

Seeing Jesus

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[0 : 00] So Revelation, in a nutshell, I guess, is all about seeing things as they truly are. When we come to John's vision, we're given a glimpse at how things look from heaven.

When we looked at the first eight verses, I used the analogy of the theatre. When you're in the midst of the drama, as it were, it can be hard to know why things are happening in a particular way. It can be hard to persevere and keep following Jesus. But when we go up into the rafters, we see behind the curtain, peek into the wings, well, we get a partial understanding of the bigger picture and the workings of God in history.

We get a sense of where all this is going and why. Because, let's be frank, being a Christian isn't always easy. Following Christ comes with challenges.

That's what the seven churches addressed in Revelation found. And I suspect that if we're following Jesus, that's what each and every one of us finds. And when we look at the world around us, it's not always as obvious as we would like it to be, that following Jesus is the right way.

[1 : 15] The prevailing culture tends to suggest that actually following him is the wrong way. Because to follow Christ as he is, instead of the Christ our culture might like him to be, is challenging and provocative.

But our world and our culture are frequently blind. One example, the way in which it's tearing itself apart over the ethics of gender is perhaps one clear example of how the world is maybe not the best barometer of clarity or unity.

Instead, the Bible teaches us that it's only when we look to Jesus, the light that shines in the darkness, as John calls him in his gospel, it's only when we look to him that we can see clearly. When we look to him, it's almost like a light has come on in a darkened room. He reveals to us what is true and what is good when we're too blind or too weary to see.

Many of us, if we know Jesus, will remember the first time that light shone into our lives. But there's also this need when we're following him to keep coming back to him, to keep coming back to that light.

[2 : 29] Because the world, the flesh, and the devil continue to wage war against us. And they want us to forget the power of that light and the truth of Jesus.

Which is why, before John writes down these letters to the seven churches, which we will see in coming weeks and months, it's why before John does that, John tells us about the one who has commissioned him to write them.

The vision which this whole book records is rooted in the one who gives it. Because he stands at the center of all life and all faith.

He's the head of his church. He's the fountain of life. And he's the light that we need to keep coming back to. If we're to remain in him.

As John tells us of this vision, he prompts us, and this is what we're going to see, to see ourselves afresh, to see our Lord Jesus clearly, and also to see our calling, what the implications are, if we're to know who we are, and who Jesus is, with a renewed clarity.

[3 : 44] So, as Catherine read, it was probably clear that John's vision of Jesus is the heart and the soul of this passage that we're looking at this afternoon. But John builds up and leads into it by telling us a little bit about himself and a little bit about what happened before he's given this vision.

And John, he chooses his words carefully. His description of himself helps the churches he's writing to, and indeed his readers today, i.e. ourselves, understand why we should listen to him.

And in the process, John is reminding us of who we are as Christians and as the Church of Christ. And this is really important, because in the midst of the frenetic pace of life, especially when life is full of challenges and temptations and sickness and grief, and as we know, life so often is, well, it's

very, very easy, isn't it, to forget just who we are as God's people.

It's very possible to go through week in, week out, doing churchy things, if you like, and yet forget just what it means to be the church.

And so John begins, I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[5 : 17] Jesus. It's interesting that John describes himself as a brother and companion. He could appeal to his apostleship as he writes this vision, but what he wants to do as he writes these churches is he's reminding them that he's part of the family, as it were.

And this family is one of shared suffering, shared endurance, and a shared kingdom. To see the kingdom of heaven identified with suffering and perseverance here is, I think, quite helpful.

The kingdom of heaven is God's destiny for all his people and for this world, a new creation where sin and death have no place and where every tear has been wiped away.

That's the future that God has promised for his people. But the kingdom as we experience it in the present is one of perseverance and struggle.

It's a kingdom of denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus. And this is what the church, the children of God through the redemption of Jesus, this is what the church shares.

[6 : 31] we have a shared suffering just as much as we have a shared hope. And we share, as John says, in the patient endurance which characterizes his church.

In fact, it's by sharing in that very suffering that John has found himself on Patmos, which was a tiny island in the Aegean Sea where the Romans would exile prisoners.

And John's there because of the word and testimony of Jesus, i.e. the message of the gospel. And I think this is actually a really helpful corrective.

There is, there's nothing more wonderful than to be called by God's grace and to be one of his sheep. And there's nothing more life-giving than knowing Jesus.

But he never said it would be easy. In fact, he said the opposite. And yet, and we all know this, it's when things get hard that we're going to be most tempted to pack it in, to give in to temptation, to give in to the spirit of the age, the culture, and the way in which those around us would have us live and believe and forget just who we are.

[7 : 50] And so John's words are a wake-up call, perhaps even a slap around the face. We are the church. Therefore, says John, we should expect suffering, just as we should expect the coming of the kingdom.

These truths, they coexist together. We will inherit the kingdom, but we must also suffer like our king and for our king.

So is there then any benefit to being in Christ before his kingdom comes in power? Well, yes, there is. Because if we're in Christ, this is one benefit of many, we're also in the spirit and Jesus himself speaks to us.

John tells us that he was in the spirit on the Lord's day, as indeed I trust that we all are today. And he hears a voice like a trumpet. A voice like a trumpet.

This has connotations with the story of the Exodus where God, he appeared to his Old Testament people after he'd rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

[8 : 56] And he spoke to them from Mount Sinai. And we're told there that his voice was accompanied by the sound of a trumpet. This is God here speaking in all his power and might.

And the divine voice gives John an instruction. Write down what you see and send it to the seven churches. These seven churches, they were seven real churches with real problems, just like any church today.

And they're representative, really, of the whole church at all times. The number seven, we saw this last time in Revelation, being symbolic of a sense of completeness.

And so when John, in the spirit, on the Lord's day, hears God speaking with a message to his church, well, it's a reminder that we are a people whom God himself speaks to.

Why do we have faith in the kingdom in the future? Why do we have a shared suffering and a shared perseverance? Well, it's because we have been called by God and he speaks to us.

[10 : 08] God isn't addressing John just for his own sake. He's giving John a message for his people. who just like God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai with a voice of the trumpet, with a message to this people that he'd redeemed from slavery.

Well, so God speaks to us today through this vision, but also through all of Scripture. He speaks to a church that he has redeemed from slavery to sin.

We are, to use a technical term, God's covenant people. That is the people that he has promised to graciously bless and mercifully save.

The church is not an institution or a charity or a building. It's a people as he knows you. You are his sheep. The sheep whom he loves and feeds.

So, that's who we are. That's who we are as Christ's flock, as his church, as his people. But, we are only who we are because of the one who has called us and redeemed us.

[11:20] And that's who John sees whenever he turns around. Our identity is rooted in Christ. And so, to see ourselves more clearly, well, actually, we have to see Jesus with more clarity.

There's a lot of people across the world who would call themselves Christians, but who don't actually know the name of the one that they're claiming. To illustrate that, there was a poll done in the United States last year, and it found that 43% of evangelical Christians believe that Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.

To put it bluntly, you cannot be a Christian if you say that Jesus is not God. And I use this as an illustration of the fact that it can be very easy to claim the name of Christ and yet not actually know who he is.

So, John says, I turned round and he sees Jesus to see the one that was speaking to me. And when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands. And among the lampstands was someone like a son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. John's vision of Jesus here is just jam-packed with symbolism and imagery all drawn from the Old Testament. Jesus, he called himself the son of man more than any other title whilst he was here on earth.

[12:53] So whenever John calls him this, we know that he is seeing Jesus. And what John sees is, basically it's a symbolic picture of who Jesus is.

A picture of him in his power and his authority. Because as we read this, I mean, clearly this is not how Jesus appeared when he was on earth.

This is not the Jesus that we see in the Gospels, for example. The Gospels don't talk about the sword poking out of his mouth or his eyes of flaming fire. What we have here is a look behind the curtain.

Jesus presented symbolically to remind us who he is. To remind us that he is the son of man who reigns in power.

And when we know that, when we understand that, following him, persevering for his name, suffering for him, that becomes a joy to be embraced, not a reason to give Jesus up.

[13:57] So, according to John, who is Jesus? Well, firstly, he's the son of man. The son of man's a figure we see first in Daniel. And Daniel tells us he is this figure who has been given authority, glory, sovereign power, and dominion.

And we're told by John that he wears a robe and a golden sash. He has feet like bronze burnished in a furnace, and his eyes are like fire. This is how he appeared to Daniel, actually, in Daniel chapter 10.

And it's imagery that conveys something of his divine power. A power that is terrifying. Which is why Daniel and John both fall down before him in fear.

Which is a reminder that it is wise to fear Jesus, in a sense, because he is God. A fact that's emphasized when John says in verse 10 that his hair was white like wool and snow.

That's also a description that's found in Daniel. But it's a description not of the son of man, but of this figure called the Ancient of Days. The Ancient of Days is a visionary picture of God.

[15:07] So seeing Jesus with this white hair is telling us that he is God. He's the creator. He is the Ancient of Days. The one who was and is and is to come.

And he's wearing a robe and a sash as we already pointed out. And that points not so much to his power, but points instead to his priestly role. Because these clothes are priestly clothes.

So he's not just the one who is God and he's not just the Son of Man, but he's also the one who is our priest and makes it possible for us to come to God.

And not only that, but he's the one who reveals God as he speaks. In his gospel, John calls Jesus the word who became flesh.

And here he has this voice that comes with all the power of rushing waters. It comes with the power of a sword, sharp and double-edged. His word is truth from before time began.

[16:10] And he shines. He shines because he is glorious and wonderful. He's like the sun, terrifying in power, blinding and burning if you approach without care, but also giving light and life to everything and everyone.

He is the sun who rises with healing in his wings. things. This is not a picture of a great teacher. Not even the wisest teacher merits a description as glorious and transcendent as this. If Jesus is just a teacher, there's no impetus to follow him and certainly no impetus to suffer and die for him. But if this is Jesus and it is, then there is every reason to give him everything, to give him our all. Because you don't give your life for nothing, do you? There would have to be a reason to lay down your life. Sacrifice has to be done on a foundation of faith and conviction and hope.

[17:24] It's like the battle scene from Braveheart where the Scots are ready to turn away and live, as they say. William Wallace slash Mel Gibson convinces them to fight with a vision of why it's worth it even if they die.

And I'm not going to do the accent for all our sakes, but he says they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom. Wallace is giving them hope to put their lives on the line for something. And Jesus, well, Jesus explicitly calls us to lose our lives for his sake. And when we do, he tells us, well, we gain him. And when we gain him, well, we gain everything that he has won and inherited from his father.

Hypothetically, though, of course, for so many Christians across the world, this is not hypothetical at all, we might lose our lives for Christ. But we will never, ever lose eternal life and our union with Christ, our King.

There is nothing that can take that away. It's why Paul could ask in Romans 8, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

[18:50] And Paul comes to the conclusion that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. In Christ, he says, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Because not only is Jesus the glorious and powerful son of man who has dominion and authority, he is also the one who has defeated death on our behalf.

When I saw him, John says, I fell to his feet as though dead. And he placed his right hand on me and said, do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I was dead. And now look, I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades. One of the great lies that our culture promotes is the story or the belief, I guess, that death is just the other side of life.

[20:06] That death is natural. The poet Paddy Smith has said that it's part of the privilege of being human that we have our moment when we have to say goodbye.

That's not a privilege. I don't know about you, but I hate goodbyes, especially when it's for the last time. Death is so final.

It is such an aberration. When death occurs, you feel that hole. There is a hole in the world where once there had been life.

The Bible tells us that death is not natural, which is why the great Christian hope is that death has been defeated. Our hope is rooted in the fact that Jesus Christ died and rose again.

As he says to John, I am the living one. I was dead and now look, I am alive forever and ever.

There is no privilege in dying.

[21:16] That is a lie or a story that I guess our culture tells ourselves to dull the real pain that death brings because it is painful and we all know this. If we've ever stood by a graveside or said goodbye to a loved one for the last time, that pain is real.

But the Christian solution is so much better, richer, and crucially real. Now, personally, in contrast to Patti Smith's approach, I prefer the approach of Groucho Marx, who said, I intend to live forever or die trying.

The good news is, for the one who follows Jesus, one, we can live forever, but two, we don't need to die trying because Christ has already died so that we can live.

It's certain, it's fixed because of what Christ has done. And when he tells John that he holds the keys of death and Hades, that's a way of saying that death no longer has any power for those who

are united to Christ.

We will die, but only to rise again with him to eternal life. So in this vision of Jesus, we have a reminder firstly, that Jesus is God.

[22 : 37] He is the one who has all power and authority. He speaks with power, he appears in power, and he is terrifying in his power. But he is also the one who says to his people, do not be afraid because he is the one who came to put an end to death.

He's the one who holds out the hope of eternal life to all who trust and follow him. And I suggest that when we forget that Jesus is the one who has all power and authority, when we forget that he's the one who has actually in reality defeated death, that it's very hard to follow him.

Because if this is not our foundation, well, we're going to find ourselves trying to follow Jesus on our own strength and in our own power, which doesn't really work.

So do you know this Jesus? Do you have confidence in him as the one who has all power and all dominion?

Are you facing the future knowing that you are truly more than a conqueror because Christ rose from the dead for you?

[23 : 53] is this Jesus the one that you look to when temptation strikes? And is this Jesus the rock upon whom you have built your life and your hope and your expectations?

Because if this vision of Jesus and these truths about his power and his victory are not what we have built our hope upon, then it's going to be really hard to stay the course.

And that's going to come across very clearly whenever we eventually get to the letters to the seven churches. But we don't need to go there to know that this is a truism. It's observable in history and it's observable in our own personal experience.

When our trust is in something other than Christ, ourselves or money for example, or when our first love is something else, family or work for example, we're going to find living for Christ so much harder.

And we're going to find that the peace of Christ doesn't reign in our hearts as we want it to. We're going to find that our hope and our assurance is a lot shakier.

[25 : 09] We're going to find it hard to draw on the resources of the Spirit in the fight against sin. And some, when trouble comes, if Christ is not the foundation, are going to find themselves slipping away from him.

So the first principle of the Christian life is this. Do you know who Jesus is? There's a reason that we have four gospel accounts in the Bible.

We need to know who Jesus is. There's a reason the Old Testament is so long. It is designed the way it is. It's because it's all pointing to Jesus and showing our need of him and setting up our expectation for him.

There's a reason we have this vision right at the start of this final book in Scripture, because we need to see and know Jesus in all his splendor and glory.

And then, and only then, can we perceive our calling with clarity and spiritual confidence. John's calling here for himself is to write to the seven churches.

[26 : 20] We see that Jesus standing among the lampstands is a picture of Christ standing amongst his people, amongst his church. And the calling of the church is first and foremost to listen to him.

If John's called to write to the church, the church is called to listen. And therefore, that is not just the calling of these seven churches, but it's our calling today. For this calling to listen is rooted in the identity and victory of Christ as we've seen.

Why should we listen to Jesus? Because he is, and potentially the risk is repeating myself, he is the one who has all power and authority and he is the one who has defeated death.

And as we listen, and as we keep listening throughout our lives, if this is our vision of Jesus, then we're going to be strengthened to live for him, to grow in godliness, to be a faithful witness to him and to his light in this dark world that so desperately, desperately needs to know him.

As I look out on everyone, we've all been called by God to carry different responsibilities, to shoulder different burdens. Every one of us is unique, even as we share in the one Christ.

[27 : 41] But all of us together have one primary calling, calling, the calling that undergirds really every other calling. That's the call to listen to the words of Jesus and know him and follow him, the call to persevere in him, the call to share in the victory of Jesus, to share in the victory of the Lamb

who was slain for us so that we might inherit eternal life.

And we can then persevere when we know our Lord and Savior deeply and intimately. We'll find that we can suffer for his name and yet at the same time remain joyful when we have confidence in what he has done for us.

We'll find that actually we can find strength to finally put that sin to death that has been plaguing us because we know that in Christ we have the victory.

We'll find that we can remain hopeful when everything around us feels bleak or challenging or filled with tears. When we see and know Jesus, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world, the Living One who died and rose again, when we see and know this Jesus, we have a hope, a hope that is unwavering, and unshakable, a living hope in the victory of the Lamb for us, his chosen, and faithful followers.

The very end. Amen. Hold EsteEM in c