

11 February 2007

## "Look Who Holds the Keys"

Revelation 1:9-20

It was just another Sunday on the inhospitable island of rocky crags and quarries. The deep blue water of the Aegean Sea was a stark reminder that freedom was unattainable. We don't know how many Sundays John had already spent on the Island of Patmos. He was there as a prisoner of Rome. The surroundings were calculated to depress. But Sunday was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. John was prevented by 55 kilometres of water from attending a gathering of Christians, but he took the opportunity to worship his risen Lord despite the unfavourable circumstances. He was in a bleak and disheartening place, but he was "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.

While he was worshipping, John heard a thunderous voice and, within seconds, the rugged island of bondage was transformed into the very gate of heaven. As he heard that trumpet-like voice, his bleak surroundings faded into the background and he was captivated another kind of reality altogether.

Before he could move, he heard the instruction: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Instinctively he turned to see the commanding voice that was speaking to him. What he saw was to have a profound impact on him and on millions of others down through history. Before we consider the appearance, we need to be clear on two matters.

- John *saw* this; it was not a literary fabrication. Whether this was a vision or, as some argue, an external appearance to him, it was an actual experience that he had.
- His mind was saturated in the Old Testament Scriptures. Since the same God who inspired the Old Testament writers was appearing to John, we may expect that there would be a link between what he saw and what has previously been revealed. As John attempted to put into words what he saw, Old Testament pictures would readily have come to mind. Michael Wilcock suggests that this is "a working over in color of a picture we already know in outline."<sup>1</sup>

### I 'SOMEONE LIKE A SON OF MAN'

A. As John turns, he sees seven golden lampstands. He was familiar with the Menorah – the seven-branched lampstand in the temple. But these lampstands are

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 39.

separate and they seem to be in a circle. His eyes are immediately drawn to the one right there in the middle of the lampstands. John is riveted to the spot by the compelling sight. All at once he sees the imposing features. There is splendour; there is magnificence; there is majesty; there is authority.

- B. If we were to see Jesus today, he would probably not look like this. What we have here is *symbolic* rather than *pictorial*. Every feature of this appearance conveys something to John and to those to whom he will report this epiphany. And every feature is a valid portrayal of who Jesus is for us today.
- C. John says: “Among the lampstands was one like a son of man.” If we are to understand this appearance and the book as a whole, this is where we must start.
1. The term “son of man” can simply be another way of saying, “human being.”
  2. But this was the term Jesus used most frequently to describe himself. Think of some of the statements he made about himself: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10) “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) No sooner had Peter identified him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, than he began to explain to his disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law.” (Mark 8:31) Speaking about his return, he said, “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming with the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” (Mt 24:30) Think of Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked him: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus, “and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Caiaphas tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy.” (Mark 14:61, 62)
  3. Clearly Jesus is referring to a particular passage in the Book of Daniel (and so is John).

As I looked,  
thrones were set in place,  
and the Ancient of Days  
took his seat.  
His clothing was as white as snow;  
the hair of his head  
was white like wool.  
His throne was flaming with fire,  
and its wheels were all ablaze.

A river of fire was flowing,  
coming out from before him,  
Thousands upon thousands  
attended him;  
Ten thousand times ten thousand  
stood before him;  
The court was seated,  
and the books were opened.

In my vision at night I looked,  
and there before me was one like a son of man,  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
He approached the Ancient of Days  
and was led into his presence.  
He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;  
all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away,  
and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

No wonder Ethelbert Stauffer contends that the title Son of Man is just about the most pretentious title anyone could use.<sup>2</sup>

## II HERE'S WHAT JOHN SAW

- A. Please note how frequently the word “*like*” occurs in the passage. John reaches for similes to describe what he sees. I am reminded of Ezekiel’s reaction when he was given a vision of the LORD. He too could only use approximations to describe what he saw: “This was the *appearance* of the *likeness* of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.” (Ezek 1:28)
- B. ***“He was dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.”***
1. This is how both the high priest and kings dressed. We know that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest and the King of kings.
  2. It was customary for the priest to wear the sash around his waist while he was working. Once the work had been accomplished, it was worn across the chest.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>.Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 43-4.

C. ***“His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow.”***

Interestingly, it is the Ancient of Days, and not the Son of Man, who is described in this way in Daniel 7. This unusual term is no doubt a figurative way of referring to God’s eternity. The white hair speaks of his infinite wisdom. The Son of Man is not actually described by Daniel but when John sees him, he has the attributes of the Ancient of Days.

D. ***“His eyes were like blazing fire.”***

These are the eyes of omniscience. That penetrating gaze can see right through us.

E. ***“His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace”***

The Book of Daniel seems to be in John’s mind as he encounters the Lord. In chapter 2, there is a description of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. He saw an imposing statue made of gold and silver and bronze and iron and clay, representing the kingdoms of the world. It was impressive to the eye but it was standing on unsteady feet. Then there was that rock cut out but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet. The metals were pulverized and blown away without a trace. “But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”

Daniel interprets the dream for us: “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” The image stood on unsteady feet consisting of a mixture of iron and clay. Eventually, when it was struck on those feet by a rock, it collapsed. By contrast, the feet of the Son of Man are strong and firm and steady. They have been strengthened by fire.

F. ***“His voice was like the sound of rushing waters.”***

Every aspect of the vision conveys something of the awesome majesty of the exalted Lord. As befits his divine majesty, his voice reverberates and can only be compared to the sound of rushing waters. When he spoke, his voice drowned out the familiar sound of the breakers crashing against the rocky shore of Patmos.

G. ***“In his right hand he held seven stars.”***

Here it simply says he had the seven stars, but the grammatical construction in chapter 2 makes it clear that he didn’t simply have hold of them – they were in the palm of his hand. He held them completely. They were in his control.

H. ***“Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.”***

We are familiar with the imagery here, from other parts of Scripture. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit. (Eph 6:17) It is sharper than any two-edged sword. (Heb 4:12) When he speaks his word gets right to the secret places; “it penetrates even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

I. ***“His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”***

Light emanates from the being of God. John says, “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5) Paul reminds us that God lives in unapproachable light.” (1 Tim 6:16) How fitting that the face of the one who is described as “the radiance of his glory” (Heb 1:3) should be “like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

**Imagine it**, if you can:

The spotless, long robe of the Royal High Priest

The golden sash around his chest

The glistening white hair

Those penetrating eyes

The feet glowing like bronze in a furnace, steady, sure and about to administer justice.

That loud, resonant voice like the breakers booming against the rocky shores of Patmos

That sharp, double-edged sword

And that face, like the sun in all its brilliance.

**III RESPONSE**

- A. John could not have looked at that scene for long. Some 60 years before, he had reclined at Jesus’ side. He had witnessed something of the anguish of Gethsemane. He had experienced the overwhelming brilliance of the Mount of Transfiguration. He had been at the cross and he had spoken face to face with the risen Christ. He could write, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (1 John 1:14) This same John fell at the feet of the exalted Christ as though dead, completely overcome by this glorious manifestation of the living Lord.

- B. The Lord placed his right hand upon John and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead, and look I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and of Hades.”
1. John knows full well what he is recording. Those words were awe-inspiring but, in themselves, they would not have surprised him. He had a “high” Christology. The risen Lord described himself as **“the First and the Last.”** Those words parallel the words of the Lord God Almighty, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, who is and who was and who is to come. (1:8) John would also have been aware of the LORD’S statement recorded in Isaiah: “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” (Is 44:6; 48:12)
  2. **“I am the Living One.”** This too is a declaration of deity. The words of John 5:26 come to mind: “For as the Father has life in himself so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”
  3. **“I was dead.”** Here is a statement every bit as amazing as the great paradoxical declarations of John’s Gospel. (John 1:1, 10) The RSV renders this, “I died.” That’s because it can read, “I became dead.” On the Day of Pentecost, Peter announced the resurrection in these terms: “God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” (Acts 2:24)
  4. **“And look, I am alive for ever and ever.”** We who believe in Jesus’ resurrection know that. John knew that. But think of the effect of those powerful words upon him. The Writer to the Hebrews contrasts Jesus’ high priesthood with that of Aaron’s descendants. Under the Aaronic priesthood, one priest would succeed another “since death prevented them from continuing in office, but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.” (Heb 7:23, 24)
  5. **“And I hold the keys of death and of Hades.”** Oh how those imperilled Christians in Asia Minor needed to hear that! It is their risen Lord who holds these all-important keys. We too need to remember that. God has always been sovereign, but it took an act of his in time to reverse the effects of the curse pronounced against humanity when we rebelled. “Death entered through sin and death came to all because all sinned.” (Rom 5:12) And death reigned until one man who didn’t have to die voluntarily tasted death for each one of us. Did he not say, “No one takes (my life) from me; I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again”? (John 10:18) But the “Living One” walked right into the jaws of death and removed its sting by succumbing to it. He “suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” He shared in our humanity “so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil.”

(Heb 2: 9, 14)

Remember that if ever your life is threatened. Remember that if one day you receive a dreaded diagnosis. Take it to heart now, even if death seems a long way off. The words of the last stanza of “In Christ Alone” are particularly relevant in this context:

No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath  
Jesus commands my destiny  
No power of hell, no scheme of man  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Till He returns or calls me home  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand

#### **IV EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE BOOK FLOWS FROM THIS VISION (THEOPHANY)**

- A. It was a unique occurrence – not one that we may expect to recur.
- B. But its implications for us are the same as they would be if this had happened yesterday. Let me mention just four:

1. He is right here among us.

When John turned to see the voice that was speaking to him, he was among (literally, “in the middle of”) the lampstands. In chapter two, we are told that he “*walks* among the seven golden lampstands.” (2:1) This important truth is both sobering and encouraging.

It is one thing to affirm, in theory, the reality of his presence and another to conduct ourselves in the light of the fact that he is here. Too often we have left him in history or we imagine that he is far off somewhere. But, by the presence of the Holy Spirit he *is* here. And, if he is present, how foolish it would be to try to operate as if he were not!

He is right here among us. *Let us never forget it!*

2. His majesty is awe-inspiring.

John fell at his feet as though dead. Think of how Elijah pulled his cloak over his face when the Lord “appeared” to him on Mount Sinai. (1 Kings 19:13) And of Isaiah who saw the LORD, high and lifted up, through a smoke-filled temple, and said, “Woe to me, I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Is 6:5) Ezekiel saw “what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure

like that of a man.” He explains his reaction: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown.” (Ezek 1:26-28) Simon Peter fell at Jesus’ knees and said “Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man.” (Luke 5:8)

I am convinced that we have too weak a picture of Jesus. We emphasize his love and we celebrate his grace and so we should. But, in the process, we have “domesticated” him into “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” The Jesus of many an imagination is sweet and sentimental – and sometimes downright pathetic. His love is and always was a *strong* love. His submission was never weakness. He now appears in majesty. He is the Son of Man. By a double entitlement, he possesses “authority, glory and sovereign power. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Dan 7:14)

When we have a weakened picture of Jesus, we are the great losers. A church facing the intimidating might of Rome needs a strong Saviour. We who face a more subtle but no less deadly form of attack, need to see our Lord in his risen and exalted majesty. He has feet of burnished bronze, eyes like blazing fire; the double-edged sword that extends from his mouth cuts through sham and subterfuge; his voice is like the sound of rushing waters; and his face is like the sun shining in its brilliance.

His majesty is awe-inspiring. *Revere him!*

3. He is in complete control.

Is that not the most important truth this appearance is meant to convey to John, to his readers in Asia Minor, and to us today? So many things are not as they seem. That’s because we live in a fallen and “as-yet-unredeemed” world. The conflict continues and the King has yet to come to earth “with power and great glory”. But the one who is “the First and the Last,” who “died and is alive for ever and ever,” and who “holds the keys of death and of Hades,” is in control. If, for the moment, the Dragon seems to have the upper hand, that is not the full picture. That’s not how things will eventually be. That’s not how things were when Jesus went to the cross in apparent weakness. That’s not how things really are now.

He is in complete control. *There is nothing to fear!*

4. He has something to say to us.

As we move into chapters two and three, there are seven messages, one to each of the churches. The number seven is not accidental. Yes, there were churches in the seven cities mentioned here, and each one is addressed specifically. But seven is the number of completeness and it recurs throughout the book. (There are “seven Spirits,” seven seals, seven

trumpets and seven bowls). It is *not* true that the seven churches represent seven periods in the history of the church. From a biblical point of view, that notion is contrived and from a historical point of view it is untenable. (If we have to force an interpretation and be very selective in our reading of history, it is likely that we are on the wrong track). But each of these messages contains the words, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” So, *each* one of us is to listen to *all* that is said. Everything that is said is instructive and helpful and some of the statements (insights, rebukes, and encouragements) may be particularly applicable to you, to me, or to us as a church.

He has something to say to us. *Listen for it!* And don't let's rationalize it away. If he wants to tell us that we have forsaken our first love, let's be open to hearing that. His words are penetrating, but they are kind. If he exposes our position as one of lukewarmness, let's remember that he also says, “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline.” If he commends us for our faithfulness, we do not need to be bashful. Let us bow humbly and thank him for the grace he has given us. When he assures those who overcome that they will sit down with him on his throne, let's ponder the meaning of this amazing promise.

He has something to say to us. *Let's listen for it!*

### **Conclusion**

We are not undertaking this series to satisfy curiosity or to tickle fancy. It is an opportunity for us to come face to face with our risen and exalted Lord. We want to get his perspective on time and on the real meaning of human history. We want to hear his evaluation of our situation. We want to grow in grace as a result of this encounter. If we are to grow in grace, our ears and our hearts will have to be open. In considering his message to the churches over the next few weeks, we shall be asking: “Lord, what do you have to say to us?”

As we continue our study, we are in for a treat. We shall see the Lord in his glory. We'll witness the great cosmic battle between the Dragon and the Lamb - and we shall see its outcome. We shall see how God wraps up history, eliminating evil from the universe and restoring us to full fellowship with himself.

I'm excited because I believe there is a genuine hunger among us to grow closer to God. As we study the book, let God do something deep down within you. Right now, let's strip away our defences and present ourselves to him. “Speak Lord, your servants are listening.”