SOMEONE LIKE A SON OF MAN

Revelation 1:9–20

Key Verses: 1:13–16

“…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. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

Last week, in the first eight verses of chapter 1, known as the prologue, we were introduced to the major themes of this long letter called “Revelation.” We learned that this letter is from God, and how important it is to read it and take its message to heart. We also were reminded of who Jesus is and what he’s done for us. It says Jesus “loved us,” “freed us from our sins by his blood,” and “made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” It’s our new Christian identity, it gives us a meaningful life, and it’s amazing grace. Now, in chapters 1-3 Jesus addresses the seven churches in Asia Minor. In chapter 1 the author first introduces himself and shares with us a very special vision he had. In this life we may never experience firsthand such a glorious vision, but we can certainly learn a lot from meditating on this one. The rich symbolism in this description of Christ is meant to give us strength, hope and courage. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Look at verse 9. This is the second time in this chapter that John introduces himself. As he said in verse 4, he’s writing to seven churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. But this time, he introduces himself in a special way. He calls himself “your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” This John is one of the original twelve apostles of Jesus. At the time of this writing, he is believed to be in his 90s, perhaps the most senior Christian leader among the early believers. But he doesn’t introduce himself as their superior or emphasize his authority. Instead, he calls himself “your brother.” He even says he’s their “companion.” In Greek it’s a form of the word “koinonia,” a word often translated as “fellowship,” and it’s an important theme in the letter of 1 John. John is their “companion,” but he’s not physically present with them. He’s their companion in the sense that he’s sharing something with them. What is he sharing? He says it’s “the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” There are a couple of important things to note here. Firstly, John can understand the people he’s writing to, because he’s suffering like they are. There’s a famous old proverb of the Cherokee Indians that translates: “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins.” In other words, if we haven’t suffered like certain people have, we can’t appreciate who they are or what they’re going through. But John can appreciate his audience, because he’s been suffering just like they have. The early church father Tertullian wrote that as part of his persecution, John had been put in a caldron of boiling oil, yet miraculously survived. In his old age John had been mentoring disciples in the city of Ephesus. Ephesus was the leading city of Asia Minor, and people from all the other cities would often travel there for business or shopping. From a missionary strategy standpoint, it was a great place for effective ministry, because so many people could be reached (Ac19:9,10). But according to verse 9b, John is now out on the small island of Patmos, about 40 miles away, “…because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” (see map) John had been sent there in exile, to stop him from spreading the gospel. Evidently all the believers in these cities of Asia Minor knew the persecution this elderly saint had been through. So when he wrote, “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus,” it must have meant so much to them.

Secondly, we learn from these words what Christian life is like. Today some people would tell us that if we believe in Jesus, we’ll live our best, most blessed life, because God will shower down riches and honor upon us. That may be true in some cases. But here the Apostle John tells us that we’re all supposed to be sharing in “the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” Why is that? The Bible tells us that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2Ti3:12). It tells us we’re called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who suffered for us (1Pe2:21). It says we’re called not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him (Php1:29). It’s not a popular message, but it’s the truth. As we saw last week, a major theme of Revelation is “patient endurance” (e.g. 13:10; 14:12). Often, when people begin to suffer, they can’t handle following Jesus, and they’re quick to fall away (Mk4:17). But when we suffer, God wants us to patiently endure and be faithful to Jesus.

Next, John describes a very special revelation he had. Look at verses 10,11. We don’t know why on this particular Lord’s Day John was “in the Spirit.” In fact, we may be wondering what it really means to be “in the Spirit.” Don’t all believers have the Holy Spirit living in them daily? But here John seems to be describing a special experience of the Spirit given to some people. The Bible also describes it as a trance-like state, which can happen during prayer (Ac10:10; 11:5; 22:17; cf. 2Co12:2–4). Four times in Revelation John says he was “in the Spirit” (1:10a; 4:2a; 17:3a; 21:10a). Since he was in exile on the island of Patmos, John couldn’t join other believers in their worship. But while he was alone, enduring suffering, he was still worshiping the Lord and praying, and that’s when the Spirit came on him. Often Christians have had their greatest spiritual revelations while alone and in intense personal sufferings. So we shouldn’t be striving to have the perfect human conditions, but focus on seeking God himself.

We also notice in these verses that John heard a voice like a trumpet. Later on, he’ll tell us that he heard this voice like a trumpet again (4:1). What’s the symbolic meaning of the trumpet sound? In the Old Testament, the trumpet would be sounded when people were called to battle, when there was a great celebration, or when a king was anointed. In this case, the voice like a trumpet seems to announce the kingship of Jesus. It also commissions John to record what he sees and send it to seven representative churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. As we saw last week, these churches were in order, in a circular route in Asia Minor. (see map). God wants to use John to communicate his message to his people in these places.

Look at verse 12. In verse 10 John said the voice was behind him. But he wanted to see the person speaking to him, so he turned around. When he turned around, he saw something amazing. It says he saw “seven golden lampstands.” Verse 20 tells us that these lampstands are a “mystery.” They’re symbolic of something. In the Old Testament, God wanted a golden lampstand to be placed in his tabernacle. It was to symbolize the light of God’s presence with his people (cf. Zech4:2). But here, there are seven golden lampstands. Verse 20 says that it represents the seven churches. God’s churches are supposed to be like a golden lampstand. It means we’re called to shine the light of Jesus in this dark world. We do that through the quality of our daily Christian life, through our deeds, and through our fellowship. When we shine this light, we become the light of God’s presence in the world. Later, Jesus rebukes five of the seven churches because of spiritual problems among them. But still, they’re described here as “golden lampstands.” How can any church be like a lamp?

Look at verse 13a. It says, “…and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man…” Here, the son of man is a description of Jesus. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is repeatedly described as “the Son of Man.” It’s a description taken from the prophecy of Daniel 7:13. The point here is that Jesus, the Son of Man, is among the lampstands, his churches. Later we see that he’s walking among the lampstands (2:1,5). He’s concerned about them, looking at them, and is with them. Just as the Old Testament priest was supposed to tend to the lampstand, so Jesus is among the lampstands to encourage, correct and warn them not to go out. So it’s the presence of Jesus himself among his people that makes them like a light in the dark world. Only his presence can make us a light to others. Jesus is still present among his people. We don’t have to be big in numbers or have an impressive old church building. Jesus promised, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Mt18:20). Jesus’ presence with his churches described here in John’s vision is meant primarily to comfort his suffering people. When John wrote Revelation the Roman Emperor Domitian was persecuting Christians. Some were being socially pressured to renounce their faith in Jesus (2:13). While they were suffering many probably felt as if God were ignoring them. But God revealed to John that Jesus is among his people even when they don’t realize it. In the beautiful poem “Footprints in the Sand,” the Lord tells a struggling Christian looking back at only one set of footprints in the sand, representing a lonely Christian: /“My precious child, I love you and will never leave you/ Never, ever, during your trials and testings./When you saw only one sent of footprints,/It was then that I carried you.”/

John goes on to describe more fully for his fellow believers what he saw. Read verses 13–16. This vision is a description of Jesus, how he is now, in his heavenly glory. It’s a picture of Jesus we don’t often have, and at first it’s hard to understand. First of all, we need to know how John’s vision of Jesus similar it is to Old Testament prophecy. In Daniel chapter 7 God reveals to Daniel a vision of four beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard and a terrifying beast with large iron teeth. Each of those beasts are increasingly more disturbing. They devour and ravage the earth. After those beasts, Daniel sees a vision of “the Ancient of Days,” meaning God. He sits as ruler and judge of the earth; his clothing is as white as snow, and the hair of his head is white like wool. Soon, the fourth beast is slain, destroyed and thrown into blazing fire, along with the others. Finally, Daniel sees someone like a son of man; he approaches the Ancient of Days and is led into his presence; he’s given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worship him, and it says his kingdom will never be destroyed. The son of man figure is so different from the four beasts, first of all because he’s more humane, not like a cruel beast. Also, this son of man wants to be in God’s presence and worship him, whereas the beasts are godless. The four beasts represent four world empires: Babylonian, Medo Persian, Greek, and finally Roman. In his prophecy Daniel said that the final beast was unlike the others. It seems to have been bigger, way more powerful and way more evil. To the early Christians it meant they were living in the evilest world empire the world had ever known. But John’s vision of Jesus was so radically different.

What does it tell us about Jesus? First of all, Jesus is not a monster. He’s a human being, like us. He can relate to us and empathize with us. At the same time, he has the same heavenly glory as the angels. In Daniel chapter 10 Daniel sees a vision of “a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude (Da10:5,6). This creature’s glory was so overwhelming that Daniel lost all his strength and fell with his face to the ground. He was seeing an angelic being, and its description is similar to John’s vision of Jesus. It means that though we can’t see him, Jesus who was raised from the dead is now in heavenly, eternal glory, the glory he had with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5). We can’t see his glory with our physical eyes, but we believe it by faith (2Co5:7). And according to Daniel’s prophecy Jesus has white hair just like the Ancient of Days, God himself.

But what do all these descriptions of Jesus mean? Look at verses 13–16 again. Someone said this glorious image of Jesus is like a rainbow—we should just gaze on it, wonder at it and take it all in, not over-analyze it. But we should also use our minds to think a bit about what each part means. The robe is probably a priestly robe, signifying that Jesus is now at God’s right hand interceding for us as our Great High Priest (Ro8:34; Heb4:14; 8:1,2). Some people think the sash represents the high priest’s ephod. In any case, a sash that’s golden represents the highest honor and glory that can be given. The white hair symbolizes wisdom. The eyes like blazing fire are mentioned two more times in Revelation (2:18; 19:12). It represents his penetrating insight into true realities, including what’s really in our hearts (2:23). The feet glowing like bronze represent moral purity, strength and stability. In the Book of Ezekiel God’s voice is described as “like rushing waters” (Eze1:24; 43:2), and Jesus has this same powerful, life-giving voice. According to verse 20, the seven stars in his right hand symbolize the angels of the seven churches, and their being in his right hand means he has complete power and authority over them. As we’ll see in Revelation, he sends his angels to give his churches his message, to awaken them spiritually and help them remain faithful to him.

The last two descriptors are the sharp, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth, and his face shining like the most brilliant sunshine. They may be the most obvious in meaning. The sword of his mouth is repeated twice more in Revelation; it represents the word of Christ, through which he will strike down unrepentant nations, and through which he calls Christians tempted in some way to compromise their faith to repent (2:16; 19:15). We need to respect his word, use it as our own armor, and let it penetrate us (Eph6:17; Heb4:12) His face is shining like the sun, I believe, because he loves God so much (Jdg5:31).

So what should we do with John’s glorious vision of Jesus? It may seem impractical compared with all the pressing problems we're facing in our lives. But it’s not meant to just help us escape from our cold realities. It’s a glorious vision that’s meant to change our hearts and transform us. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Here the word “contemplate” means to look at as in a mirror, or to behold. Looking at the glory of Jesus gives us a clear vision. It points to our glorious hope in his kingdom. It strengthens and renews us. It makes us bold. It takes away our fear. We need to stop rushing through life and take the time to really contemplate his glory, to take it all in. When we do, we’re slowly transformed into his image. So what are we looking at? When we think too much about this world, about its leaders and problems, or about people in our lives, or about material things or even about ourselves, we tend to get dark and depressed. But when we contemplate the glory of Jesus, we become bright and strong like him, and faithful and true witnesses like him. May God help us through our study of Revelation this summer to really contemplate the glory of Jesus.

How did John respond to this vision? Look at verse 17a. He fell at his feet as though dead. He thought he’d seen the glory of God, so it must be his time to die and go to heaven. But look at verses 17b,18. Jesus placed his right hand on him. It was to comfort him, but also to commission him. Even John in his old age had more to do for God. Let’s read verses 17b,18. Again, Jesus is like God the Father, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last (8). But unlike the Father, Jesus became a man, died and rose again. In this way, he became our Eternal Savior. Like the Father, he’s the Living One. And because he died and rose again, Jesus holds the keys of death and Hades. Death and Hades are like a prison in which so many countless people are trapped. Only Jesus has the keys to get us out. The early Christians may have felt like their persecutors held the keys of death, but in fact, Jesus holds those keys. We won’t go until he calls us. And he calls us to bring people to faith in him, so that they can get out of the dungeon of death and Hades. In verses 19,20 John is commissioned to write this letter to the precious people Jesus redeems. We learn that Jesus is glorious in heaven, but he’s also deeply concerned about his churches in the real world today. What a comfort that is!

Today’s passage calls us to contemplate John’s glorious vision of Jesus. May God open the eyes of our hearts to see his glory, to have hope, and to join in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.