

Revelation 1:1-9-20 “Seeing Great and Good Jesus”

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! The Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Just a few minutes before that, new deacon Stephen had been preaching the good news of Jesus.

Now he was being stoned to death. What was it that enabled Stephen to stand firm? To speak up? To suffer boldly and faithfully? It was seeing Jesus. Not everyone in the early church was facing martyrdom like that.

[1:21] But whether it was their Jewish neighbors who were upset with these new Christians, whether it was their Roman rulers who were wanting to keep them in line and loyal to the Caesar alone, all of the Christians were facing tough challenges.

John was no exception. Once among Jesus' 12 disciples, now he is probably in his 80s and God is not through with him.

I hope that's a great encouragement to many of us. In his 80s, in fact, he needs to see Jesus afresh too. That's what he needs because he is in exile on an island that is like Alcatraz but with even more water surrounding it for political prisoners of Rome.

And Jesus appears to him. Jesus gives him the revelation of himself that is for John and for all of his people.

Listen to how this happens in Revelation 1 at verse 9. He writes, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[2:50] I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day and I heard behind me a voice like a trumpet saying, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

John writes what he sees to these representative churches, to all of God's people, including us. And what does he say?

He says, look, I'm with you. Brother, partner, tribulation. It's hard. Suffering for the sake of the kingdom.

Needing patient endurance because it's tough. And Jesus' voice calls to John and says, look and see and then write it down.

Share it with my people. What is it? Share what? What is it that Jesus wants them, wants us to see? Remember when we started the book of Revelation just last week, we said it's going to show and tell us God wins.

[4:07] Grace prevails. Jesus reigns. It's a revelation and unveiling of Jesus by Jesus.

Now, why is that so important? See, the early church every day, over and over, was surrounded by reminders of Roman power, Roman prestige, Roman success everywhere, the buildings and the roads, the neighbors and the officials, the money and the temples.

They shouted that Caesar was the Lord and that the good life was lived with Rome, right? Like no one else in the world had Rome, had it.

In other words, Christians were facing constant pressure either to give in or to give up. To give in and compromise their loyalty to Jesus, to live for Roman values, to blend in and get along, you know, without Jesus or just to give up any hope.

Just be small, insignificant, persecuted people who would be marginalized for sure. Martyred, maybe. And then was there anything after that?

[5:43] Was there any other hope? So, give in or give up. Maybe you know some of that pressure in our world.

It's a little bit different, but maybe your heart this morning is heavy for loved ones in Nigeria or India or somewhere else who may suffer real physical harm any day now simply for their commitment to Jesus.

Maybe you have a really smart professor whose arguments you just can't keep up with and he hates Jesus. Maybe you have a boss who keeps belittling you and reminding you who really has the power around here.

Maybe you just, you really want to be with a different group of friends and you want to get in with them, but you know that to get in with them, you're going to have to change some things about yourself.

Like how you talk or how you dress or how you act. Maybe you're one of so many in our church family facing health crises this week.

[7:01] It's been remarkable. Many very unexpected. And maybe this, on top of everything else you're dealing with already, just, you're just overwhelmed.

You're just feeling alone and hopeless and how can I handle another thing? And we're tempted in those moments to give up or to give in, right?

Where's Jesus getting me anyway? How's this working out? I mean, it's the people who lie and focus on their bodies and make lots of money.

They're the ones having all the fun. They're the ones with all the power. They seem to have life figured out. Give in. Give up.

Or, what does Jesus want us to see that might totally change our perspective on all of that?

[8:03] That might completely change our lives? Let's read the second section. What's Jesus going to show John in this moment? What's he going to show his church then? What's he going to show us right now?

Verse 12. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. And on turning, I saw seven golden lampstands. We're going to find out in a little bit.

Those lampstands represent those seven churches that John is writing to. All of the churches. And in the midst of the lampstands, right there in the midst of the churches, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace.

And his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

[9:12] And his face was like the sun shining in full strength. Jesus says, John, I want my people to see me as I really am in all of my glorious greatness.

I want them to see me. Now in case you're confused as we read through the vision, it's not trying to help us have a detailed physical description of Jesus.

That's not what he's after. That's not what's most important. That's why there's so many likes in there, right? John is just trying to describe it, right? He wants us to understand his character, his power, his unique glory that can hardly be captured in words.

Just think about the vision as a whole, right? That's what is going to hit John and is going to hit you maybe as you read through it. It's overwhelming, right?

You can't even piece all of these things together into an image in your mind probably. It's just like nothing you've ever seen. You can't take it all in.

[10:28] But John tells us up front, before he gets into some of those details, that this one he's looking at is one like a son of man.

That phrase immediately takes us back to Daniel chapter 7, where one like a son of man, in other words, appearing to be human, but then there in Daniel, seated with the ancient of days, with God himself.

This is more than a mere man. That's what they're telling you. Listen to who this figure is. It's a remarkable description. To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, right?

That can only be talking about God himself. That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion. His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. This is who you're looking at. That's who we're talking about and seeing here in Revelation 1. Let's just look for a minute at the vision, but don't get lost in the details, okay?

[11:41] Who is Jesus for his church who needs him? He's got clothes on, a long robe and golden sash.

He's a royal high priest who most effectively brings us in to the presence of God. So you're not alone. You're not too small for God to notice, right?

He has white hair, like the great ancient of days in Daniel. This is an unparalleled divine ruler who is full of wisdom.

He's been around longer than any Caesar or any other ruler. This guy has been there. And maybe we've lost a sense of this in our culture.

But age is meant to be full of dignity, meant to be full of wisdom, to be honored. See, your difficult situation will not leave him confused.

[12:41] He's been there, seen that, done that. The two most helpful things I've heard this week came from people with white hair. What a gift that is.

Eyes like a flame of fire. He can see everything, right? Even judging the depths of hearts, even the secret struggles in your life that you think nobody knows, he sees them.

Even the places that you haven't invited him in. He can go there, and he can meet you there, and he can transform you. So don't limit this guy's power to see and to work anywhere.

Feet like bronze, standing firm, absolutely purified in the fire. In his judgments, they're pure. But he is utterly immovable.

No one is knocking him down. That's why it's an everlasting kingdom, an everlasting dominion. He is not going to get weary. He's not going to need a rest.

[13:49] He's not going to fail to be there for you, exactly where you need him. And then something you hear, his voice.

It's like a roar of many waters. Have you ever stood under a waterfall? Like a big waterfall? Maybe you saw one of Pastor Derek's videos from Iceland a few weeks ago online.

Pastor Derek says lots of wonderful things in the video. You know how many of them you can hear? None of them. Because you hear the roar of the waterfall just drowning out every other noise, right? He drowns out even the yelling and shouting of all of the voices around you. There's power, there's priority in what he says that must be heard.

And he holds seven stars in his right hand. This may be my favorite part of the image, this vision. Some of you know much better than I do the size of a star.

[15:02] So I'm going to just leave it at that. A star in his hand. What superhuman strength it would take to hold even one star with the nuclear fusion that's going on, creating this extraordinary energy in your hand.

No one can hold it. And he holds seven in one hand. We found Roman coins from this time in history that show the emperor's son who had died playing with seven stars.

It was a way of trying to picture that he lived on controlling the heavens. You know, this is the omnipotent, true son of the true God holding the stars.

Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world. Right? A two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. It's a strange one, but that's the word of God.

Right? Powerful both to judge and to save. Every time he speaks, we must listen. And finally, his face, like the sun at full strength.

[16:29] Just imagine, you know what happens when you're looking at something and it's like the sun at full strength. What this is saying, really, is that there's this shining, radiating glow going out from him.

There's purity and power, but I think what John's trying to communicate is Jesus is too much to take in. As he gets to the end of the vision, it's certainly too much to approach.

Right? He dwells in unapproachable light. You can't even look him in the eye without wincing.

Right? You've tried that before. This is the glory, the weight of Jesus coming through.

That when you see Jesus, you realize that he is the big rock that when placed in the middle of the stream, all of the water has to flow around him.

Right? He's the big one. His glory, his weight. Are you seeing Jesus? He's so great.

[17:32] He's central. Right? Everything works around him. His overwhelming power and might would intimidate even the strongest person.

In fact, what happens to John? When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

When you get a clear vision of Jesus, okay, it overwhelms you to the point of trembling worship, of speechless awe, of humble reverence.

Right? Maybe you can remember a moment like that when Jesus just overwhelmed you. If you think you're seeing Jesus and your response is short of that, you're not seeing the true, powerful, awesome, pure Jesus.

Okay? Don't get confused and think that Jesus is some teddy bear. Some grandfather figure. Some genie in the sky. When Daniel got a similar vision in chapter 10, he tells us what happened to him.

[18:51] He said he had no strength left. His whole appearance was changed and he retained no strength and he fell on his face in a deep sleep with his face to the ground.

Sounds like what's happening to John, right? Listen, when we come to worship Jesus, when we pause to pray to Jesus, even before a meal, for a few seconds, when we slow down to contemplate Jesus and who he is, his greatness ought to stop us in our tracks.

Everything else should stop moving. His greatness ought to grab our complete and undivided attention. It has to.

And as we get overwhelmed by his greatness, it ought to prompt one burning question from us over and over. Are you on my team?

Are you on my side, Jesus? I can still remember a cartoon that I saw as a kid.

[20:16] I don't even know what it was called, but there's a lot of them like it so that the details aren't that important. But there was a little boy who was being attacked by dragons. It was a little scary.

The dragons were much bigger and stronger than he was, maybe five times his size. They were certainly about to catch him and crush him. And they were just getting close to him in the chase and all of a sudden the boy and the dragon stopped where they were.

And they turned to look because there was a sound. There was a booming sound of a huge giant coming across the fields.

Ten times bigger than the dragons, right? This giant comes lumbering over smashing trees and tossing cars and knocking tall buildings off of their foundations.

And as this giant comes over, the look on the boy's face was like, are you going to eat me or rescue me?

[21:23] Are you on my team? And it was really clear that the greatness of the giant, his size, his power, the way he entered the scene, you knew that the answer to that question was going to determine the end of the story.

Well, what happened was his arms started swooping down and the first hand that came by grabbed the little boy and the second hand just swept the dragons out of the way like little toy animals and he picks the boy up in his hand and he smiles and he says, you're my friend.

Moments before, the boy was hopeless and ready to give up or maybe if he had anything left, it was just to give in and join Team Dragon.

Maybe if they'd let him come along and save his life because they were clearly the ones winning.

They must be the ones in charge. Maybe I'll just be a dragon. To rescue him from hopelessness or from compromise, the boy needed that giant to be great and good.

Great and good. We're going to see this often in Revelation where Jesus is both lion and lamb.

[23:06] Strong and kind, merciful and mighty, holy and gracious at the same time. When we confront Jesus, we need to realize he's a lion who has swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms.

Thank you, C.S. Lewis. It is hard to feel safe drawing near someone so great. But we must draw near and find him to be the fountain of goodness or else we will die of thirst.

There's no other life. We're hopeless apart from him. That's what David learns in Psalm 62 when he's attacked and he's waiting for God with no other refuge, no other hope.

He learns two things from God. That power belongs to God. God, you are great. And that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.

God, you are good too. Let me say this one more way. I don't know, that's half dozen or so, but this is an important concept.

[24 : 21] kids, you know the song, maybe you don't sing it anymore. It was from when you were really little. He's got the whole world in his hands.

You know that one? I'm embarrassed that I sang it too. When I sang that as a kid, what I used to picture in my mind was Jesus' hand with like the whole globe, the whole earth in his hand. Do you ever picture it that way? Right? And that's true, right? Because he is so big. He holds the entire universe in his hand.

But you know, we sing some other things, don't we, in that song. We sing, he's got you and me and the tiny little babies in his hand.

Right? In other words, Jesus is so big that the whole world is there, but you are not so small that he can't see you and hold you and care about you.

[25 : 23] Right? Jesus is great and he's good. He knows you. He sees you. He loves you.

He cares about you. So, he's bigger than you can imagine and he holds you and he smiles at you and he calls you friend.

Amazing that both of those are true. I want you to keep thinking about that powerful hand for just a minute, okay? The big hand in which is the whole universe, it holds the world.

Back here in Revelation, his right hand holds what? Seven stars. Seven full, all of them.

The whole universe. And now, flat on the ground before the awesome power of this Jesus, John is nearly dead.

[26 : 26] He needs to know one thing. What does he need to know? Is Jesus on his team? Is Jesus there for him? And Jesus has one more thing that he wants his people to see.

So, that powerful right hand does something else. but he laid his right hand on me saying, fear not. I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold, I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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 are the seven churches.

Jesus' same hand that has the power to hold the stars reaches out to touch us tenderly. It is vital for us.

[27 : 37] What does Jesus want to make sure that we see about him so that we get the full picture of who he is? He wants us to know that he's also good, that he is for us, that he's on our team.

Fear not. He says, don't you love that? That Jesus understands that you have much to be afraid of until you're scooped up in his hand and then he can say stop.

He wants his people to know that he is putting all of his powerful might, all of his incomparable greatness to work for them on their behalf, for their blessing and rescue and salvation.

Look, John, I am the first and the last. I'm the living one. See, before Rome was, I am. After Rome falls, I will be.

And right now, even while Rome seems to rule, I live. In fact, Rome sought to silence me by crucifying me, but I am alive forevermore.

[28 : 56] And so it's not just Rome that I'm in charge of. I hold the keys of death and Hades. The gates of hell will not prevail against me and my church because I've got the keys.

Think how vital this would have been for the early church and then for us. For those who were every morning facing the imminent possibility of death, watching loved ones, their brothers and sisters in Christ time and again brutally martyred.

They need to know the one with the keys, don't they? Otherwise, there's just no hope. Death looms as an enemy larger than we know how to handle, right?

But our gentle giant knows how to handle it. He has trampled sin and death and the grave, knocked them aside like little toys and captured the keys and he holds them.

He's in charge. Nothing else and no one else. So if you're trapped in a dark building and the doors are all locked and you don't know how to get through any of them, what do you do?

[30 : 18] You stay near the one with the keys, right? Don't be stupid. Stay near the guy with the keys and some days death still feels like that.

Like it has us trapped and stuck and there's darkness all around and we're confused and afraid and Jesus says, stay near the one with the keys.

When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the only way that I won't be afraid and won't fear any evil is that you are with me, my good shepherd, the one with the keys.

I may or may not be able to get through this next part but last Sunday our dear Betty Murray got news that her heart could not be treated and she was being moved to hospice care.

Later that day I knelt by her bedside and asked her if I could read her Psalm 23. I thought, we talked about this, she loved Psalm 23 and her face kind of got this uncertain look on it and I thought, oh no, maybe I suggested the wrong one.

[31 : 30] I said, is there one you like better? Lots of choices, right, in Psalms. Maybe Psalm 23, not a favorite after all and she said, oh no and then she paused and a smile came over her face and she just said, the Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters. and 93 year old Betty kept going the whole way.

Betty has beautiful white hair, by the way. We should heed her wisdom that in the moment where she just heard, maybe death has the upper hand.

she said no. She remembered and stayed near the one with the keys.

She saw Jesus and pointed me to him. That was one of the deep griefs of the season of COVID a few years ago, wasn't it?

[32 : 53] That there were people dying alone and apart from their loved ones and I thought a lot about this vision of Jesus, of a God near to us and holding us and holding the keys of death and Hades.

Stay near the one with the keys because Jesus lives forevermore today and forever. He has the keys. He is great and he is for you as you trust him by faith.

No matter what they go through, he's holding his churches, isn't he? the seven stars in his hand are, it says, the angels of the seven churches.

Perhaps meaning human leaders of those churches. Perhaps heavenly angels representing each church. Isn't that a cool thought?

Regardless, representing his churches in his hand as he walks among the lampstands, his churches, his people, this is the part of the vision that Jesus explains to us specifically so that we can't miss it.

[34 : 05] He's with us and he's holding us. That will help you. This vision of Jesus has helped me often as a pastor when I feel small or when I'm intimidated by a leadership conflict I don't know how to resolve or when I'm overwhelmed by grief that seems too big for me to be of any comfort in.

Jesus is great and good for his church. He's with us and he's holding us. Many thought the early church wouldn't survive the fires of Nero or the systematic persecution of Domitian, but it turned out that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church that grew as it saw its king hold them faithfully even through death.

There have been times that people thought the church in China or the Soviet Union would be stamped out, but instead it has flourished underground often where the king with the keys still rules there.

Recently, the church in Iran, as many of you know, has grown more rapidly than ever before as the threat of death has come to them even more fiercely than ever before, but many of them keep seeing a vision of Jesus.

And there are those concerned that the church in the United States is fading, compromising with a culture of worldliness. I get it. Or where it's not, just being ignored more and more.

[35 : 50] But these churches continue to prevail against the gates of hell, not because they've got it all figured out and they hold the power and they're in charge, but because a strong, victorious Jesus full of wisdom and power and majesty is fighting for them.

He's with us and He's holding us. Don't give in. Don't give up. And you say, how? How am I transformed because I don't feel that?

How do I get changed so that I stand firm and speak up and suffer boldly? How does that happen, Jesus? We see Jesus.

He's stronger than our enemies no matter how they boast, what it might look like. He is the one, not Rome, not America, not living for yourself and your own freedoms, having it your own way.

He's the one who knows real life, true life, abundant life, everlasting life. He holds the keys of death and hell and He is with you and He is holding you.

[37 : 05] Do you see that, Jesus? That great and good Jesus? That will change you. 341 years ago, two godly women named Margaret were martyred in Wigtown, Scotland for their commitment to worshipping the Jesus of the Bible.

I've told you their story before in case it sounds familiar. Yep, that might have been me. but 70-year-old widow Margaret was tied to a stake a bit out in the ocean as the tides rose and her dear friend, 18-year-old farmer's daughter, Margaret, was tied closer to shore to watch her white-haired friend die first.

Their executioners thought that the younger Margaret would give in and would recant. Certainly she will as she watches one of her heroes and friends die.

So as the waters covered the older woman, they turned and asked the younger Margaret what she saw and what she thought now. Can you imagine that?

Standing there at 18 years old trying to figure out how can I stand? How can I speak faithfully?

[38 : 39] How can I suffer boldly? What would she need? She looked up and said, I see Christ.

She was just wrestling there. She saw not a failure, not a defeated loser, not a friend who was going under and would never come up.

She saw a victorious king with her friend, holding her friend who would therefore not be overwhelmed by the waters but triumph over death because she was held by the one with the keys. She said, I see Christ. whatever is overwhelming you today, whatever you're tempted to give in, to give up, see Jesus.

maybe that sounds, I don't know, hard to figure out but look, he's not far away from you. You don't have to wonder where he is or what he's like because it says he's walking among the lampstands and holding the stars in his hand which means that great, gracious giant has scooped us up and is now smiling down at us just like this, looking down at his friends so you can just rest there for a minute and you can look at him up close.

[40 : 05] He's great and he's good. He is strong to save and he loves to save. He is with us and he is holding you.

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