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REVELATION 1: 9 – 20

THE EXALTED CHRIST CARES FOR HIS CHURCH

As we continue to read through Revelation 1, we hear about John's first vision. He meets the exalted Christ. And through John's report we meet the exalted Christ. Well – we read about him. But he is real! Try to imagine what it would be like to experience this. Would it be scary? John is totally overwhelmed. Should it frighten us to meet Jesus Christ?

But why should it? Jesus loves you and he is your friend, right?

Sure, but there is another side to him. C.S. Lewis captured this in a passage from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Aslan, the lion, represents the Christ figure, and the children Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy, who are visiting Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, want to know more about him. Here is the conversation:

“Who is Aslan?” asked Susan.

“Aslan”, said Mr. Beaver. “Why, don’t you know?” He’s the King. He’s the Lord of the whole wood”...

“Is – is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the Great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most, or else just silly.”

“Then he is not safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

“I’m longing to see him,” said Peter, “even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point.”²

Indeed – the exalted Christ is not safe. He is dangerous. But he is also good. And so, what do you do? You approach him with respect, as John does.

When Christ appears to John in this vision, John is between 90 and 95 years old. By that time, it had been about 60 years that he had last seen Jesus. That was when Jesus ascended into heaven. Now he meets him again and this beginning of what appears to be a one-day meeting turns out to be enormously important.

Not in the first place for John, but especially for the church – the church then and the church today.

This first vision shows that there is a strong and direct connection between Jesus Christ and his church. We may think sometimes that the Christian church is finished. It’s all going downhill, and the future looks bleak. But we must remember that we have the risen and exalted Christ in our midst. His

² C.S.Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Harper Collins 1950, First American Edition 2001, 146

work continues throughout the world, for the benefit of his church. Because he cares for his church.

CHRIST'S INSTRUCTION

When John begins to tell the story of what he has seen, he does so in the first person, quite emphatically: *I, John....* As a matter of fact, throughout the book he puts a lot of emphasis on this "...I..." In this chapter alone: *I was in the Spirit; I heard; I saw; I turned around; etc.*

That is not because he thinks he is so important. But it does give Revelation authenticity and authority. This comes back in 22:8, when he says: *I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things.* That is like a signature at the end to reinforce the trustworthiness of this book as direct revelation of Jesus Christ. And it makes for a fascinating personal and lively report of what is happening, a story that captivates the reader.

No, John does not brag about himself. He does not stress his authority. He does not even call himself an apostle or a prophet. On the contrary, he identifies himself with the people that will read and hear what he has to tell. *I am your brother and partner*, he says. John has the unique office of 'apostle', but he is not a distant saint who cannot relate to the hardships and struggles of his fellow believers.

In this way he comes also close to us, today. "I am your brother in the faith," he says. "I am one of you and, despite the distance in time, I share in what is going on in your lives as God's children. And that's why I ask you to trust me when I am going to tell you in my book what I have seen."

I am your partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. As our brother in the faith, John was experiencing what all Christians can expect: the painful reality of suffering! In the last days, the days between Jesus' first and second coming, the world is often a hostile place for those who believe in Jesus. The New Testament is pretty blunt about that. And Revelation is full of it.

But then, in the midst of suffering we may also experience the comfort of belonging to God's kingdom, the comfort of living in God's presence and

under the rule of Jesus Christ, our King. And because of that, even in the midst of suffering, we may know that we will be victorious. Revelation is full of that, too.

“And that’s why we can also be partners,” says John, *in patient endurance*. When your suffering makes life unbearable, you can hang in there, because of what is coming. Remain faithful and obedient. Resist the powers of sin and evil and do so consistently. Revelation issues this urgent call as well.

So, when John says these things about him and you, his purpose is to stress that you are personally involved in what is coming. “Make no mistake,” he says. “This book, with all the things that I have seen, is about you. It is about your life, your suffering, your patient endurance and the kingdom that is for you.”

Well then, he continues, *I was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus*. Patmos is a small island off the coast of Asia Minor. And although it does not say so, in so many words, he was most likely exiled as the result of his love for Jesus, for his preaching and leadership. By banning him to Patmos the authorities tried to silence him and stop his influence.

But look what happens. The exalted Christ comes and amplifies John’s voice. He makes him witness of visions that will be proclaimed all over the world. He makes his message sound louder and reach further than ever. And he does so, because the exalted Christ cares for his church everywhere with deep love and compassion.

And so, one day John meets Jesus Christ. That was amazing. We know that he had met him before. As a matter of fact, he had spent about three years of his life with Jesus. But that is a long time ago and this is totally different. This was just an incredible experience, as he tells about it in our text.

He remembers exactly what day it was. It happened on a Sunday. *On the Lord’s Day*, he says. Some think that John means “the day of the Lord” as in “the day of judgement”. But that day is still to come. No, it is the same construction that Paul uses when he talks in 1 Corinthians 11:20 about “the Lord’s Supper”.

And just as this supper in 1 Corinthians 11 belongs to the Lord, so here it is about the day that belongs to the Lord, the day that was dedicated to Jesus Christ. That is the first day of the week. For the Christian church, the day of Jesus' resurrection had become a day of praise and worship, a day of celebration, and also a day filled with hope and encouragement. For on this day the church would rejoice in the anticipation of God's final victory.

In our time we do not use this expression "the Lord's Day" very often. Most of the time we use the more secular name "Sunday". We all know what we are talking about, but perhaps we are missing something. We are worshipping on the Sunday, but if you go by the name, you could ask: why not on the Tuesday or the Friday? Some Christian churches in the Middle East worship on the Friday, because that's the day off in a Muslim country. Is there anything wrong with that?

And how does this affect the way in which we experience our day of worship? It would be good to think of ways to enhance the awareness among us that the first day of the week is the day that literally belongs to the Lord – the whole day!

At least, Christ himself found it important enough to meet John on that particular day. After all, Jesus' resurrection was also a day of new beginnings, new hope, new life. And thus, the exalted Christ chooses this day to do new things and to show John new things. On this day he would see things never seen before.

It happened while *I was in the Spirit*, he explains. That was a unique experience. The Holy Spirit of God disconnects John from the physical world around him. He can see – but not with his physical eyes. He can hear – but not with his physical ears. No, the Spirit opens wide his ears and eyes for direct communication with God, for direct spiritual contact with the exalted Christ.

And then, in this condition, John is suddenly startled by *a loud voice behind him*. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Revelation is not only a picture book, it is also a noisy book with lots of loud sounds. Here it begins already: *an unexpected loud voice like a trumpet*. And then from behind. You can imagine that John nearly jumped out of his skin.

The sound of trumpets was often a signal that would come with the announcement of an important message or instruction. That is what it is here. The loud voice instructs John: *Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches....* The bewildered apostle doesn't see anything yet, but the instruction is clear: "you are about to see things and you'll have to write an accurate report on it. Get ready!"

In other words, what John is about to see on that Lord's Day is not just for himself. He will have to pass it on to others, to his brothers and sisters, his partners in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance: his fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

"Send this document, with all its colourful and sometimes bizarre pictures, the description of what you have seen. Send it to the seven churches in the province of Asia. These churches need to read and hear what you have seen today. They will need to be alert and aware of what is really going on in this world".

And why is that? Because the exalted Christ loves them and cares for them. That is why he wants to warn and encourage and comfort his churches.

The seven that are listed here – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea – were not the only churches in Asia Minor. This order reflects a commercial travel-route from one to the next, a loop that returned to Ephesus. This was, of course, easy for delivering a copy to each church.

But there is more to it. Remember what we have seen before: in Revelation the number seven is the number of fullness. This means that these seven churches represent all the churches, the whole universal church of all times and places.

In other words: from these seven, John's picture-book will go to all the churches, all over the world, because the exalted Christ cares for all of them. In this way this unique book came also here, to you, because the exalted Christ cares just as much for you, in the church where you belong today, as he does for all his churches.

CHRIST'S APPEARANCE

As the loud voice from behind him indicated, John not only gets to hear things, he also gets to see things. And so, startled as he must have been by this voice like a sudden trumpet blast, in his vision the apostle turned around to find out who was speaking to him, and what there was to see.

Now, that was quite a sight to behold. The scene before his eyes is totally awesome! The overwhelming glory is nothing short of spectacular. John sees the first of three major appearances of Jesus Christ we find in Revelation. The other two are in Rev. 5, where Jesus is pictured as *a Lamb, standing as though it had been slain*, and in Rev. 19, where we meet him as the *Rider on the White Horse*.

Despite John's obvious shock because of what he sees, he does give us a detailed description of this amazing vision in the v.12–16. Although, if you read carefully, it turns out to be difficult to give an exact description. The whole picture is just too overwhelming, too much. He is trying to find the accurate words, but he ends up turning to similes to come as close to what it really is. And then you get expressions like: "his eyes were like..., his voice was like..., his face was like..."

And yet, what John is seeing, and the way he describes what he is seeing, looks and sounds remarkably familiar if you know the Old Testament. When you read what the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel were seeing in their visions you will notice the similarities. What Ezekiel is trying to describe (Ezekiel 1:22 – 2:2) is the appearance of the Holy and Almighty God. And in Daniel's vision (Daniel 10:1-11) we meet a Man who can be no one else but the Glorified Christ.

Here, in the final phase of history, the exalted Christ shows himself to be both.

John's description is fascinating. He begins at the periphery, and then he moves to the centre of the vision. It is as if we look through a camera with a zoom-lens, which is slowly zooming in on what is most important.

First, he sees a circle of *seven golden lampstands*. That reminds us of the lampstand that was standing in the Tabernacle (Exodus 25) or the lamp-

stands that were placed in the Temple (1 Kings 7). Those lampstands would symbolize the presence of God's people before the Holy God.

Then, in the centre of that circle, John sees *one like a son of man*. Or: "someone like a human being". Did John know right away who he was looking at? We do not know. But we do remember, and so would John, that when Jesus lived on earth, he often spoke about himself as "the Son of Man".

Here again we hear the echo of Daniel's prophecy. In Daniel 7:13,14 the prophet tells us: *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man.... And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

In the distant future Daniel sees this mysterious, exalted human figure, *a son of man*, who will bring an end to all pagan kingdoms.

Well, this has become reality in Jesus' death and resurrection. Just before he ascended into heaven Jesus declared: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me* (Matthew 28:18). Here he is: meet the exalted Christ in his glory. The effects of all this are still being worked out in the final phase of our history. And today we find ourselves right in the middle of this, as pictured in John's book of War & Victory.

The camera then focuses on the clothes and the physical features, things that display someone's status, position, or qualities. There is the *long robe and golden sash*. They show the royal status of Christ. There is the *hair white as snow*. It symbolizes his purity or wisdom. There are the *eyes like a flame of fire*. They give him the ability to see through the pretences of this world, to expose superficial faith in the church, and to penetrate in hidden corners and see the secrets of every human heart.

There are the feet *like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace*. He is ready to march to war, and to do justice with incomparable strength and energy, trampling down the evil powers.

There is the voice *like the roar of many waters*. His voice is drowning out all other sounds, the lies and deceptive rhetoric of the voices we hear every day in the world in which we live.

Then the camera zooms in on the props, and we see some odd combinations.

Seven stars in his right hand. In the Bible the ‘right hand’ is the hand of powerful protection. The exalted Christ controls the powers that be, but with the specific purpose to care for his people, to protect his church.

And then there is this *sharp, two-edged sword, coming out of Christ’s mouth.* That is a weird picture. You would expect a sword in someone’s hand, to slay the enemy and defend the innocent. That is what a sword is for, is it not? Yes it is, and this one too. This Son of Man is ready for battle. He is ready to slay his enemies and protect his church. But the battle that unfolds in Revelation is no ordinary battle.

The sword, coming out of Christ’s mouth, shows the manner in which he will conquer. His weapon is his powerful Word. *God’s Word is living and active*, says the author of Hebrews (4:12), *sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit.... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* Everything is exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

This sword of God’s Word is what we need to be prepared for the great battles we find ourselves in, as described on the pages of Revelation. Know the Word and train yourself in handling it. For the defeat of God’s enemies will be realized by the truth of the gospel, the testimony of the crucified and risen Christ.

Finally, as John zooms in on the very centre of the vision, the light increases and its brilliance intensifies to the point that it is impossible to look at. The face of this Son of Man *shines like the sun in full strength.* God’s pure character as “light” is shown in the exalted Christ. The dazzling majesty of his appearance is nothing but God’s heavenly glory. He came into this world as the true light of God to drive out the darkness of sin and evil.

The exalted Christ appears in this vision as our glorious Judge and the powerful Ruler over the church and the world. He is coming, clothed with power and majesty. He is coming to purge his church and to burn away sin. He is also coming to pour out his wrath on the evil and the wicked. Let the world tremble! Who can stand before him?

The exalted Christ appears in this vision also to wake us up and shake us up, because he cares for his church. Be filled with awe and rejoice in your exalted King.

CHRIST'S MAJESTY

The effect this vision had on John was dramatic. He falls down as if he is dead – totally overwhelmed by the holy majesty of this 'son of man'. And you can understand that. It is just too much for a weak and sinful creature, this confrontation with God's heavenly glory in the exalted Christ.

However, the purpose of this vision is not to terrify John, but to comfort and encourage him. And not only him, also the seven churches, and the church today. Yes, the vision of the exalted Christ is to comfort and encourage you and me. Here is our majestic King, our Lord-protector, in all the strife of this mortal life.

And so the majestic son of man comes and places his right hand on John with the words: *Fear not*. This is fantastic! This is wonderful, this tender gesture of love and encouragement from this fierce warrior. We all know how much good it does to feel a hand on your shoulder when you're afraid, anxious or nervous. You feel: here is someone who cares for me, someone who has compassion. Perhaps we do not do this enough – just a hand on the shoulder and an encouraging word.

But then the exalted Christ continues to clarify who he is, just to underline that John does not have to be afraid in his holy presence. And if you are John's brother or sister in the faith you do not have to be afraid either. *I am the first and the last*, says Christ. "I control the beginning of everything and the end of everything and all things in between." Do you recognize this? Indeed, Jesus Christ says the same as God the Father said about himself in v.8: *I am the Alpha and the Omega*.

The exalted Christ identifies himself entirely with Almighty God. He is God! In this way he says to John, and to the church, and to you: "Trust that nothing, absolutely nothing is beyond my power. Do not be intimidated or frightened by other powers, as so many people are in this world. Nothing

and no one beats my glorious majesty. And I care for my church. I care for you. And I will bring you safely home.”

“I am the Living One. I am the Living God. Yes, I have been dead. I died on the cross – for you. But look at me: I arose from the dead – for you. And now I am alive. And that will never change – never!”

Through his death and resurrection your Saviour defeated the powers of death. O, it is true: if there is one power in this world that seems invincible, it is the power of death. But the exalted Christ broke it. He went in the grave and came out again. Not just for himself, but for his church, for you and I who belong to him.

How does that work then? “Do not worry,” says Jesus. *I have the keys of death and Hades.* Hades follows death as the state you enter when life ends. It is like a prison from which no one can get out. You die, you go, and the door is locked behind you. That is it! But praise be to the exalted Christ, the Living God. He has the keys. He is authorized to get you out. His victory opens the dark dungeon of Hades.

This is such an enormous comfort. It is such a great source of strong hope – today already. If you die in faith, you will join the exalted Christ in heaven. But there is more to come. At the very end of history death will be no more.

A lot of frightening things will happen before we get there. But feel the right hand of the exalted Christ on your shoulder and hear his voice. “Fear not! The new world is coming and the triumph is mine. Today the book, written by John, is as relevant for you, as it was for the church in his days because I care for my church. And I promise you that one day my church will cross the final finish-line victoriously.”

How do we know?

“Listen,” says Jesus, “I will explain the mystery. Remember that you saw the seven stars in my right hand and the seven lampstands around me? These are *the churches* and *the angels of the churches.*” There are a lot of different ideas as to what these ‘angels’ are. But this is the point Jesus is making with this breathtaking vision of the exalted Christ: “with my glorious majesty and invincible power I will be in the midst of my church; in your midst – always. And I will carry you as my church – always.”

Despite the hostilities and persecution, despite our own weaknesses and our inclination to assimilate with the secular world, in the ongoing battle *the Lord Almighty, great and glorious, is on our side and goes before us.*

3. Do you really believe that *the time is near*, as it says in verse 3? How does this affect your priorities in life today, but also your activities with a long-term focus, for instance your education, your career or raising your children?
4. In v.4 and 5 God greets the churches. Quite often the same words are used to greet you and welcome you in church every Sunday. It implies that God himself is greeting you and welcoming you with these words when you come to worship. Explain why this is significant and discuss how this affects you.

Chapter 2 – Revelation 1:9-20

1. In v.9 we hear the word *tribulation*. It reflects that in the last days, the days between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming, the world is often a hostile place for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Find passages elsewhere in the New Testament that illustrate and affirm this.
2. How are you comforted and encouraged in what is going on in your life and in this world by the various details of the vision of the glorified Christ as John describes those in the verses 12 – 16?
3. John's vision of the glorified Christ causes him to *fall at his feet as though dead*. Christ then lays his hand on him and says, *fear not* (v.17). Explain what this tells you about how we should experience our relationship with Christ, and how we should worship him.
4. What makes 'golden lampstands' (v.12 and 20) a fitting image for churches? And why the plural and not just one golden lampstand as image of the one universal church?

Chapter 3 – Revelation 2:1-7

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Ephesus Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Can you, and dare you, identify what drives you, either personally or as congregation, in your Christian life and in your activities in the church, but also as church?