

Vision of Jesus

Revelation 1:9-20

John had an encounter with Jesus in Revelation 1 that petrified him. It shows us Jesus as He really is, and how we should respond to Him. Revelation 1:9-20 is the longest description of Jesus's appearance in the Bible but it's written in apocalyptic language which uses symbol, imagery, and cultural references to describe things we can't fully understand. It's not meant to be a photographic statement about what Jesus looks like but to give us a strong sense of who He is.

"I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet" (v.10). Trumpets aren't just about playing music, they are for announcements and summonses (Exodus 19: 13, 16, 19-20, Matthew 24:31, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16). A voice like a trumpet tells us that something big is happening.

"I saw seven golden lampstands" (12) Verse 20 tells us that this is a picture of the church, probably the entire church because seven usually means completeness. Lampstands were used in the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 25:31-40) and there's a particular reference to a vision in Zechariah 14:1-10 about God's power building a mighty dwelling place for Himself. The church is beautiful and valuable, a light to the world, and the place where Jesus dwells. He is not distant from His people.

"One like a son of man" (13) is a clear reference to the prophet Daniel's vision of a great conflict and a great victory for God which saw an everlasting kingdom being established (7:1-14, used by Jesus in Mark 14:61b-62). The phrase itself reminds us that Jesus is both like us, a human being, and not like us: He is divine.

"[He was] clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest" (13) - these are the clothes that rulers and priests would be wearing. Jesus came to us as a servant but not because He didn't have authority.

"The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow" (14). In most Middle Eastern and African cultures, white hair is a sign of dignity and wisdom (Proverbs 16:31). As well as telling us this, John is blending the image with Daniel 7:9 to reassert Jesus's divinity.

"His eyes were like a flame of fire" (14). Jesus can see through anything, He sees everything, His knowledge is perfect. Fire is also a sign of judgement, destroying anything that is false so that only the true and good remains.

"His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace" (15). Bronze was used by armies in John's day so there's a military idea of battle and conquest.

“His voice was like the roar of many waters” (15). The force that you feel when you’re near many waters roaring is awesome, a glimpse of God’s power. John also wants you to connect his vision with Ezekiel 43:2, which is also about this glorious God coming to be with His people.

“In his right hand he held seven stars” (16) – this is explained in verse 20 but there’s still uncertainty as to whether this means actual angels, or human leaders, or something else. Jesus’s right hand is used for action and rescue, and it promises security (Exodus 15:6, Psalm 98:1, John 10:28).

“From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword” (16) - a massive blade used in cavalry charges. Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2 prophesied that what comes from the mouth of God’s chosen one will destroy all opposition and bring about His rule, like a mighty sword would.

“His face was like the sun shining in full strength” (16). Yet again, it’s Old Testament imagery of God being applied to Jesus (Exodus 34:29, Psalm 84:11, Isaiah 60:19). John had seen this before (Matthew 17:2) and he wrote in his gospel that light triumphs over darkness and offers life and hope (John 1:4-5, 14) to those dwelling in darkness.

“I am the first and the last” (17). John has already told us that “the Lord God” is the Alpha and Omega (8), so this another reassertion of Jesus’s divinity (Isaiah 44:6). “He is the origin and goal of all history” (Richard Bauckham). He alone is eternal.

“[I am] the living one” (18) – another title given to God in the Old Testament (Joshua 3:10, Psalm 42:2, Hosea 1:10). It makes a contrast with all the dead idols of the world, which have no power and can give no help.

“I died” (18) – such a strange statement by one so powerful and glorious but it was God’s plan all along (John 10:17-18, Acts 2:23). This should remind us that God doesn’t do what we expect and works in even the worst-seeming of moments for good.

“Behold I am alive forevermore” (18). Here is where all Christian hope is found (1 Corinthians 15:14), that the cross was not merely an inspiring example of self-sacrifice but a conquest. The Powers of Sin and Death, that have reigned over every human since Adam, were defeated by Jesus’s perfect life, sacrificial death, and glorifying resurrection.

“I have the keys of Death and Hades” (18). Keys in the New Testament are pictures of authority, so this means that Death and the place of the dead belong to Jesus. They should hold no fear for the Christian because Jesus is in charge of them. This is why John keeps asserting that Jesus is God, He isn’t just another inspiring personality or wise teacher. That would not be enough to save us from our sins, defeat the Powers of this world, and reconcile us to God. Only God could do this, and in Christ He did.

John’s response

“I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me” (12). Christians need eyes of faith to see Him as He really is (John 20:29, Hebrews 11:1). The world is in chaos, the church can seem like a mess, our lives are so uncertain – is Jesus really in charge and really good? John had those questions and shared the answer God gave him with the rest of us. We can use our Bible readings to see more of Him and our prayer times to praise Him.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (17). This is a common response in the Bible to the presence of God (Joshua 5:14, Ezekiel 1:28, 43:3, Daniel 8:17-18, Matthew 17:6, Luke 5:8, John 18:6). In this scenario, it’s not an act of politeness or a considered decision, it’s a reflex. We have to choose daily to live wholeheartedly and humbly before God (Romans 12:1-2).

“Fear not” (v.17) Fear is exactly the right way to respond, “but he laid his right hand on me” (v.17). The hand that holds seven stars touched lepers to heal them, and children to welcome them. It’s the same right hand that a nail was driven through to hold Him to the cross so that God could reach across the great divide to us and bring us safely to Himself, not as enemies but as beloved sons and daughters. We can come to Jesus with reverence and humbled awe, confidence. We can have certainty that He will welcome us if we’ve surrendered our lives to Him, that He will hear our prayers, and that He will bring us to be with Him in joy forever, whatever happens to us in this life.

S. M. Lockridge’s famous monologue on Jesus: That’s My King <https://youtu.be/yzqTFNfeDnE>

Questions

How did Luke’s preach make you feel about Jesus?

Why do you think John used so much Old Testament imagery in his description of Jesus?

Which element of John’s description did you find most interesting – be it surprising, inspiring, confusing, exciting, etc.?

Which of the three responses Luke mentioned do you find easiest and which do you want to grow in?

- What have you found most helpful when trying to fix your eyes on Jesus?
- What can we do to heighten our awareness of how awesome He is and worthy of all we have to give, whether we’re tuning in to the livestream or going to work?
- Because it’s easier to live at extremes, we tend either too fearfully or too casually. How can we relate to Him as He really is?