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Revelation #2

Behold the Glory of the Lord **Revelation 1:9-20**

What is it that makes this portrayal of the risen and glorified Christ more than just a fascinating pictorial display? I doubt if there is a more majestic description of our reigning King than what we find here in Revelation 1:12-16. Countless attempts have been made by artists to render an accurate representation of the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm sure that now we find ourselves in the age of computers and highly technical tools of graphic design that many will make an effort to supply us with a vivid portrait of Jesus as he is described in this text.

But I would greatly caution against it. After all, what sort of image emerges when you try to paint or draw or sketch a person whose eyes are flames of fire, whose feet are like burnished bronze, and who has a sharp two-edged sword protruding from his mouth? That hardly makes for a flattering portrait! My point is simply that the purpose of this revelation of the risen Christ is not to tell us what he literally looks like in a purely physical sense, but *who he is* spiritually and morally.

Early on in my study of the book of Revelation I remember coming across a statement from G. B. Caird in his commentary. He urged his readers not to become overly obsessed with the particulars of this portrait of Jesus. Whereas each element in this portrait has theological significance, Caird warns us not *“to unweave the rainbow”* (25). In other words,

“John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing. The humbling sense of the sublime and the majestic which men experience at the sight of a roaring cataract [waterfall] or the midday sun is the nearest equivalent to the awe evoked by a vision of the divine. John has seen the risen Christ, clothed in all the attributes of deity, and he wishes to call forth from his readers the same response of overwhelming and annihilating wonder which he experienced in his prophetic trance” (25-26).

That being said, I will attempt to make sense of the various attributes that are mentioned here. Still, we would do well to heed Caird's advice and not attempt to “unweave the rainbow.”

So my concern today is not so much with the details of this vision of the risen Christ, although we will in fact examine those details in just a minute. My primary focus will be on asking the question: *Of what practical benefit is it for you and me to behold the glory of Jesus in this*

vision of John? What good is it? How does it help us in our struggle with temptation and idolatry?

I'm sure you are aware of this, but ***there are countless ways and methods and strategies employed by Christians everywhere to accelerate and facilitate change or moral transformation in our lives***, most of which leave you with a sour taste in your mouth. Some professing Christians insist that we need to jettison all rules, regulations, and commandments and simply rest in the grace of God that is shown us in Jesus. Others gravitate to the opposite extreme and argue that we need more rules and regulations to help us conform to the image of Jesus, rules and regulations that are nowhere found in the Bible itself. Some contend that abstinence is the key to transformation. If you want to be more like Jesus simply refrain from everything that might remotely have the capacity to bring you joy and happiness. Deprive yourself. Deny yourself. Some insist that the only way to change is to exert one's willpower in saying No to temptation and Yes to God's commands. Then there are those who advocate retreat. Withdraw from the world and close yourself off from its temptations. Perhaps living in a monastery will help. And so the list goes on and on as people try to find the key to successful Christian living.

I mention these misguided approaches to the Christian life in order to throw them into contrast with what I believe is the primary catalyst for growth in Christ and increasing conformity to his image. So, to say it again, what is the best, most effective way to accelerate and facilitate increasing conformity to Jesus? I believe the answer is found all through the NT, but let me direct your attention to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Paul couldn't have been any more precise in making his point. If you and I ever hope to be changed, to be transformed into the image of Jesus himself, ***it will only come to the degree that we behold the glory of the Lord and treasure him above all else***. Now, I want you to be patient with me as I try to establish a clear connection between John's vision of the risen Christ here in Revelation 1 and Paul's description of how we are changed to be more and more like Jesus in every way.

In the inner core of every Christian, in the depths of the heart, there is movement, as Paul says, “from one degree of glory to another” (v. 18). If you do ***not*** feel an internal impulse and desire to change and be more like Jesus, I doubt very seriously if you are truly born again. I insert that comment today as a warning to anyone who can read the portrayal of Jesus in Revelation 1 and feel nothing. If you feel nothing, I urge you to examine your heart and determine if you are truly a child of God. Now, let's move on.

Literally, Paul writes that we are being transformed “*from* glory *unto* glory.” Oh, how I love prepositions! The preposition “from” points to *source* and “unto” highlights the ultimate *goal* in view. In other words, God began a work of grace in us at regeneration or the new birth that consisted of the experience of his glory that is building momentum and progressively moving toward the final experience of the fullness of that glory at the return of Jesus Christ (for the latter, see Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 5:23; 1 John 3:2).

Perhaps the best way to mine this text for all its treasures is to make a series of observations.

First, Paul describes us, *all Christians*, as those who are “beholding the glory of the Lord” and doing so, unlike the Israelites of old, “*with unveiled face.*” It was the distinct privilege of Moses alone to glimpse the “glory” of God when he saw his “form” (Numbers 12:8) and his “back” (Exodus 33:23). But now in the New Covenant all Christian believers without distinction are granted the privilege of seeing or beholding that glory. And unlike the people of Israel who looked upon the glory as reflected in Moses’ veiled face, we see with permanently uncovered faces.

Second, where exactly do we “see” or “behold” that glory? Paul saw the glory of God on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 22:11; Acts 26:13). In 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 he suggests that God shines the glory of that light “in our hearts” *through “the gospel.”* In other words, whereas Paul literally saw the glory of Christ with his physical eyes in a direct and unmediated vision, we *see* the glory of Christ when we *hear* the gospel. What was for Paul a visual encounter with the glory of Jesus is for us an oral encounter. *We hear what he saw when we read his record of the gospel of Jesus.*

Third, the process that we call sanctification comes *only as* or *because* we behold the glory of God. *Apart from beholding there is no becoming.* The more we know him and behold him in the splendor of his glory, the more we are changed into the very image of Jesus himself, in whose face God's glory has shined or is reflected (2 Cor. 4:4,6). Sanctification, therefore, is the fruit of seeing and savoring. Ignorance, on the other hand, breeds moral paralysis (if not regression).

Fourth, as much as we all might wish otherwise, sanctification is *progressive*, not instantaneous. As noted earlier, we are gradually moving by the power of the Spirit from one stage or degree of glory (first “seen” in the gospel when we turn to Christ) to another (that of the glorified Jesus, whose glory we will not only see on that day but in which we will also participate).

Fifth, sanctification is *by grace* (we "*are being* transformed"), the agent of which is the Spirit of Christ. We don't transform ourselves by unaided striving. This doesn't eliminate human effort but rather makes it possible. We act because acted upon. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God, *who is always antecedent*, is at work in us to will and to do for his good pleasure (cf. Phil. 2:12-13)!

Sixth, we see here that "*beholding is a way of becoming*" (Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 17). That is to say, we always tend to become like or take on the characteristics and qualities of whatever it is we admire and enjoy and cherish most. *Fixing the eyes of our faith on Jesus is transformative*. Gazing on his glory as seen in the gospel and now preserved for us in Scripture has the power to *bump us along*, as it were, whether in short spurts of sanctification or great and notable triumphs, toward the fullness that is found in Christ alone but will one day be found in us, by grace, as well!

Can you now see why I am drawing a connection between what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18 about how we are changed and what John saw in his vision of the risen Christ and how he recorded this for us in Revelation 1? *This vision that John experienced and then recorded for all Christians to read is intended by God to be a catalyst for change*. This is how we are transformed. This is how we find strength and incentive to resist temptation. This is how we resist the seductive appeal of idolatry and greed and lust and pride. It comes as we continue to behold the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, one example of which is here in Revelation 1.

We've all heard the statement that "*Seeing is believing*." I suppose that's true. But here in 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says that "*Seeing is becoming*." You become like what you behold. Now, pause for a moment and ask yourself: "Why am I not changing more consistently? Why am I not becoming more like Jesus?" Perhaps the answer is found in what you are beholding. If the focus of your sight is the banal trash and mindless sensuality of TV and the Internet and Facebook, is it any wonder that you aren't today substantially different or more like Jesus than you were a week ago, or a year ago? I'll leave it with that and let you meditate on your answer.

Before we go any farther let me make application of this to myself. If what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is true, and it is, then *my primary responsibility as your pastor is to hold up for your continual gaze the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ*. To the degree that I fail to do that consistently and passionately, over time, is the degree to which I have failed you. That is the primary way in which you and I will together become more and more like Jesus.

What this means is that, contrary to what many of you think, your primary need isn't financial or physical. Your primary need isn't that you lose weight or gain the respect of your peers. Your

primary need, my primary need, is spiritual: *we need to be a people who radiate the beauty of Christ that comes from beholding the glory of Christ.*

Now, before we look at this vision of Christ in Revelation 1:12-16, let's take note of the context and how it came about.

John in Exile (vv. 9-11)

Don't miss what John says in v. 9 about *the reason for his exile* on the island of Patmos. John's presence on Patmos wasn't his choice. This is no vacation. Patmos itself is "a rocky and rugged island about six miles wide and ten miles long, some forty miles southwest of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea" (*An Introduction to the NT*, Carson, Moo, Morris, 473). John states that he found himself there "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." In other words, "Jesus was so real and so precious to John that he would rather be exiled to a barren island than not to talk about Christ. John had gazed at Jesus long enough to become like him in this way: obedient fellowship was more important than the comforts of life" (John Piper).

This vision came to John on "the Lord's day," perhaps while he was engaged in prayer or worship or both. The Greek term *kuriakos* is never used in the NT or early church history of "the Day of the Lord" in the eschatological sense but uniformly refers to Sunday, the first day of the week.

What was the nature of John's experience? The phrase "*I was in the Spirit*" occurs here and again in 4:2. On two other occasions (17:3; 21:10) John says he was carried away "in the Spirit". Was this his way of describing some sort of divine inspiration or does it merely refer to a trance-like experience in which he received visions from God? Probably both. In any case, John was so deeply immersed in the Spirit and subject to his influence that he saw a vision of the risen Christ.

Be it noted that there is nothing to suggest John was seeking after or expecting to receive this vision. There are *no formulas* that might induce such an experience. One should always be postured and prepared to receive whatever God might choose to give, but all semblance of manipulation must be avoided.

Now look closely at what follows in v. 11. Although John alone literally saw the vision it was intended to be communicated and experienced by all Christians. Jesus told John to “write” down what he sees “in a book and send it to the seven churches” in Asia Minor. That means ***this vision was given to John for you and me as well. It was intended as much for Bridgeway Church in 2017 as it was for the church in Ephesus or Smyrna or Laodicea in the first century.*** This wasn’t some private and altogether personal spiritual experience that one secretly records in his/her journal, never to be shared with others. ***Jesus appeared to John so that Jesus might appear to us by means of John’s written record.***

Jesus could have appeared to all of the Christians in the seven churches the same way he appeared to John. He could appear in the same way to us today. But he doesn’t. He appears to us in the inspired words, the written record of what John saw. And this inspired, written portrayal of what John saw is designed to have the same impact on us as it did on John.

People today, on rare occasions, have visions of the risen Christ not unlike what John experienced. I don’t see anything in the NT that would lead us to believe that such visions are impossible. But they are certainly quite rare. I’ve never had one. The primary way that we behold the glory of Christ is as he comes to us and shines upon us through the written Word of God. ***The glory and beauty and majesty of Jesus primarily shine into our hearts through the words of the Bible.***

One more brief comment before I go on. Notice in v. 9 John’s reference to “the tribulation” that he shares with other Christians. As far as John is concerned, “the tribulation” to which all believers are at some time or other subjected has already begun. More on this as we go deeper into Revelation.

John in the Spirit (v. 10, 12-16)

So, as John turns to see whose voice was like a trumpet (v. 10), he sees seven golden lampstands and Christ in the midst of them. Verse 20 provides us with an interpretation of the lampstands: “As for 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 are the seven churches***” (Rev. 1:20).

So the vision of Jesus that John gets is of our Lord among or in the midst of the churches. Jesus is not merely over the local church as its authoritative King but is actively and truly present in and among the local church as its living Savior, as our friend, as our guide. Jesus is not distant from the church, abiding in some remote galaxy. He is here, right now, as truly and literally as can possibly be imagined.

Bridgeway is one of his lampstands. Jesus is here this morning. And so he calls on us, he invites us to look at what John saw.

When John turned he saw “seven golden lampstands,” a clear allusion to Zechariah 4:2,10. Most believe that the lampstand in Zechariah with its seven lamps stands first for the temple and by extension the faithful within Israel. Here ***in Revelation the lampstands represent the church.*** The church is to serve as a light to the world. In the middle of these lampstands is the risen Christ. “Part of Christ’s priestly role is to tend the lampstands. The OT priest would trim the lamps, remove the wick and old oil, refill the lamps with fresh oil, and relight those that had gone out. Likewise, Christ tends the ecclesial lampstands by commending, correcting, exhorting, and warning . . . in order to secure the churches’ fitness for service as lightbearers in a dark world” (Beale, 208-09).

I want to comment briefly on selected parts of this vision:

- *Son of Man* (cf. Dan. 7:13-14) - This description not only points to our Lord's humanity, but even more to his role as ***messianic king*** through whom God's dominion and power are exercised over all creation. So when John says that he saw “one like a son of man” he means that he saw someone with authority and power and glory and royal dominion over all the nations, kings, and over all the peoples or the world. This is actually very similar to what John meant in v. 5 when he spoke of Jesus as “the ruler of kings on earth.”
- The *long robe* and *golden sash* evoke images of the high priest under the Mosaic Covenant (Ex. 28:4; 39:29) and thus point to Christ's function as he who has obtained for us immediate access into God's presence. Jesus, then, is not only the sovereign messianic king ruling the nations, he is also the ultimate high priest who does not offer the blood of bulls and goats but his own precious blood to “free us from our sins” (v. 5).

- The *white hair* reminds us of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9 and thus points again to his deity, his essential oneness with the Father in the eternal Godhead. But the white hair also points to his wisdom and the maturity and dignity that come with age. Sadly, there is a diminishing respect for the elderly in our society. They are viewed as outdated and people to be patronized rather than pursued. But we read in Proverbs 16:31 that “Gray hair is a crown of glory.” Jesus isn’t literally old, as we measure age on earth. He is unaffected by the passing of time. He is eternally old in the sense that he has always existed and possesses the dignity and knowledge and wisdom of someone who has experienced all of life.
- His *eyes were like a flame of fire* – Seiss writes:

“Here is intelligence; burning, all-penetrating intelligence. Here is power to read secrets, to bring hidden things to light, to warm and search all hearts at a single glance. . . . But his sharp look is one of inspiring warmth to the good, as well as discomfiting and consuming terror to the hypocritical and the godless. Will you believe it, my friends, that this is the look which is upon you, and which is to try you in the great day! Well may we pray the prayer of David: ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thought; and see if there be any evil way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting’” (40).

The eyes of our risen Savior do not droop. They are not closed in sleep. They are not sullen or sad. They burn ablaze with power and energy and insight and excitement. He sees everything with all the vitality of youth but thinks with all the wisdom of age.

- *His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace*, which possibly points to his moral purity and will become the basis on which he exhorts those among whom he walks to reflect this same purity of life (cf. 3:18).
- *His voice was like the roar of many waters* (cf. Ezek. 1:24; 43:2). I have no grid for this or insight on how to interpret it. Needless to say, for John it was utterly overwhelming.
- *In his right hand he held seven stars*. In v. 20 the stars refer symbolically to angels, indicating that Jesus is not only the sovereign ruler of the church on earth but also of the myriads and myriads of angelic beings who exist to worship him and to do his will. Later we will see in Revelation the role angels play in communicating with John and pouring out God’s wrath on an unbelieving world. But at all times they are held tightly in Christ’s hand, under his complete control.

- The *sword* is not in his hand, but proceeds from his *mouth*, indicating that his *spoken word* is in view. A sword that cuts two ways points to the gospel as that which both brings either life or judgment (cf. Isa. 11:4; 49:2).
- *His face was like the sun shining in full strength* (cf. Judges 5:31). Again Seiss explains:

“Something of this was seen in the mount of transfiguration, when 'his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.' Something of the same was manifest when he appeared to Saul of Tarsus in 'a light above the brightness of the sun.' And so glorious and pervading is this light which issues from his face, that in the New Jerusalem there will be neither sun, nor moon, nor lamp, nor any other light, and yet rendered so luminous by his presence, that even the nations on the earth walk in the light of it. And so the lightning brilliancy, which is to flash from one end of heaven to the other at the time of his coming, and the glory which is then to invest him and the whole firmament, is simply the uncovering or revelation of that blessed light which streams from his sublime person” (43).

The Divine Interpretation (vv. 17-20)

How do you explain John's reaction? Why did he fall? Is this a normative phenomenon? It would seem that John's response follows the same four-fold pattern of Daniel 10:5-11 and 10:12-20 – (1) the prophet (Daniel and John) sees a vision, (2) he falls prostrate in fear, (3) is then strengthened by a *touch* (!) from a “heavenly” being, and (4) then receives additional revelation that serves to interpret what he saw. And be it noted that John's response is not one of terrified retreat but of reverential falling at the very feet of his Master.

The words “Fear not” find their basis in the fact that Jesus has conquered both sin and death. The believer need not fear either suffering or martyrdom, for Jesus has endured both and emerged victorious. The “keys of death and Hades” may mean the keys “to death” or the keys “possessed by death.” In either case, Jesus has absolute authority and power over this realm. We need never fear death, for it brings us into the immediate presence of this glorified and majestic Lord that John has so vividly described for us.

There have been numerous interpretations of Revelation 1:19. Many try to find in it a clue to the structure of the entire book of Revelation. I'll save my comments on this verse when we get to Revelation 6 and look more closely at the way this book is put together. Likewise, when it comes to "the angels of the seven churches" in v. 20, I'll have much to say when we come to the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3.

Conclusion

John was overwhelmed by his vision of the risen Lord, *your* risen Lord. It would do us well to meditate on the glorious sufficiency of the glorified Jesus to meet every need. Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) once preached a sermon entitled "The Excellency of Christ" that asks repeatedly the same question: ***What is it that you need or desire that cannot be found in Jesus. What possible reason could you have for not casting your life upon him?*** Allow me to paraphrase:

"What are you afraid of that hinders you from venturing your soul upon Christ? Are you afraid that he is not strong enough to conquer your enemies or to supply you with what you need? But the risen Christ possesses infinite strength and all things are subject to him, even the demons that threaten to destroy you."

"Are you afraid that even though he is strong enough to take up your cause and defend you he might not be willing to do so? But if he was willing, for your sake, to subject himself to a Roman scourging and ridicule and public humiliation and eventually willing to be crucified naked in order to bear your sin and shame and the wrath you deserved, don't you think he is willing to come to your aid and to help you through every struggle?"

"Are you afraid that if perhaps Jesus might accept and receive you to himself, the Father will not? But could the Father ever consider rejecting his own Son, in whom he delights with infinite delight? And did not Jesus say in John 17 that the Father loves us with the same love that he has for Jesus himself?"

"What spiritual or moral excellencies do you desire in a Savior that cannot be found in Jesus Christ? What is there great or good, adorable or endearing that cannot be found in Jesus? Do you wish your savior to be honorable and dignified, strong yet compassionate, powerful yet humble, firm but at the same time gracious, both loving and just? Is that not

what Jesus is at all times for us? Is he not both the Lion of Judah who roars with supreme power and at the same time the Lamb led to slaughter in the place of sinners like you and me?”

“Would you have your Savior to be one who is near to the heart of God the Father, whose prayers and intercession for you are readily and joyfully heard by our great God? But who is more near and dear to the heart of the Father than his only-begotten Son, who is, with him and the Holy Spirit, one God, who is beloved of the Father and is never denied anything he asks of him?”

My questions to you today could continue without end. And every one of them would be answered in the same way. There is none other than Jesus who can be for you and do for you everything your heart may require. So will you not receive him today as Lord and Savior? Will you who have already received him lift your hearts and voices to declare his greatness and mercy and power and love? Will you now join me to exult in Christ and in so doing exalt him above all others?