



Sunday, September 17, 2023

Revelation 1:12-20

In case you missed it, last week, we started walking through the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. And this book is probably one of the most interesting and fascinating letters in all of the Bible, filled with jaw-dropping, incredibly odd, and sometimes even fearful imagery. Ultimately, though, as we learned last week, the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ is not a book about fear, but it's actually a book about hope. Great hope, because this book is actually written about a Person, not an event. It's all about Jesus Christ. Which is an interesting statement in and of itself, because most people would assume that this book is a book about the end times, the second coming of Christ, the great tribulation and the mark of the beast. You're not wrong, but before all of those elements come into play, we have to understand that this book is about Jesus Christ, first and foremost.

The actual name of the book is significant and helps to show this really, really well because the official title is not 'Revelations' as most of Christendom incorrectly calls it. It's actually specifically entitled the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The word Revelation is the Greek word 'apokalypsis' which is where we get the English word 'Apocalypse' from. And apocalypse doesn't in fact mean 'end times' as many seem to think. It simply means an, 'unveiling or a breaking through from hiddenness.' And so even though the timeframe of this letter is future-tense, the heart of this letter is an unveiling or a breaking through from the hiddenness of Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, about Jesus Christ. And so, it's no surprise, then that the entirety of the first chapter is ultimately doing just that - declaring the power and authority of Jesus Himself. And it is doing so in ways that all throughout the Bible have not yet been seen; in a time which has not yet taken place.

So why is this important?

Because Apocalyptic literature reveals to us what we can't see in the physical but what is actually happening in the spiritual so that greater elements of faith, hope and trust can be established. And so a book like this is important because it shows us that what is going to happen in the world in the end of days isn't going to look very good and will be fearful and will potentially look like the enemy will win. But if we peer into the hidden spiritual realm of what is really going to happen, then we will clearly be able to see that Jesus is victorious and has been all along. So the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ then can actually bring us great hope instead of fear, all the while strengthening our faith and trust in Him no matter what the physical situation may seem to dictate.

You see, up until this point, the world had only ever really seen Jesus as the suffering servant not a mighty warrior. Well things are about to change....and they are now going to see Jesus Christ in a completely new light. It will be an apocalypse so powerful, that upon witnessing it, John Himself will fall as if dead at the sight of Jesus and struggle to find appropriate words to convey what He has just seen. But make no mistake, this portrait will declare the power and authority of Jesus in ways that up until this point have not been seen or even imagined for that matter.

Today, we pick up the story in verses 9-20 where we will read in full description the image of Jesus that John has just witnessed and will start to get into the nitty gritty of some of the imagery of Jesus here, and the symbolism that is associated with Him.

Revelation 1:12-20 (NKJV)

'12 Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. 19 Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. 20 The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.'

The first thing we read is that as John turned to see the voice, that was speaking, he notices seven lampstands. And then He sees a startling image of Jesus standing in the midst of them with seven stars in His right hand. Towards the end of the first part of this vision we learn that the seven lampstands are the seven churches and the seven stars are the angels/messengers of the seven churches.

But beyond just the identification of the 7 lampstands as the 7 churches, there is a significance to this symbolism that I'd like to share with you here today. And the significance of the lampstands here ultimately comes down to their purpose which is to shed light. And the imagery of a lampstand is significant because it would have taken them back to first century Jerusalem, where a seven stemmed lampstand was a central focal point in the temple.

That lampstand was called a Menorah and its purpose wasn't just to cast light but to represent the presence of God - that every time that light was looked upon, it would be a reminder that only God is faithful and true. The Menorah sat just outside the Holy of Holies - the most sacred part of the temple - where the presence of God dwelt and it was the job of the High Priest to make sure that the flame never went out because after all God is eternal. But there wasn't just one flame, there were seven. And we see the number seven congruent in both examples here and it's important to understand that all throughout the Bible, the number seven consistently represents perfection and completion. So the menorah in the temple would not only cast light and declare the presence of God but it declared the nature of God as well as holy as One that is perfect and complete. He is the One that illuminates the way in truth and faithfulness.

And so in John's vision now, by using the imagery of the menorah, Jesus is making it very clear that the responsibility of the church is to declare the One that illuminates the way in truth and in faithfulness.

And Scripture backs this up by teaching us on numerous occasions that Jesus is the Light of the world and then in Matthew 5 Jesus then shares that role by telling those that choose to put their faith and trust in Him, that we are the light of world.

And so what this vision is showing us right off the get-go is that it is our responsibility as Christians - as the church - to spread the light of Jesus Christ wherever we may find ourselves. But the very nature of that light is specific and so we need to make sure that the light that we are emitting to the world is His light and not contaminated. Because He is the One who is faithful and true and because His light is now in us - with the intent of illumination to others - then we better make sure that the light that we are emitting - the light that we are meant to emit - is just as faithful and true as He is.

Next in the imagery is Jesus. John says he turned and saw One, like the Son of Man. This is the same language used throughout the OT to identify the physical presence of Jesus Christ as both 100% Man and 100% God. This delineation is so important because this is intimately connected to His death on the cross. The only way that His death could cover our sins was if He was a perfect human being. So hence the two terms, Son of God and Son of Man.

But what is of particular interest for me in this line is the word 'like'. John uses this specifically and it is significant for one of two reasons:

The first reason is that it connects what is happening here to the prophecy of old in Daniel 7:13-14 where "one like a son of man" is seen coming with the clouds of heaven. By using this title, John directly ties the Jesus Revelation to the Jesus in Daniel thus declaring that this is the same person and the fulfillment of prophecy. This is He.

The second reason has a lot to do with the nature of this vision as an apocalypse - the unveiling of that which has always been but was once hidden. John was one of the closest disciples of Jesus and spent the better part of 3 years at His beck and call and so it's very accurate to say that he knew what Jesus looked like. Now, in this vision John sees similarities to Jesus but this is an image unlike anything He has ever seen before. Golden sash, white hair, blazing eyes, feet like bronze, voice like that of rushing water, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth and face like the sun. Again, all of these elements are significant because they help to confirm the prophecy of Daniel that this indeed is the Almighty One. I won't go through every single one of them but probably the most prolific example here is the double edged sword. Note it is coming out of His mouth. According to Hebrews, the Word of God is like a double edged sword and according to Ephesians 6 the sword of the Spirit is the word of God and then in John 1 we read that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And so the example of this son of man-like figure standing with a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth is specifically designed to show us the authority of this figure as Jesus Christ and to tie in all of the other scriptures that I just mentioned. It's just not like any other image of Jesus that John had ever seen. Jesus was a peaceful, carpenters son, riding on a donkey....etc. But a warrior??? I mean, this was the image that all of the disciples wanted to see!! It just wasn't the right time.

So naturally, John falls to the ground as if dead - a very appropriate response to the scene before him but Jesus reassures Him that despite the fearful image before him, He is still the same Jesus that He knew years before.

Now, before we go any further in this imagery, I want you to see something very specific here. I want to go back to the lampstands for just a moment and want you to note the position of Jesus in

this vision. It's critical to see that He's not over or above the lampstands. He's not in front or behind them either. And he's certainly not standing beside them in the circle. He is specifically in the middle of them. By depicting Jesus in the midst of the lampstands, John is emphasizing the nature of Christ as the Source from which all draw strength from. The best imagery that I can think of is that of a wheel. Each spoke is connected to the hub because that is where it gets its strength and foundation from. If the spokes are not connected to the hub, then the wheel has no strength and therefore cannot complete its purpose of movement. And so, by placing Jesus in the middle of the lampstands in John's vision, that action alone declares His centrality as their Source. And because Scripture teaches us that Jesus is the light of the world, then when He calls us the church to shine His light, the only way we can do that is if we are connected to Him as the Source.

And as their Source, in His right hand John now sees Jesus holding seven stars which we are told represent the seven angels or messengers of the seven churches. The term 'angels' here has been the subject of various interpretations. Some scholars believe it refers to literal angelic beings who watch over or represent the churches before God. Others believe 'angels' may be symbolic for the leadership or pastors of the churches. Given that the Greek word is the word 'angelos' which simply means 'messenger,' it could refer to human messengers or leaders. Either way, their placement in Jesus' hand signifies His authority and protection over them. The fact that the stars are in Jesus' right hand is significant. The right hand is a Biblical symbol of authority and power. By holding these stars, Jesus demonstrates His authority over the spiritual realm and His protective care over the churches. And this is interesting because in the first century mind, the seven stars would clearly have referenced the seven planets known at that time: Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. It was common at that time for people to think that all of life was under the sway and control of those planets. People would anxiously consult the astrology tables in time of need. The Roman emperors understood this, and so asserted their supposed cosmic rule by surrounding their thrones with stars and planets. Furthermore, in Greek mythology, the goddess, (heck-a-dee) Hecate, held the stars and called herself the beginning and the end. And so, keep in mind that when this letter was being read to the seven churches this is the context in which they are living. So when they perceive the image of Jesus holding the planets, that portrayal would have been a declaration that all of culture was in fact wrong. All of life is actually not under the sway and control of the planets for Jesus controls the planets. Not Caesar, not (heck-a-dee) Hecate - not anyone. The Son of Man is Lord of the cosmos. The universe is held together by Him and Him alone. For He alone has the whole world in his hands.

Now watch this. This next part is so beautiful: that same right hand that holds all authority of heaven and earth now lovingly reaches down and touches John and reassures him that this is the same

Jesus that he once supped with and did ministry with a number of years earlier. And this is exactly what He does for each and every one of us if we would allow Him to. That Almighty God would love a wretch like me.

There is still much more that is in here, but the last thing I want us to see this morning is the way that John recorded the order of his verbal portrait of Jesus:

Head
Eyes
Feet
Voice
Hand
Mouth
Face

If we are to read it in the order of how it is presented, then it can seem disjointed and we just get an overall somewhat disconnected image of the portrait of Jesus and move on to the next sentence. However, this is where things get really, really interesting because this is actually not the way that John intended for this part to be read. What John has done here is employed a literary device called a Chiasm. Chiasms are used all over the Bible especially the Psalms and in Chiastic literature, the way to read things is not linear as one would normally do but more-so in a sideways flying ‘V’ type pattern. In this method, the “point” of the sentence is not found at the end of the sentence as in Western communication, the point is found at the pivot - the dead centre of the chiasm. So, if you read it in a straight line, the portrait of Jesus jumps all around, and it doesn’t make sense. But if we are to read it chiastically then all of a sudden things start to line up:

1: Head			
^	2: Eyes		
^	^	3: Feet	
^	^	^	4: Voice
^	^	5: Hand	
^	6: Mouth		
7: Face			

The Head and the Face line up; the Eyes and the Mouth line up; the Feet and the Hand line up and the Voice is the point. Everything in the structure works together to support the voice of Jesus.

Do you see what is going on here?

Jesus is in the middle of the lampstands and His voice is in the middle of the chiasm. The middle is the point. Everything revolves around Him. Jesus is the central figure in all of Christianity - the whole world for that matter. He is the Source from which all life stems. And the purpose of this vivid description of Jesus is simply to draw the reader into the realization of the ultimate authority of Jesus as the Almighty so that when His voice speaks, they will know the power and authority and love behind that voice and hear.

But not just hear. To listen. You see, in English there is a big difference between hearing and listening. My kids hear me all the time when I tell them to do their chores, but I'm not interested in them hearing me, I want them to listen to me. Hearing is passive, whereas listening is active.

And what He is about to say to the seven churches needs to be listened to. 5 of the 7 churches have drifted off course and the voice of Christ will set them back on course if they listen to Him. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' This phrase will be repeated a total of 7 times as the voice of the Lord speaks to each of the churches. And the Greek word for hearing is the word 'akouō' which specifically means to understand; to attend to and to think carefully about what has been said. Jesus is not interested in them just hearing Him, He wants them to listen to Him and respond with obedience.

I recognize that this morning has been a bit of an information dump but if you get anything out this I want you to get this. In the midst of all of this authority and power language, it can cause us to stand back a bit and perhaps even respond in fear. This is why I believe the whole part about John falling as if dead is important. Jesus reaches down with the same hand that holds the universe and reassures him. He specifically says do not be afraid. He speaks out of power and authority but backed behind his incredible love for us. Don't miss that.

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