

The Bright Morning Star The Ultimate Sign of Hope

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[0 : 00] One verse from the New Testament document we call the Revelation of Jesus Christ, or literally the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, or still more literally the unveiling of Jesus Christ.

Our text is Revelation chapter 22, verse 16. If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of the word? I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things for the churches.

I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star. Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you met John on the island of Patmos and inspired him to write down these words for us.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace, you will cause these words to come alive to us as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen.

Please be seated. I want to focus our attention this morning on just one phrase of this one line at the last page of the Bible.

[1 : 19] I want to focus on the title, The Bright Morning Star. It is the last recorded self-revelation of the crucified and risen Lord.

This is the last great claim Jesus, the Savior of the world, makes about himself. I, Jesus, am the bright morning star. Here's my plan.

I will first fill us in on the historical context in which John, the author of Revelation, first heard Jesus make this claim. And then I'm going to fill you in on the historical context in which I first heard Jesus make this claim.

And then I'm going to suggest three implications of the claim for us in our present historical context. I am the bright morning star.

Jesus made this claim to the apostle John some 60 years after the earth-shattering events of the cross and empty tomb. The year was about 92 A.D. or thereabouts.

[2 : 24] John, then in his 80s, had been exiled to the prison island of Patmos, which is just off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Scholars of the first century period have found evidence that the Roman government maintained rock quarries on Patmos, to which prisoners and troublemakers were sent to spend the rest of their lives.

Now, why did John, the apostle of love, as he is called, end up on Patmos? What did John do to warrant being held with political prisoners?

In 92 A.D., life became extremely difficult. Frightening is a better word for the disciples of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire. Life had been difficult enough up until that time, especially for those who actually lived in the capital city.

But in 92 A.D., the pressure became more intense and more widespread. The emperor at the time was the emperor Domitian. Domitian was a profoundly insecure man who lived in a morbid fear of a coup attempt.

To compensate for his insecurity, Domitian ordered that all subjects throughout the empire were to worship him. And they were to worship him as Lord and God, as Domini et Deus.

[3 : 39] In 90 A.D., he actually changed the name of the empire to Imperium Arternum, the Eternal Empire. And he changed his name to Everlasting King.

To this day, in the ruins of the city of Ephesus, the city where John was arrested, we can find the Temple of Domitian, the place where all the Roman citizens were required to worship Caesar.

Citizens were obligated to come to a temple like that, cast a pinch of incense on the altar and pay homage to Caesar as God by saying the words, Kaiser Kurios, Caesar is Lord.

Now, for most of the citizens of Rome, this presented no problem. Most of them were polytheists, so what was the problem with adding one more God? They could take part in the ceremonies without violating their conscience.

John, however, and thousands of other disciples of Jesus Christ could not abide by the emperor's edict. Respect Caesar? Yes. Worship Caesar?

[4 : 42] No. The only Lord, the only Kurios, the only one worthy of total, unqualified allegiance was Jesus Christ. And John was not about to bend his knee to a mere mortal who was usurping the place of the living God.

So John graciously refused to cast the pinch and say the words, Kaiser Kurios. He was, therefore, from the state's perspective, an atheist.

He was, from the state's perspective, a troublemaker. His simple little act of discipleship was challenging the ideology which unified the empire. His act was, therefore, considered to be a subversive act, and he had to be dealt with.

The Romans could have killed John on the spot. But they knew that murdering the beloved leader of a minority movement would give the movement a martyr.

And as James Callis says, nothing renews the spirit of a minority movement more than having a martyr. So instead of killing John, the Romans arrested him and hustled him off and sent him to the prison island of Patmos.

[5 : 49] And there, in the words of Thomas Torrance, John was abandoned to the inhospitable solitude of a restless murmuring sea and left there to rot and bleach on the rocks.

Now, John, of course, was not the only Christian suffering during that time. In city after city, disciples were receiving personal threats. They were being boycotted in business, and many of them were being killed.

On top of all of that, heresy and immorality were gaining a foothold in the young churches of Asia Minor. The problem for John, and for those other Christians then, was not simply a matter of survival.

We have to know that. They're not just wrestling with a matter of survival here. What was happening throughout the Roman Empire posed a theological crisis for them. It was a crisis of faith.

Persecution, heresy, immorality in the churches all seemed to call into question the fundamental affirmations of the gospel. Jesus is Lord.

[6 : 56] Where's the evidence now? Jesus is alive. Where's the evidence now? The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Where's the evidence now?

The most revered leader of the church, the beloved disciple of Jesus, is hauled off by the police. Isn't Jesus able to protect those whom he loves? If, as the gospel says, the living God has come to earth in and as Jesus Christ and won the victory over the powers of evil, why do the forces of evil now seem to be gaining an upper hand on the churches of Jesus Christ?

It is in that context, in a context of great theological struggle and a crisis of faith, that Jesus speaks this document we call the Revelation. His first word is, do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I was dead. But look, I am alive forevermore and I hold the keys of death. And his last word is, I am the bright morning star.

It was in 1981 that I first heard Jesus make this claim to me. I had read it many times before, but it was in 1981 that I finally heard him.

[8 : 14] That was the year that the walls began to cave in on me. I was experiencing constant tightness in my neck and in my stomach. I was alternately unable to sleep or wanting to sleep all the time.

I found myself regularly daydreaming about how I could, quote, meet an accidental death, close quote. It felt like night, even on the brightest of days.

The irony was, there was nothing in my circumstances that should warrant such a state of being.

God had given me a wonderful woman to be my wife, and God had given a wonderful little boy to us to be our son.

I was pastoring at the time one of the fastest growing Presbyterian churches in Southern California. I was in demand as a Bible teacher. The church I was working in was looked at as a model church. People were asking, what is it that you're doing to make such an alive congregation? People especially wanted to know what was it we were doing to free the laity from ministry. Because of all of this success, I was invited to teach a seminar at the biggest interdenominational seminary in the world, at Fuller Seminary.

[9 : 22] I had made it to the top. But I was engulfed in a dark cloud, and I wanted to die. For nearly 12 months, I fought the Depression, all the while carrying on my pastoral duties.

One of the things that kept me going is I had laid out for that year to preach through the book of Romans. I haven't preached Romans since. Someday I will again. Through the prayers and love of Sharon, and through the prayers and love of trusted friends, and through the godly counsel of a counselor, I began to understand, this depression.

I learned that depression has one or, one or, I can't say that right, one of four or all causes. Four possible causes for depression.

One of them is a chemical imbalance somewhere in our system. Another is anger that is unresolved and turned inward. Another is the experience of lots of loss.

And a fourth is broken expectations. Through the counseling process, I came to see that I was very angry, but that I was trying to deny it.

[10:30] See, I grew up in a family system where anger wasn't processed. I grew up feeling that anger was wrong. And I came into the ministry then, believing that especially anger is wrong for a pastor.

But there I was, angry, but trying to deny it. I also came to see that I was experiencing a great deal of loss, as many of us are in this time of constant change.

My experience of loss wasn't because of personal loss, but because of my identification with other people and with the world. I ached for all the pain that I felt in the world at that time.

I ached for all the pain that I feel in the world in our time. People with cancer, people with Alzheimer's, people with Parkinson's disease. My dad has Parkinson's disease. Children who are abused, people who are just shot down at random by gang violence.

I feel all of that loss. And I came to see that I had very unrealistic expectations of myself in the face of all of that loss. Get this.

[11:31] You're going to think me really nuts now. You're going to be sure I'm nuts after I tell you this. In those early years of ministry, I felt that as a man committed to Jesus Christ, hook, line, and sinker, as a man filled with the Holy Spirit, I should be able to do all aspects of pastoral ministry, do them all with a high degree of excellence, do them all with a cheerful spirit, do them all without stepping on anyone's toes, and do them all without getting tired.

Where did I get that sense of expectation? To say the least, I was suffering deeply, trying to keep up with that.

After 12 months, it appeared that I had finally made my way through the tunnel. Dr. Hart, who I'd gone to see, said that the only way out of depression is through depression.

And so for 12 months, I entered the tunnel and tried to find out the roots of the depression. At the end of the 12 months, it looked like I had come through, and so the elders of the church voted to give me a leave of absence for three months to get away and to rest and to study and to write.

And so Sharon, David, who was 18 months at the time, and I headed off to the mountains of Colorado for our ideal break. But to my horror, the depression returned and intensified.

[12:59] As we drove across California and Arizona, I found myself wanting to let the van we were driving simply drift into the other lane, into the oncoming semi-trucks.

The darkness was so great that I did not think I could bear it anymore. What kept me on my side of the highway, besides the grace of God, was looking in the rearview mirror and seeing Sharon and David in the back seat.

Once we got to Colorado, the depression deepened even further. I woke up every morning in great despair and daydreaming how I could go for a hike in the higher mountains and just slip off one of those high rocks and end the darkness once and for all.

By the 10th week of my ideal break, the darkness was so great that I begged God to take me, that if this depression could not lift, then I wanted to die. It was then that a number of things happened.

God made it clear to me that the depression was due in part to eating too much refined sugar, so you will forgive me if I don't eat all the cookies that will be given to me during Christmas. God also helped me see that the depression was chiefly due to twisted patterns of thinking.

[14:18] And he showed me that this depression was a gift, that it was part of the Spirit's program of freeing me from those twisted patterns. I was being stripped of unrealistic expectations.

And then late one evening, I finally saw and heard and felt what Jesus claimed about himself on the last page of his book.

I am the bright morning star. I'm the bright morning star. I am the bright morning star. What is Jesus saying to John as he sits on the rocks on the island of Patmos?

What was Jesus saying to the church then and now, here and around the world? What is Jesus saying to you and to me in using this title? In the Roman world, the morning star, Venus, was the symbol of victory and sovereignty.

The Roman generals, before going to battle, would appeal to Venus for protection. Thus, there were temples to Venus built all over the empire and Caesar's troops would have a symbol of Venus on their armor.

[15:27] By calling himself the bright morning star, Jesus was announcing his victory and sovereignty. In the Jewish world, the image of the morning star would recall the prophecy of Balaam recorded in Numbers 24, 17.

A star shall come forth from Jacob. A scepter shall come forth from Israel. This prophecy was taken to be a promise that the Messiah would come to overcome injustice and oppression.

That Messiah would come and establish God's shalom and wholeness. By calling himself the bright morning star, Jesus is declaring that he has come to fulfill those biblical promises.

He has come to fulfill Messiah's rule. But how does this title help John when there is no evidence of this? How does this help John when there is no visible evidence that Jesus is victor and sovereign? How does this title help someone who is engulfed in a dark cloud? The answer lies in the astrophysical phenomena of the morning star. That night in Colorado, I was reading a book entitled *Idols of Our Time* by Dr. Bob Gautsvart, who was a member of the Dutch Parliament and now is professor of economics at the Free University of Amsterdam.

[16:49] In the book, *Idols of Our Time*, he writes this. The morning star often appears between two and three at night when the darkness is complete and the faintest sign of morning is not yet visible.

Let me read that sentence to you again. The morning star appears between two and three at night when the darkness is complete and the faintest sign of morning is not yet visible.

Gautsvart goes on, so small that it threatens to vanish, the star seems unable to vanquish the overpowering darkness. Yet when you see the morning star, you know that the night has been defeated.

It may be four or five hours yet until the sun is actually going to rise. But when you see the morning star, you know that the night has been defeated.

Gautsvart then writes this, For the morning star pulls the morning in behind it. Isn't that a marvelous phrase? The morning star pulls the morning in behind it just as Jesus pulls the kingdom in behind him.

[18:09] Do you see now why Jesus uses this title as the last recorded thing he says to the churches? The morning star can only appear when the night has reached its darkest.

And it appears before there is any evidence that the sun is going to rise. What is Jesus saying to us? He is saying do not judge by appearances.

Because I have come, because I have been born into your world and lived your life, because I have died your death and been raised from your grave, because I am alive here and now, dark though the night may be, the darkness is complete and it is only a matter of time until the sun rises.

In that title, Jesus is declaring to us in a more powerful way than he ever could his victory. He's declaring that contrary to appearances, his new day is dawning.

The messianic age is coming. God's kingdom is breaking into the world. The night is almost over.

The day is close at hand. Well, then, why after his coming and why after this declaration to John in 80-92 do the powers of the night still exercise such great influence in the world?

[19:33] They do, don't they? Why do the powers still wreak such havoc with us? Maybe Jesus was mistaken. You have to ask the question.

Maybe Jesus' gospel is not true. You have to ask the question. The answer, of course, is no. The fact of the matter is, and this is what I came to understand, the fact of the matter is that greater turmoil, the greater upheaval in our lives comes precisely because the gospel is true.

The night, sorry, the night, yes, the night is being invaded by the day, the night is being invaded by the day, and the night is resisting with all of its might.

You see, as long as drug lords can operate in the night, they can operate calmly. But once they are exposed, once they are forced to operate in the daylight, they can't operate calmly.

They either have to repent of their evil or they have to get rid of the source of the daylight. Thomas Torrance put it this way. It is because the kingdom of God has already invaded this world and is

breaking up the kingdoms thereof that evil is provoked to such bitterness and its final desperation. [21 : 03] The ferocity of the night does not negate Jesus' claim, it validates it. The night knows that it is over and it is doing everything to resist the coming of the day.

And when you know that, you can handle the darkness. Are you with me? The fact that the church often gets caught right in the middle of the battle does not mean that her Lord has left her or abandoned her.

It means that the church is standing with him right at that intersection of the clashing kingdoms or to change the image. It means that she is caught up in the birth pangs of the messianic age.

She is there at the final stage of delivery where the agony is the worst. I am the bright morning star because I have come because I have died and risen because I am alive and in here the night is almost over the day is close at hand.

The morning star only appears when the darkness is complete. When the faintest sign of the morning is not yet visible but when you see the morning star you know that soon and very soon the morning star is going to bring the kingdom in behind you.

[22 : 22] Well the implications of Jesus' claim are staggering. Let me just briefly tell you three. First, because he, the bright morning star has appeared we can dare to hope.

As long as he is in the picture we can dare to hope. As long as I can see him on the streets of our city I can dare to hope.

I spent time with that Filipino family whose son was shot two weeks ago late at night and I walked that street looking for Jesus there and I saw it and if I can keep my eyes on him in the street I can dare to hope that that street can be different.

it's when we take our eyes off the star that the night around us begins to cause despair. The fact of the matter is there is much about which to despair in our time isn't there?

Do I need to elaborate? There are days when it feels like we are spinning in a whirlpool that is going to suck us into chaos. I am the bright morning star.

[23 : 42] Despair, doomsday thinking comes from focusing too much on the night. Despair and doomsday thinking comes from believing that the night is stronger than the day.

I am the bright morning star. The night is not stronger than the day. This is how English scholar F.F. Bruce puts it.

The world in which the early Christians lived believed that the future belonged to the clenched fist of Caesar. Christians believed that the future belongs to the pierced pen of the carpenter and lived accordingly.

Which leads us to the second implication of Jesus' claim. Because He, the bright morning star, has appeared, we can dare to resist the ways of the night.

Indeed, we can dare to renounce the ways of the night. You see, when we believe that the night is almost over, we need not play the game by the rules of the night.

[24 : 54] Again and again, the New Testament appeals to us to live a new quality of life based on the fact that the night is passing. Ephesians 5, verse 7 and 11.

Therefore, do not be partakers with them, for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead, even expose them.

Romans 12, 13 and 14. It is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep, for now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. The night is almost over, the day is at hand.

Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, when you know that the old order of things, worship of money, worship of power, worship of control, worship of personal security at all costs, when you know that all of that is on the way, you no longer have to live by it.

[26 : 03] When we can keep our eye on the morning star, we know that the night no longer sets the agenda. Which leads to the third implication of Jesus' claim.

Because He, the bright morning star, has appeared, we can dare to walk in the light, even when it's dark. We can walk in the light, we can walk in the ways of the light. More specifically, we can choose actions which the night judges to be naive, unrealistic, and weak.

The night will always do that, but the night doesn't see. For goodness sake, why do we let the night judge our actions? The night will always consider the deeds of the day to be naive, unrealistic, and weak.

So what? You know the night is over. Bob Gotsfart suggests that the biblical model for our time, that the biblical model, the person in Scripture who best illustrates discipleship for our time, is the Old Testament hero, Esther.

It's interesting to note that the name Esther is related to the Hebrew word for morning star.

Remember the story? The Jews of Judea had been taken captive to Babylon.

[27 : 19] Babylon. Babylon was then overcome by Persia, which means now the Jews are under the reign of King Xerxes. Esther, because of her beauty, ends up in the king's harem. Because of her exquisite beauty, she ends up as Xerxes' queen.

The king, however, does not know that Esther is Jewish. Now, one of the chief officers of the king's court, a man named Haman, hated one of the Jewish leaders, and that Jewish leader turned out to be Esther's adoptive father.

Haman tricks Xerxes to give a decree that all the Jews are to be murdered. As the day of execution approaches, Esther's father-in-law appeals to her to do something.

He says that now famous line, who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this. Esther wrestles for days. What can I possibly do?

I'm only one individual. Besides, I might get killed doing this, and what good would that do? Finally, she chooses to risk. She chooses she will go to the king, reveal her ethnic identity, and appeal for the safety of her people.

[28 : 23] So late one Passover morning, trembling with fear, Esther goes into King Xerxes, and she dares to speak light into the darkness. And to her surprise, the king extends the scepter and gives her the request.

Through that one simple act of light, the spell of darkness was broken, and a new day dawned for the Jews. In Esther's case, of course, she lived to see the redemptive consequences of her acts. Not everybody does. What are those who do not? What are those who meet their death in choosing the acts of light? The mystery is, the mystery that's revealed throughout the book of Revelation, the mystery is that even the death of the children of the day break the spell of the night.

Is that not the mystery at the center of the Christian faith? Is that not the mystery in the cross? That Jesus Christ wins the victory over evil through the weakness of his death.

The lion of Judah has triumphed, and I turn to see a lion. No. The lion of Judah has triumphed, and I turn to see a lamb.

[29 : 37] The lion doesn't win by remaining a lion. It has to become a sacrificial lamb. Ninoy Aquino knew this.

Ninoy Aquino is the husband of Cory Aquino who became the president of the Philippines. In the early 1980s, Aquino was forced to leave the Philippines because he had dared to speak out against the oppressive and violent ways of Ferdinand Marcos.

He moved to the Boston area where some men and women befriended him and discipled him deeper into Jesus. In 1983, he felt that he had to go back to his homeland to risk the danger to go back and at least do something for his people.

He knew full well that he might be killed, but he was willing to risk it because he knew the mystery that in Jesus the night has been defeated and that acts of light hasten coming of the morning.

He flew to Manila. When he stepped out of the plane onto the steps, as he stepped out he was shot. His dead body fell to the tarmac below and in his pocket was the speech he was going to deliver to the media gathered inside the terminal.

[30 : 52] This is the first line of the speech he did not give. The willing sacrifice of the innocent victim is the most powerful response to insolent tyranny that God or man hath ever dreamed of.

Nino's death from outward appearance seemed to be a victory for the night. But it turned out in the mystery of things that Nino's death, the act of the night, set into motion a series of events which culminated in the so-called people power revolution three years later when a new day dawned for the Philippines.

The night never wins against the children of light when they choose the acts of light. eyes on the bright eyes on the bright morning star.

If we can just keep our eyes on the bright morning star that's why we gather here week after week is it not? To help us do that? That's not, that's why we have small groups to help us do that because if you can keep your eye on the morning star you can dare to hope you can dare to renounce the ways of the night and you can dare to choose the weak ways of the light because when you see the morning star when you see Jesus you know that the night is completed and it is just a matter of time until he pulls the kingdom in behind him.