

AWESTRUCK

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 1:9-20

Second Message

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Revelation 1:9-20

In the science fiction movie *Contact*, Jodie Foster plays a scientist who enters a complex machine designed to help her make contact with an advanced civilization on another planet. Upon seeing this other world, she is overwhelmed by its beauty and struggles to describe it. Awestruck, all she can say is, “No words. No words to describe it. Poetry. They should have sent a poet. So beautiful. Beautiful. So beautiful. So beautiful. I had no idea. I had no idea. I had no idea.”

The apostle John may have had more of a way with words than Jodie Foster’s character, but he too struggles to describe what he sees in Revelation 1:9-20. He too is awestruck. Fortunately for us, he’s able to put some words to what he sees so that we can use our imaginations to picture it too.

Perhaps we too will be awestruck.

Tribulation in Jesus

Revelation 1:9-11:

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. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 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 has already said that Jesus has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” so that we might represent God to people and bring people to God, not least by interceding for them (Revelation 1:6). Now John says that he shares with his readers—and, by extension, us—not only the kingdom but also “tribulation” and “patient endurance,” all of which are “in Jesus.”

For John, tribulation takes the form of exile. John has been sent to the island of Patmos, evidently by Roman authorities, because of his involvement with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He has been confined, but the Spirit of God is not confined. While John was literally “in” Patmos, he was also “in” the Spirit: he became receptive to an explosive vision.

You can’t have the kingdom without tribulation. But if you have the kingdom, and if you’re in Jesus because you believe in him, you have what it takes to endure tribulation, whatever form it takes. Many people become more receptive to the Spirit when they are in tribulation. In this way, God helps them endure tribulation.

A voice, with the strength and clarity of a trumpet blast, commissions John to “write what you see.” [In Exodus 19:16 and 20:18, a loud trumpet signals the presence of God.] Earlier, John said that the letter he’s writing conveys “all that he saw” (Revelation 1:2). Beginning with verse 12, John describes what he saw. The book of Revelation largely consists of a report concerning what John saw, with very little interpretation. I will do my best in the book of Revelation to interpret what John saw, but not to the diminishment of experiencing what John saw, for Revelation is nothing if not a visual experience.

John earlier addressed “the seven churches that are in Asia”; now we learn that the voice commissioned him to write to those churches, and we also learn the identity of those churches.

John hears a voice. At this point, we may be just as curious as John: whose voice is it?

Identity of the voice

Revelation 1:12-16:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white,

like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

When John turns around, he sees the individual with the trumpet-like voice, “one like a son of man.” In the prophet Daniel’s vision, “one like a son of man” represents God’s people and ascends to God to receive the universal and eternal kingdom of God (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus, of course, identified himself as the Son of Man (Mark 14:62). When he rose from the dead and ascended to God, he filled out Daniel’s vision. Jesus appears to John as the glorified and eternal king of all creation.

John gives us a detailed description of Jesus’ appearance, although he struggles to define what he sees because he’s never seen anything like this before. Therefore, he repeatedly uses the word “like”—e.g., “His eyes were like a flame of fire . . .” A poet couldn’t have done any better.

But what does it mean? Jesus himself interprets two aspects of the vision in verse 20: the seven stars in his right hand represent the angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches. We’re left to work out for ourselves, with the help of the rest of the Scriptures, other aspects of the description.

The tabernacle of old featured a golden lampstand with seven lamps (Exodus 25:37, 37:23). Israel, and later the church, was to be the light of the world (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, Matthew 5:14). In that Jesus is “in the midst of the lampstands,” he is present with the churches to help them fulfill their vocation to be the light of the world.

The long robe and sash indicate that Jesus is king or priest—or both (1 Samuel 18:4; Exodus 28:4, 31). He is, of course, both king and priest. Roman soldiers mocked Jesus by clothing him with a robe and placing a crown of thorns on his head as if he were a king to be revered (Matthew 27:27-31). What would they say if they could see this vision of Jesus? The sash around the chest, as opposed to the waist, indicates that he has finished a task—in this case, that he has died for the sins of the world.

The whiteness of his hair indicates ageless, divine wisdom (Daniel 7:9). The flame-like appearance of his

eyes represents the penetrating vision of a judge. His bronze-like feet convey strength and purity, especially as a judge who burns away evil (Ezekiel 1:7, Daniel 2:3, 10:6; Revelation 2:18, 19:12). His voice, already described as like that of a loud trumpet, is now likened to the power of “many waters,” along the lines of the voice of God himself, drowning out all other voices (Ezekiel 1:24, 43:2). In that Jesus holds seven stars in his right hand, he rules both the cosmos and the angels that minister to the churches.

The sword emerging from Jesus’ mouth indicates that he is a warrior (Isaiah 49:2; Revelation 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). In that the sword comes from his mouth, he fights not with weapons but with words, especially the words of the Gospel message. In the New Testament, “the word of God” is usually the Gospel message.

If you want to know who someone is, you look at his face. Jesus’ face, more than anything else, tells you who he is. The description of his face, shining like the sun in full strength, gathers together the entirety of the vision. The transfiguration of Jesus, when his face “shone like the sun,” anticipated his glorified state, which the current vision conveys (Matthew 17:2). Here is a vision of Jesus from head to toe in all his glory.

Visualize Jesus

The vision of Jesus conveys truth of who is and what he does. Consider the meaning of each aspect of John’s description. Spend time meditating on who Jesus is and what he does.

Note, however, that Jesus does not commission John to write about who he is and what he does; he commissions John to write what he sees. John, therefore, does not declare, as Paul might in one of his letters, that Jesus is the glorified and eternal king of all creation, that he is our high priest who died for the sins of the world; and that he judges the world with perfect wisdom. John is more visual than propositional.

Propositions can move us and inspire us. Images can move us and inspire us in a different way. Some people will remember particularly meaningful encounters with other people and say, even decades later, something like, “I’ll never forget the look on her face.” If we interpret the vision without experiencing it, we risk domesticating it. Based on Revelation 1:12-16, meditate on who Jesus is and what he does but also use your imagination to picture the image of Jesus that John describes.

Picture seven golden lampstands. Picture, in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man clothed with a long robe, with a golden sash around his chest. Picture the hairs of his head, white like wool, like snow. Picture his eyes: they're like a flame of fire. Picture his feet: they're like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace. Hear his voice: it's like the roar of many waters. Picture his right hand: he's holding seven stars. Picture a sharp, two-edged sword coming out his mouth. Picture his face: it's like the sun, shining in full strength.

What do you see? What do you feel? What do you want to do?

Now, think about this. You can't look at the sun. Sure you can look at the sun with those special eclipse glasses, but when you do, you won't be looking at the sun in its full strength, because the glasses will protect your eyes. Note that John doesn't say, "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I put on my special eclipse glasses." He looks full into Jesus' face, which is shining like the sun in full strength. How can he do that? I don't know.

How can we do that? I don't know.

What do you do when you see a vision like this? What does John do?

Like a dead man

Revelation 1:17-18:

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

John not only writes what he sees, but he also describes his experience of what he sees. When he sees Jesus in this way, he falls at his feet like a dead man. Wouldn't you? This is a white-hot, bone-shaking, drop-dead vision Jesus. John falls down like a dead man because in one respect he should be dead, just like we should all be dead—and worse—because of our sins.

One the one hand, John has every reason to be afraid: the one whom he is falling before burns away evil with his feet and a sword is coming out of his mouth. On the other hand, Jesus touches John with his right hand, the hand that holds the stars, and says, "Fear not."

Jesus then identifies himself along the lines of the Lord God, who declared himself as "the Alpha and the Omega": the first and the last (Revelation 1:8). Likewise, in Isaiah, God identified himself in this way: "I am the first and I am the last; / besides me there is no god" (Isaiah 44:6b). Jesus also identifies himself as "the living one" along the lines of "the living God" (Deuteronomy 32:40, 1 Samuel 17:36, Revelation 4:9). Jesus identifies himself as the God of Israel, the living God, the one true God, who created all things and will bring all things to fulfillment.

Having conquered death in his resurrection, Jesus now has the keys both of death and Hades, the place of the dead. We are all subject to the power of death, but death is subject to the power of Jesus. One day, death and Hades will give up their dead (Revelation 20:13).

John fell at Jesus' feet like a dead man, but if Jesus is the first and the last, if he has the power over death, if he places his right hand on John's shoulder and if John doesn't die, then what is Jesus doing here? Jesus is here to assure him ("fear not") and to commission him (verse 19).

Fall down

What do you do when you see a vision like John saw, or even if you use your imagination to picture what John saw? You might do what he did: you might fall down like a dead man. You might fall down knowing that you should be dead. Jesus is the God of Israel, the living God, the one true God. The Jews, based on their Scriptures, did not consider this kind of encounter with God to be good for one's long-term health prospects (Exodus 33:20). God is holy; humans are not.

We should be dead because of our sins, for the way that we have treated God. More than that, we should be in hell because of our sins. There is no goodness in any of us that recommends us to Jesus, especially as he reveals himself to us in Revelation 1. Woe am I! I am ruined.

Right now, I have some questions for you. Do you believe in Jesus? Have you given your allegiance to him? Are you endeavoring to follow him, however haltingly? If the answer is no to these questions, then you have reason to be concerned about your standing with God, both now and, more importantly, forever. For unless you're able to answer yes to these questions, you may meet Jesus at the end, and he will not say to you what he says to John verse 18. He might say something like, "I never knew you; depart from me" (Matthew 7:23). Believe in Jesus. Give your allegiance to him. Start following him.

If you believe in Jesus, then use your imagination again. Feel Jesus' right hand on you. Hear him say to you, "Fear not." He has not come to destroy you. He has come to assure you.

Jesus comes to assure us. But that's not the only reason he's come. He also has something for us to do. What's that?

Commissioned to write

Revelation 1:19-20:

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 20 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 has already commissioned John to write what he sees in a book and send it to the seven churches, but John didn't know it was Jesus then. Now he knows. Does he ever! If someone appeared to you in such a way and identified himself to you in such a way and both assured you and commissioned you, you'd want to obey such a person. John obeys.

Jesus tells John to write "the things that you have seen," which he further defines as "those that are and those that are to take place after this." The things that John has seen, then, would be everything that he has seen by the time he writes his letter. What John sees relates to both the present ("those that are") and the future ("those that are to take place after this"). Revelation, like the rest of the New Testament, conveys the "now" and the "not yet": the kingdom of God has been inaugurated with the first coming of Christ and will be consummated with the final coming of Christ.

Revelation also includes things that, even from John's perspective, have been—e.g., the birth and death of the Messiah. The book mirrors the Lord God himself, "who is and who was and who is to come" (Revelation 1:4, 8). What the prophet Daniel expected in the latter days has come upon John and the seven churches—and us (Daniel 2:28-29).

Tell what you see

If John encounters Jesus, and Jesus commands him to write what he sees, what does Jesus say to those of us

who have encountered him? Tell what you have seen of Jesus, especially what you have seen him do for you.

This is what Mary Magdalene did on the first Easter Sunday. She came to the tomb of Jesus, not expecting to see what she saw of course: she saw Jesus, the living one, who died, yes, but who is alive forevermore. Then she left the tomb and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18).

Note: you do not have to tell what you haven't seen; you do not need to tell what you don't know. What you haven't seen and what you don't know may hold you back, but it shouldn't, because you have a unique and powerful story to tell.

Although it is true that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), it is also true that what he does in each life is unique, because each person is unique. If you have met Jesus and you are following him, you have a unique, one-of-a-kind, once-in-history story to tell. It is a powerful story, because it involves Jesus and because it involves what he has done for you.

We not only need to be a Bible-teaching community, but we also need to be a story-telling community. In Equip, the Sunday school class I help lead, we're almost always encountering some biblical text, and people are often telling personal stories that illustrate what the text means to them. We also build into our worship services what we call "Life Together" so that you can share with us what you have seen the Lord do. In the men's groups that I lead, I announce to them up front: no one gets out of here without telling his story.

My objective in preaching is to search for God in the Scriptures, especially as he is revealed in Jesus Christ, and to tell you what I see. Each text, each sermon, is a spiritual adventure. There is always the hope that I will find something that hits me in just the right way, and there is always the hope that something I say will hit you in just the right way—all because of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus healed a demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, he told him,

"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you," at which point the man "went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him" (Luke 8:39). Indeed, tell what Jesus has done for you.

Look full in his wonderful face

The apostle Paul writes that the Spirit transforms as we behold the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). John shows us the face of Christ, shining like the sun. If what Paul says is true and if we have used John's words to visualize Christ, even the face of Christ, then perhaps we've been changed a little bit by our time together today.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in his wonderful face / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim / In the light of his glory and grace.”