

Is this how you see Jesus?

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[0 : 00] Don't worry, you're not alone. Those are probably some of the most comforting words for struggling people. I know, because Kai is turning two in a couple of months, and he's been acting up so much.

But knowing that other parents are struggling with the same thing is good for us. To know that we are not alone, that we don't have to carry the burden alone that other people can help us, gives us comfort.

I think this is what the church needs as we struggle in this world. Last week we heard that the early Christians were struggling with persecution and rejection, and we, the church today, also struggle from time to time.

Back then, persecution sometimes manifested in direct threats to their lives, sometimes in rejection and exclusion from the society or the economy.

And many times, this persecution manifested in social pressure, in invitation to compromise and be like the world, so that the Christians could be accepted by the society.

[1 : 23] I think these pressures are still here. As we are pressured to conform to the world's perversion of sexual identities, for example, or sexual desires, or greed, or consumerism, corruption, and all other vices that don't reflect gospel truth.

We need to know that we are not alone. And this is what our passage gives us. John is telling us that in this struggle, we have each other, we have other churches as our companion, and we have Jesus right next to us.

And so, in verse 9, John says, 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.

Patmos was an island where the Roman government sent their prisoners to, so John was exiled because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

And so here, John identifies with all Christians who are persecuted because they talk about Jesus. John, too, was exiled, was sent to prison because he talked about God and Jesus.

[2 : 59] To the point that he says he's our brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.

Now, that sentence needs a bit of explanation. In verse 5 from last week, John calls Jesus the faithful witness or martyr, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In summary, because Jesus was faithful to the point of death and he endured suffering, Jesus was resurrected and he will come again as the king of kings to establish his kingdom.

Now, that's a bit strange. Because in all worldly stories where people gain kingship, they always do it through conquests and violence.

But this is a different story. In the biblical story, the hero, Jesus, wins in a very unlikely manner. Jesus defeated our sins by becoming sin for us.

[4 : 19] Jesus defeated human pride by humbling himself and living among us. Jesus defeated oppression by serving us.

Jesus defeated death by dying on the cross. And so we should not be surprised if Jesus gains victory and becomes king through serving, suffering, and dying.

Now, where are we in this story? In this story, we are not just spectators. If we believe in Jesus, we also participate in the things that make Jesus the hero.

Suffering and death, resurrection, and kingship. That's why John says that he is our brother and companion. That is, he participates along with us in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.

In Jesus, that is, in his kingdom, to suffer is to win. To be defeated is to have victory.

[5 : 40] To be bullied and to be persecuted is to rule over the world, as we shall see later in the whole of Revelation. To take up the cross is to receive the crown.

That sounds hard. And we're going to struggle. That's why we need to know that we're not alone. We have each other as brothers and sisters and companions who together share in the suffering of Christ.

We have those heroes of the faith from the past who also participated in the same suffering. We need to hear those words from John. John, your companion and brother in the suffering.

And we have all of the apostles who were tortured and killed. And we have Paul who said in Philippians 3, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

But ultimately, we can be comforted because we know that Jesus himself is with us. And we can see that from what happens next in John's vision.

[7 : 14] In verse 10, On the Lord's Day, which probably refers to a Sunday, I was in the Spirit, which is a prophetic formula for divine inspiration.

And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Probably because these seven churches were the channels through which the letter would reach all neighboring churches as well. And then we continue, I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me, and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands.

Hang on. John turned around to see the voice of Jesus, but the first thing he saw was not Jesus, but lampstands. What are these lampstands? What are these lampstands?

Verse 20 gives us the answer. The seven lampstands are the seven churches. So John turned around to see the voice of Jesus, and the first thing he saw was the churches.

[8 : 39] This is significant for our context. The church is Jesus' visible body. Jesus speaks, and what the world sees first is the church.

The church is the one witnessing or declaring the voice of Christ in the world. And therefore, in the context of suffering, our suffering and how we conduct ourselves when we suffer rejection or persecution display Jesus and his suffering on the cross for the world.

This is why the churches are symbolized as lampstands. The lampstand symbolism contains two layers of meaning. So the first layer is simple.

Lampstands give light. We are called to be the light of the world. But in the context of suffering, again, as the world rejects us, persecutes us, ridicules us, they are watching us, you see, and we have the chance to shine forth our light, to witness to the suffering of Christ that gives the world freedom and life.

We don't often see persecution as an opportunity, do we? A second layer of meaning comes from Zechariah 4, which says, I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps.

[10 : 18] I asked the angel who talked with me, what are these, my Lord? So he said to me, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty.

So the seven lampstands bring to mind God's promise to strengthen his people by his spirit, not by their might, not by their power, it is by the spirit of God.

Again, in the context of suffering, this is powerful. The people of God are called to witness to him in front of the world to see, but that is a daunting task, especially when witnessing means suffering.

And so the Holy Spirit is the one who strengthens us and comforts us. He is the one who gives oil in our lampstands to keep us burning.

What we need to do is to stay in God's presence, because only in the presence of God can we endure suffering and rejection for the sake of Christ.

[11 : 34] And this is confirmed by the next thing John sees in verse 13, which shows the lampstands being in the presence of Jesus. Among the lampstands, that is among the churches, 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 coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.

Standing in the presence of the churches is this glorious, majestic, magnificent figure who is to be feared.

And it's quite obvious that this figure is Jesus himself, because he's referred to as the one like a son of man, which is a messianic description which Jesus often used to refer to himself, the son of man. [13:01] But what do all these details in the imagery mean? Well, the son of man reference depicts Jesus in authority, because it comes from Daniel 7, where, sorry, it comes from Daniel 7, where the son of man is given power and authority over all nations on earth.

This is also shown by the white robe and the golden sash. The white robe and the golden sash make a royal outfit worn by kings.

Jesus is king. Now, the white hair is also a reference to Daniel 7, but this time it doesn't refer to the son of man, but to God, the ancient of days, who has white, his hair, the hair of his head was white like wool.

Thus, showing Jesus as both the messianic king and God himself. He is the divine king.

And that's why he can hold the seven stars in his right hand. In verse 20, the stars are the angels, the seven angels. This divine king has the authority to command even angels of heaven.

[14:35] And the fiery eyes, bronze feet, loud voice, and shining face refer to Daniel 10, where Daniel sees a glorious judge figure.

I looked up, and there before me was a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like tapas, 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. And so he said, Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia. It depicts a glorious, powerful figure who will come to judge wicked governments.

This is also supported by the image of a sword coming out of his mouth, which is a reference to Isaiah 11 and 49. But we'll look at Isaiah 11.

But with righteousness, he will judge the needy. With justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.

[15:47] With the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked. And so, overall, through a combination of images from the Old Testament, Jesus here is displayed as the glorious, majestic king who reigns over all the world, as the judge who is pure and wise, and even as God himself.

Now, if this great divine king and judge stands among the churches, then there are two implications. First, we need to be afraid. That's how John responds in verse 17. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

And indeed, if this great figure stands among the lampstands, he can do anything to them. He can do anything to us. That's what we will see next week in chapter 2, where Jesus says, If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

As in, I will come and take away your church. The proper response to the presence of this Christ among us is fear.

[17:19] Be afraid. Be afraid if you are tempted to conform to the world when you face pressure or rejection. Be afraid if you are thinking of not staying faithful to Jesus.

But the second implication is, if this figure stands among the lampstands, he is able to comfort us. Indeed, this figure of Jesus doesn't only show greatness, he also gives us comfort even when we are afraid.

In verse 17, Jesus' response to John's fear is this, Then he placed his right hand on me and said, Do not be afraid.

My goodness, this great and glorious and scary figure stoops down to touch the dirty human who is lying down scared only to comfort him and give him words of assurance.

assurance. Here, we might recall a conversation in one of the Narnia books written by C.S. Lewis.

[18:38] Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion. Ooh, said Susan. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you. Jesus is not safe.

He is to be feared, but he's a good king, and he comforts us. And the saying, do not be afraid, may, on one level, comfort John who's afraid of him.

But on another level, it also comforts all Christians who are afraid of persecution. That is, all of us. Because of the words that follow.

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.

[19 : 48] And I hold the keys of death and Hades. In other words, do not be afraid of those who persecute you or reject you or threaten your lives. They have no control.

Jesus is the one who holds the keys of death and Hades. that is the kingdom of the underworld. Even if we die, he's able to unlock that kingdom and get us out.

That's the implication. Again, if this great divine king and judge who rules over all the world and lives forever above history stands right next to us and we can call him brother brother and we can call upon him any time, whom shall we fear?

I wonder if we ever see Jesus in this light. Or do we tend to see Jesus as the tame baby in a manger?

Cute. Not to be feared. Not to be respected. Seeing Jesus in his glory as depicted in this passage gives us both comfort and warning.

[21 : 19] It warns us when we are tempted to forsake him and to conform to the world. But it also comforts us when we face rejection and persecution and pressure.

And so here as we get reminded of our participation in Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, and kingship, we also get reminded of his power and comforting presence.

He is right next to us. when we talk and we talk about Jesus with the people that we know with our friends or family members and we fear of rejection or persecution, we need to remember that this Jesus stands right next to us and he's touching us with his right hand and he's saying, do not be afraid.

Will you participate with me in Jesus' heroic story and embrace all possible rejection that the world might throw at us as we tell them about him?

Let's not fear because Jesus is standing right next to us, holding on to us while we witness despite rejection.

[22 : 49] Let me close with the story of the Moravian Christians. In the 1700s, the Christians of the people of Moravia, so from what today is the Czech Republic, were persecuted by the Catholic Church in their own land.

So they ran away and received protection from Count Zinzendorf in the Kingdom of Saxony in Germany. Now their lives were happy there, they were protected, but when they learned that the slaves in the island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean had not heard about the gospel because the slave masters did not want them to hear about the gospel of freedom, these Moravians sent some of their own lay people as missionaries to St. Thomas.

They faced sickness, they left protected, comfortable lives to embrace sickness, and a lot of people died, but more of them kept coming.

They were even persecuted, they were caught by the authorities and thrown into jail. But when Count Zinzendorf went there to visit them, he heard from the slaves that these Moravians had converted lots of them to Christianity precisely because they were suffering.

The black slave said, these Moravians were Europeans, they were white, but they suffered along with us, the black slaves. And so, the slaves listened to their gospel.

[24 : 43] After that, Count Zinzendorf went to America where some other Moravians had been sent to reach the American Indians. While he was there, Zinzendorf was looking for his Moravian friend called Christian Henry Roge, who had gone deep into the territory of an American Indian tribe that was well known for their cruelty.

Now, several other missionaries had tried spreading the gospel there, but to no avail. They were always scared, and then they ran away. Now, on the way there, Zinzendorf met an American Indian called Shoup, who turned out to be the leader of that tribe.

But surprisingly, Shoup had been converted to Christianity by Christian Henry. And so, Zinzendorf asked, how did you come to know of the gospel?

Shoup said, well, brother Christian Henry came to my village, entered my hut, and started talking about the powerful God who suffered and died because he loved us.

I had heard about that message before, but when he had finished his discourse, fatigued by the journey, he fell into a sound sleep right next to me and my weapons.

[26 : 08] I then thought, what kind of man is this? There he lies and sleeps. I might kill him and throw him out into the woods, and who would regard it?

But this gives him no concern. He speaks as someone who knows that he has a friend above. And so, after he woke up, I said to him, I want to know about that powerful God who suffered and died. Thousands had become Christians because of the Moravians, because they were not afraid of suffering or death, knowing that Jesus, the divine king and judge, was with them, and because they showed the suffering of Christ through their suffering with others.

Will you participate in that story? God's ministry? Let's say this prayer together from the Anglican prayer book. Together.

You are worthy, O Lamb, for you was laid, and by your blood you ransomed for God's saints from every tribe and language and nation.

[27 : 29] You have made them to be a kingdom, and priests serve them in our world, and they will reign with you on earth. To the one who sits on the throne and to the land, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.

Amen.