture is worth a thousand words." And in many ways, I suppose that's true. The only question is whether or not the words that we supply are an accurate description of the picture that we're looking at. I mean, isn't it just so very easy for us to look at an image and then walk away with a total misunderstanding of its most basic message to us?

Indeed it is, in fact, it happens all the time, and that's exactly what happened to John on this occasion. When he looked up and saw the Vision of the risen Lord; and as he looked at the power and the glory and the Majesty of Jesus Christ, he could not discern even the *most basic message of that vision to himself!*

You see, the message that John failed to comprehend on this occasion is actually very simple: and it is that "All that God is in Jesus Christ, God is for the good of His people." What that means is that everything John saw was a testimony to all that God provides in Jesus Christ for the salvation of everyone who believes.

And so this morning, Congregation: as we think about this Vision in the book of Revelation, as we walk away from the image in this text, let us at least remember the most basic message that we find in this Picture of the risen Christ.

Let us remember that Jesus is our *Priest*, and that Jesus is our *King*, and because of that, we, like the apostle John, have absolutely nothing to fear! Our sins have been put away, our souls have been redeemed, and the resurrection of our bodies has been secured by the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself. **Amen.**

