

FGBC: The Son and His Churches: Cosmic Jesus

Revelation 1:9-20
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Revelation is a strange book full of angels and demons and lions and lambs and dragons and horses and all sorts of other things that can make your dark house go “bump” in the night.¹

It’s strange, but it’s far from irrelevant. In fact it’s exactly the book we need just like it was exactly the book the early Christians needed. Now why?

Well, John writes at the end of the 1st century. Persecution had been ramping up since Jesus left and Christians were suffering. Nero had come in the middle of the century but now Domitian was there and he was all about systematically tearing the church apart. And he had some diabolically creative ideas.

Under his lead churches were sniffed out and Jesus followers were torn in pieces by horses. They would bind your arms and legs in ropes and attach them to the backs of horses which were then whipped to run in different directions. And they would tear your limbs off. Others had holes drilled in their skull and molten lead poured in. Others were mercifully thrown to the lions or dressed up as barbarians and cut apart by gladiators. Domitian turned the well-oiled Roman war machine into a fine-tuned torture tractor with the goal of making Christians reconsider their allegiance.

But something totally unexpected happened. It is an established historical fact that in the face of oppression the church grew. For some reason people saw death and destruction and signed up in droves to follow Jesus.

How did that happen? Well one of the big factors was the book of Revelation. Today is our second week in this series and we are picking it up in Revelation 1 starting in verse 9 which starts out: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and the kingdom.”

John wrote Revelation to his brothers and sisters in the first century church as persecution was accelerating: lions and lead and limbs torn asunder. They knew suffering and were about to know it more. And yet Revelation inspired perseverance.

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People are suffering today too. You are very likely suffering in some way. And suffering is one of the major reasons people struggle in their faith. If God is real how come bad things happen to good people like me? Why is work so hard? Why is my health faltering? Why can’t my family get along? Why?

¹ Introduction adapted from Tim Keller “The Cosmic King” <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-cosmic-king-6257/> (Accessed September 13, 2019)

Now I'm going to go out on a limb and say none of us are suffering the way the early church suffered, but that doesn't mean your suffering isn't real. King Solomon said "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can fully share its joy."² In other words there is no objective scale of suffering such that because someone got their limbs torn off my broken relationships only hurt 3 out of 10. That's not how it works. Everyone's suffering is equally real to them.

And so, into suffering Jesus inspires John with a picture. And the result was that the church grew like mad. It is estimated that at the end of the first century there were just several thousand Christians, but by 300AD that number had grown to around 30 million – half the empire. Constantine didn't make Rome Christian, it had already happened. Instead of sizzling out faith flourished. And if John's picture was strong enough to do this to the people suffering under Domitian then it's strong enough to do it for you.

So what was this picture that John gave them? It was a picture of Jesus. But not Jesus like they knew Him. Not Jesus as He was. Not the water walking, leprosy healing, crowd feeding, death defeating Jesus, but Jesus as He is now – the cosmic Jesus.

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Alright, grab your Bibles and open them up to Revelation 1. We are going to pick up the text today in verse 9 and go down to the end of the chapter. Let me read you John's vision of Jesus as He is now. Would you stand as we read God's word.

[Read Revelation 1:9-20]

John has a picture from Jesus about Jesus that the church needs to see. Now Revelation is actually full of pictures. If you've read this book there is all sorts of weird imagery, but in his book "Discipleship on the Edge" Darrell Johnson gives an incredibly insightful hint about how to read these pictures. He says they are like political cartoons.

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So I've got two cartoons for you here that have appeared in Canadian press over the last few months. And if you're familiar with the political cartoon genre you know that artists use license to make a point. So they don't draw events as they physically happened, they draw them distorted to make what actually happened visible.

So in the first cartoon we have Trudeau and Trump. And the topic is the North American Free Trade Agreement – that's what the Briefcase says. One politician is well put together, the other looks like a buffoon. But looks aren't what matters. One is small and weak the other is huge. One speaks first the other gets the last word. One is shaking hands and the other says "pull my finger." It's a picture of what happened.

Here's the second cartoon. There's a beaver reading a book called "The joys of a Canadian Autumn" and drinking a Tim's. And he's about to be crushed by a steam roller driven by the four major contenders in our election. It's irrelevant what Canadians want to do this Autumn because a big election is looming.

² Proverbs 14:10

Actually I want to stop for a second and say this is a big election for Jesus followers. Actually it's big for religious people across the country. And that's because, among other things, freedom of religion and freedom of speech are under attack and the outcome of this election is going to dramatically affect life as we know it.

So I don't know if you've ever voted in a federal election before. Canadians 18 and older can do this and about 70% of us do. But if you haven't voted before I want to stress that this is the election to make sure you do. Now how do you know who to vote for? Well the pastors across the city are in the process of putting together an all parties debate. We are going to ask questions about religious freedom and freedom of speech at the debate as well as other pertinent issues, and you will see where the parties differ so you can vote your conscience. But this is big, don't miss it.

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That's Canadian politics, here's the point as far as understanding Revelation goes – the pictures are like political cartoons. So nobody thinks coffee drinking rodents are in danger. And nobody believes Trump really weighs six times as much as Trudeau – maybe twice. But the pictures mean something. And it's the same in Revelation.

So there are 7 pictures of Jesus in the book. We get the first one today – the cosmic Jesus with burning eyes, bronze feet, a sword in His mouth and seven stars in His hands. That's a big Jesus! But it's also a strange Jesus. It's a political cartoon Jesus. It isn't meant to be taken literally. There is meaning behind every aspect of the picture. And it's the meaning that matters.

And the pictures are going to continue like this. Next we are going to get Jesus the Lamb with seven horns – any farmers ever seen a lamb like that? Then Jesus the child that the dragon wants to kill – dragons don't exist. Later we will get Jesus the King and then Jesus on a horse and finally Jesus the temple – nobody thinks Jesus is made of bricks. But there is meaning behind the pictures.

Now why would John write like this? Well it's not because Jesus tells him to. Notice in verse 11 Jesus says "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches." This is not the same as write down what I tell you. It's much harder to write what you see than simply transcribing what someone says. So John says "Jesus is like this." But what Jesus shows him is what we need to see.

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Let's look at the picture. It's a complicated one. John describes Jesus in 11 ways. And each of them provides an aspect of something the church needed and needs to hear. Every word is significant, but we don't have time to hit them all, but I'll give you several.

So in verse 12 John turns to see the voice that speaks. And he sees a person. He knows this person. It's Jesus who walked around with him 60 years ago. John laid his head on Jesus' breast. John followed Jesus and he loved Him. And so there is no mistaking who he is looking at.

But Jesus isn't the same. And that's because Jesus knows John needs more – he's on Patmos! And the church needs more – there's lions and lead and limbs torn asunder. And we need more. And so Jesus is more. Friends, it doesn't matter what you are facing Jesus is more than enough. And John looks and see Jesus standing among the lampstands like a "son of man."

Now "son of man" is a Hebraic way of saying person, and Jesus is a person, but that's not what John's saying. John got this lingo from two sources. First, this was Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself – Jesus was constantly calling Himself the Son of Man. But both John and Jesus got this from someone else. 600 years before Jesus Daniel recorded a vision God gave him writing this:

As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into His presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey Him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

This is the tradition John is referring to as he writes. So the Son of Man is no ordinary human. He's Jesus, eternally wielding all the authority, honor and sovereignty in the universe.

Jesus is huge. He's holding stars in his hands. He's got a sword in His mouth. His eyes are blazing. He's omnipotent. He's alert and aware. He's totally in control. This is Cosmic Jesus³, not as He was, but as He is.

And here's the picture. Friends, the church of John's day was weak and vulnerable. It was under attack and suffering. Things had never been as bad as they were. And while none of us are facing lions or lead or limbs torn asunder some of us are suffering in real ways. What's going on in your life right now? When you suffer your faith is on the line. The question is, will it shrivel or will it thrive?

The answer is "it depends what you're looking at." And Jesus knows this and so appears as His cosmic self. His message is "Whatever you are facing I'm big enough to handle it." I'm infinitely powerful. Your problems, no matter how terrible, haven't caught Me off guard. I Am in control. I Am. That's the picture. But there is more.

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Jesus is among seven lampstands. And this is the second picture I want to draw out.

Now we know from verse 20 that these seven lampstands and seven stars are the churches John to write to. These are the Jesus followers who were living within John's influence. And these are the Christians of all time – seven means all of us. And Cosmic Jesus is in the middle.

³ "Cosmic Jesus" is adapted from Darrell Johnson's "Discipleship on the Edge" (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing), 2004.

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Over the next seven weeks we are going to look at the seven churches. And seven times Jesus is going to say “I know” what you are going through. I know your deeds. I know the slander you are facing. I know where you live. I know you don’t have much strength left. I know. Jesus knows. And He knows because He’s right in the middle of His churches.

So not only is Jesus powerful and in control. He is present. He’s not above looking down. He’s not aloof unaffected. He’s in the middle of His churches and He’s in the middle of whatever it is you are walking through. And if you will respond by loving and trusting Him He is prepared to use His infinite power to cause everything you are experiencing to work together for your good. That’s the picture, but there’s more.

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Third John starts describing what Jesus wears. Now what we wear says a lot about who we are and what we’ve come to do. Part of the election steamroller is piles of pictures in every newsfeed about politicians. So this week I saw Trudeau wear a crisp white collared shirt and black tie signifying “I’m professional and in control.” And Sheer wore blue jeans and a windbreaker as he got off a bus signifying “I understand normal people.”

And Jesus is wearing a robe down to the floor and a golden sash around his chest. Now this isn’t a play out of Jagmeet Singh’s book, this is a High Priest’s robe like the one Aaron wore. And his sash is around his chest. If you wear a belt around your waste you are ready to work, but a sash around your chest is a sign of accomplishment.

And so Jesus is dressed to be our priest and mediator. He’s the one who spans the gap between the Holy Father and sinful humanity. And He’s not working because the work is already done. The final sacrifice has been made. The payment blood has been spilled and our sins are atoned for. And this mediator priest is for you. Jesus is on your side – that’s why He’s here. That’s the picture, but there’s more.

The robe is also a king’s robe – Jesus is king and in control. And His hair is white like wool – snow white. Jesus is wise. He’s been around and seen it all. And His eyes are on fire. Jesus is snow pure, but He’s also fire purifying. His gaze as He looks at you penetrates any barrier you’ve erected, or mask you are wearing. But His eyes don’t burn to destroy, they burn to cleanse. And His feet are like burning bronze. They are strong, firm and tested. His kingdom will not crumble.

On and on the pictures go, and the readers – them and us – see Jesus as He is right now. And hope sparks. Jesus is enough. No matter what I’m facing Jesus is enough.

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There is one final picture that I want to bring out for you, and that is Jesus with the seven stars in His right hand.

Now Jesus tells us the meaning of the seven stars and seven lampstands – they are the churches and the angels of the churches. But the imagery here would have been so familiar to people in the first century that they would have seen something else as well.

It's like stumbling across a pair of Golden Arches. Everyone knows that means burgers and other forms of fatty goodness that bad parents like me use to pacify our children – judge if you need to.

But as soon as you start talking about Cosmic Jesus holding seven stars in His hands first century Greco-Roman citizens saw something specific. In first century Rome there were seven planets known. And these seven planets traversed the sky as gods. And astrology was huge as people lived as though all of life was under the sway of the planets. And one of the Greek goddesses, Hekate, held stars in her hands and called herself the beginning and the end. And emperors used this imagery as well adorning their thrones with stars and planets. So in this sense Cosmic Jesus isn't a new idea, He's an alternative reality.

It's like the battle Moses found himself in the midst of as YHWH fought Pharaoh to let His people go. Now Jesus was doing battle with the Greco-Roman world. So Hekate doesn't hold the stars. She isn't the beginning and the end. The planet gods don't control your destiny, Jesus is the Alpha and Omega. The Son of Man is Lord of the cosmos. He holds it all together.

And this is the picture we need to see. In the midst of lions and lead and limbs torn asunder; in the midst of the worst thing you have experienced we need to see Jesus, not as He was, but as He is.

And this is what John gives us in Revelation. He says what you first see is not what is. There is another reality that is more real than the one you can touch. Yes, lions are real. Yes, lead and horses hurt. Yes, the enemy can make life hell for you, but as C.S. Lewis explained after the stone table cracked: "The witch knew the deep magic, but there is a magic deeper still... [from] before time dawned." This is real reality.

And so John invites us to live our lives in light of the brilliant face of Jesus which shines a ray of hope as bright as the sun into the darkest void.

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And so, as John sees Cosmic Jesus, he falls on his face like dead. He's humbled and scared. He's never seen anything so big or so powerful before. In light of this everything else is irrelevant. And the only appropriate response is worship.

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So where do you find yourself today? Are you falling at the feet of Cosmic Jesus? One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess, but today it's a choice. And the way we choose will affect life now and forever.

Friends, Cosmic Jesus wants you to win. He's for His church, and He's for you. Look at His first words to John in verse 17

[Read Revelation 1:17-18]

Jesus' word to John on Patmos; Jesus' word to His church under Domitian, and Jesus' word to us is: "Stop being afraid. I've walked into death's gaping jaws. I've faced the greatest enemy there is, and I've come out victorious. I've got the keys. Death works for Me now. So if you are in My hands there is nothing that can hurt you.

Friends, let the imagery grab you. Jesus is here, in the middle of His church. He is powerful, He knows, and He wants you to win.

There is another repeating theme we are going to come across over the next seven weeks, and that is that Jesus wants His church to overcome. He wants us to be victorious. The One clothed in the robe reaching to His feet – the Priest, the King. The One with fiery eyes and ageless bright white hair. The One with powerfully firm bronze feet and a voice like the sound of many waters. The most real reality in the universe has walked into His church and He speaks to you – "I've got this. Don't be afraid. I've got death on a leash. And I want you to be victorious."

So will you bow? Will you trust Him? Will you feast your eyes on Jesus as He is right now? He is what you need to see.