

The Unchanging Jesus is always and forever

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[0 : 00] To keep your Bibles open in front of you to Revelation chapter 1 verse 9 and there's also a sermon outline that might help some of you. Let's ask God for his help.

Father, we thank you again that you have not been silent but you reveal yourself to us in your word. And so I pray Lord that as we turn to this passage of scripture, I pray that you help us to see the Lord Jesus clearly once again.

That we will see him as he truly is and that we will fall down and worship him. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, we've done it.

We've reached the very last Sunday of 2020 and it's only five more days before we turn the page on what has truly been a year like no other for all of us. But wait a minute, the journalist Wajahat Ali asks us.

What makes you think that 2021 will be better? Writing in the New York Times, Mr. Ali says this. Like many, I would love an instant catharsis, a release from this enduring tragedy.

[1 : 09] I want all of us to be able to interact without wearing masks, to hug our loved ones and to sleep peacefully. But despite all this talk about how bad this year has been, life will not return to normal on the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

Chaos and crisis don't follow a calendar. Most of the underlying problems and challenges that made 2020 feel like a horror story will roll along with us into the new year.

Indeed, according to the French Scientific Council, there will probably still be a few more successive waves of COVID-19. With one infectious disease expert reminding us, it's clear that we're not going to vaccinate the entire world in six months.

And so Mr. Ali concludes his New York Times column with these rather depressing words. Although I think he means for them to be motivational. He writes this, he says, If we want 2021 to be better, we will have to make it better ourselves.

And so the question that's left hanging in the air is this. How can we make 2021 better? Is it even possible? How can we face 2021?

[2 : 23] Now as I ponder on this question, I think there are a few possible postures that we could take. The first is simply to bury our head in the sand.

Now this would be the posture of escapism or indifference. Where yes, we will still wear our masks and abide by the SOP. But by and large, we will simply try to ignore the fact that there's a pandemic on and just distract ourselves with other things.

We'll just keep binge watching Netflix or aimlessly chat on WhatsApp. Or find new recipes on Instagram to try. I will see the pandemic simply as a nuisance and inconvenient annoyance.

And not as an opportunity to assess whether we need to change our default preferences, our default patterns of behaviour, or our default priorities in life.

The second posture is to be locked in our rooms. Now this is the posture of excessive caution. Where everything is seen as full of danger.

- [3 : 28] Where isolation is always better than interaction. Where we almost dehumanise our neighbour by viewing them simply as a potential disease carrier.
- It's a vision of life ruled by fear. Where the only goal is to eliminate risk. And to ensure that we are in control of our environment at all times.
- It's aiming to be god-like. And the third posture is the fist in the air. Now this is the posture of defiance.
- This is where we go into 2021. Saying, who cares? It's time to stop being reactive. And time to start being proactive. You know, it's all about my rights.
- My freedom. My desires. My truth. My life. It's about taking the fight to whatever we perceive to be the biggest problem. Whether that's the government.
- [4 : 26] Or the media. Or the surrounding culture. Whatever it is. And what's common to all these postures. Is that their focus is all on the self.
- Whether it's numbing ourselves with distractions. Or attempting to control our environment. Or taking a posture of defiance. In the end, it's all about me.
- But I hope that 2020 has shown us that facing 2021. Or any year at all. With a focus on ourselves. Is a recipe for disaster.
- And so today the Lord calls us to a different way. We don't have to take any of those postures. Instead, rather than have our heads in the sand.
- Or be locked in our rooms. Or the fists in the air. What we should do, he says, is to have eyes on the Lord. And that's what today's passage is about.
- [5 : 31] It's what God told John many centuries ago. As he sat alone on the island of Patmos. Engaging in personal worship on the Lord's Day. Now, John's not here on a vacation.
- After all, Patmos was a place that you would only end up on if you've been considered a bit of a troublemaker by the Roman authorities. It's an island that's only 10 miles long from north to south.
- And it's filled with volcanic hills. And it's certainly not a tourist attraction. And John is there because he's been living out his faith publicly as a Christian.
- And the Romans didn't like that. And so they've banished him there. And now, in his advanced age, possibly alone, in lockdown, he's wondering how he's going to face the remainder of his days.
- And how does God respond? By giving John a vision of who Jesus is. We're told in verse 10 that he was in the Spirit, which is basically the language used whenever God wants to reveal his purposes to his servants, the prophets, back in the Old Testament.
- [6 : 53] Ezekiel's commissioning, for example, is full of such language. And the Holy Spirit now gets John to fix his eyes again on the Lord Jesus.
- And so that's what he wants us to do today. How can we face 2021? Not by placing our eyes on ourselves, or even on good things like mass vaccinations or justice movements, but to have our eyes on the Lord.
- But how is all that going to happen? Is God going to give me a vision of Jesus, just like John? Is that what I should be praying for? Well, not quite, because look at what happens next.
- As John is in the Spirit, the first thing that happens is not that he sees anything, but that he hears something. A loud voice, like a trumpet.
- Now that description reminds us of how Moses heard God back on Mount Sinai when he went up to receive the Ten Commandments. And these commandments were the very first time the people of God had the Word of God in written form.

[8 : 09] And now, John is instructed to write down what he sees and to send them out to the churches so that the people of God will once again have the Word of God in written form.

And so the point is, we don't have to receive a fresh revelation individually because we already have John's revelation written down for us.

We can already have our eyes on the Lord simply by reading verses 9 to 20. For as we do that, to use the language of verse 12, we can see the voice of the Lord.

We can see the Word incarnate. We can see Jesus. Indeed, sometimes we forget this, but the book of Revelation is first and foremost about Jesus and only secondarily about what will happen in human history.

Just look at 1 verse 1 for a moment. This book is the revelation from or of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 25] It can also be translated that way. And then if we were to turn towards the end of the book of Revelation to 19 verse 10, we'll find that the spirit of prophecy bears testimony to Jesus.

And so seeing Jesus is the point. But just before we see Jesus, it's worth thinking about what we will face. And so the rest of the sermon today is going to proceed on these three considerations.

Firstly, we will find out what we will face. And then secondly, from this vision, we will consider what we can see. And then finally, we will ponder on how we can respond.

So that's where we're going. So firstly, let's look at what we will face. Verse 9. I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Padmas because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Now, although John is rather remote from the churches that he's addressing, he identifies with them in the closest possible way. I'm your brother, he declares.

[10 : 44] He doesn't say, I'm your apostle. He says, I'm your companion. Why so? Because John knows if he calls himself a Christian, he has this in common with all other Christians.

He will suffer. In fact, as we've already said, he's already suffering, having been arrested and banished to Padmas, most likely because he's been talking about Jesus and living for Jesus.

Now, why might living for Jesus be a bad thing? At this point in history, you could probably find Christians in most corners of the Roman Empire.

They did good. They fed the hungry. They welcomed the stranger. They rescued abandoned children. Eusebius, the early church historian, would later say that the good deeds of Christians were on everyone's lips.

And so they sound like good neighbours. And yet by this time, Christians were beginning to face various degrees of persecution. Now, not necessarily unto death and not necessarily of the kind that was very violent, but clearly things were beginning to turn bad and would only get worse.

[12 : 08] And so it's kind of strange that if they're such good neighbours, people would consider that a bad thing. Why was that the case? Well, you see, you need to understand where the Roman Empire is at.

The Roman Empire actually practised religious freedom. They were very tolerant. Many people had many different kinds of gods, and that was completely fine. It was allowed.

But here's the thing you must abide by. You must also accept other gods alongside your god. And most importantly, you must be willing to bow down before the Roman Emperor.

If he asks you to call him Lord and God, as the emperor of that time indeed did demand, then you better do it.

You can call anyone else God too, that's not a problem. But you better make sure you know who's the real boss in the Roman Empire. Otherwise, you're considered a threat to the social order.

[13 : 12] But the thing is, all Christians know that they ultimately owe allegiance to only one kingdom. Notice in verse 9 that John says that he is a companion in the kingdom.

Because Christians know that they ultimately only serve one king. There are multiple kingdoms out there. But the Bible says that in the end, they can only be split into one of two categories.

The kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world. And they are in conflict. And so to side with one kingdom is to put yourself in opposition to the other.

To bow down to Jesus is to bow down to no other. Not even Caesar. And John knows this as to all the early followers of Jesus.

They're all too aware that to become a Christian is to get on Caesar's bad side and to invite suffering. Indeed, notice in verse 9 that the suffering is said to be ours in Jesus.

[14 : 22] It comes with the territory. Join Jesus' kingdom. Be willing to suffer. They go together. And so this is what we must face whenever we choose to become part of God's kingdom and live authentically for Jesus.

Now that was true in 2020. It will still be true in 2021. Now given that we don't live in the Roman Empire today with a Caesar right now, how is that true?

Well, it's true because as we live for Jesus, we will always at some point come to a crossroads. It could be a decision we need to make, a situation that we will face, or a position that we need to take.

And at that crossroads, we can do either one of two things. We can either choose to take the way of compromise or the way of the cross.

There is no middle ground. And that was what the early Christians faced. They could either compromise and say that, oh, it's okay to bow to both Caesar and to Christ.

[15 : 38] After all, I'm still worshipping Christ, right? Or they could choose to bear the cross and say, no, Christ demands my all.

And of course, you would feel it if you were to bear the cross. It will weigh upon you. It will be heavy and painful sometimes.

It will feel lonely sometimes. If we jump ahead to chapters 2 and 3, we'll see that the early Christians knew that. And so some of them were tempted to head for the way of compromise instead.

But John urges us onto the way of the cross. And that's why he says Christians are companions not just in suffering and the kingdom, but also in patient endurance.

It's like running a marathon. When you first start, the adrenaline is pumping, the motivation is flowing. But halfway through, you'll feel the muscles ache, the fatigue will set in, and the brain just keeps urging you to stop.

[16 : 51] To finish the race, you'll need patient endurance. And so we press on. In 2021, we press on and keep living for Jesus.

We bless others and share generously where we can. I know many of you are already doing that. Keep doing it. We stay preoccupied with what glorifies Jesus, not what is easiest for us.

We'll keep doing that. And if in all these years, if you reflect back and you realise that you have never felt tired or fatigued or tempted to compromise, if there is no pain barrier for you to crash through just because you're a Christian, then this verse is also a challenge to us.

Are you actually living your lives for Jesus? Authentically and in public? You see, if you're not feeling the pain, maybe you're not in the marathon.

But if you're not in the marathon, you're not in the running for the prize. And so why not remedy that? Get in the marathon, face the suffering, celebrate the fact that the kingdom is waiting.

[18 : 17] But to keep going, we need motivation. And that brings us back to our main theme. We need eyes on the Lord.

We need to, as John would tell one of the churches later, to maintain our first love. And so John now gets us to focus on what we can see. That's our second consideration for today, what we can see.

And according to verse 13, what John sees is someone like a son of man. Now, all throughout this vision, John finds that human language is limited to describe the splendor and the majesty of the person that he's seeing.

Did you notice that he keeps having to use comparative words like as and like? So this person is like a son of man, whose hair is white, as, white wool, whose voice is like the sound of rushing waters, and so on.

For John is not just seeing Christ. He is seeing Christ as he is now. And Christ is so magnificent that it is hard for him to convey what he's seeing, he's struggling for language.

[19 : 37] And so John turns to the Old Testament to look for language that would do justice to his vision. The son of man language is taken from Daniel chapter 7.

And to readers familiar with Daniel, they would remember how Daniel saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven to receive dominion over all the nations of the world.

They would remember, later on in Daniel chapter 10, how Daniel spoke of this heavenly being whose face was like lightning, whose eyes are like flaming torches, arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and a voice like the sound of a multitude.

You see, the suffering servant of the Gospels is now, in the book of Revelation, the supreme sovereign.

That's how John is presenting Jesus. He rules, he reigns, for he is God himself. Back in Daniel 7, it is the ancient of days, that is, God, who is described as having hair that is white as wool.

[20 : 53] But now that description is use of the exalted Christ. And so no wonder, later on in verse 18, Jesus is also called the first and the last.

another description that is typically applied to God himself. You see, John is saying this, he's saying that Jesus was right there in the beginning with God before creation, creating all things.

We heard about that last week. And then he's also saying that he'll be right there at the end, for he is the last. not in the sense that he'll be the last in a product line that is about to be terminated, but in the sense that he is the end goal.

There is nothing beyond him. But as the first and the last, he is also right there in the middle, in the messiness of history.

He was right there in Daniel's time, seeing how Babylon exalted himself, knowing that this kingdom would soon crumble. He was right there in John's time, seeing how Rome exalted itself, knowing that this kingdom would soon crumble as well.

[22 : 15] And he is right here, having watched the rise of kingdoms like America and Russia and China, knowing that he will outlast them. And he is right here, knowing that whatever ideology is trendy now, whatever ideas or beliefs or practices or traditions that are in the air now, well, if they are anti-God, they cannot overwhelm him.

Pandemics come and go, governments come and go, our unique circumstances come and go, while he is still the first and the last. Even the divine realm comes under his authority.

In verse 17, he holds the seven stars, which in verse 20 are identified as the angels. And so he is the supreme sovereign over the heavens and the earth.

But the supreme sovereign remains the suffering servant. In verse 15, we are told that his feet were like bronze in a glowing furnace.

Now again, this picks up on the book of Daniel, but this time it provides a contrast. In Daniel chapter 2, we see a vision of statues with feet of iron and clay, representing kingdoms that are unstable and brittle.

[23 : 42] But in Revelation chapter 1, we have a vision of Jesus, whose feet of bronze means that he is absolutely sturdy. He is unable to be tarnished.

He is completely and morally pure. And he will never be subject to decay. This is our king. But now, this king comes like a son of man.

In other words, while he retains the glory of his deity, he also takes on the very form of humanity. And we're told in verse 13 that he is dressed in a rope reaching down to his feet with a golden sash around his waist.

Now, that's not Jesus making a fashion statement. Rather, he is dressed just like the high priest. And so, once again, John is picking up on Old Testament imagery.

The king and the priest, two officers generally kept apart in the Old Testament, now come together in Christ.

[24 : 57] And so, Jesus governs and he serves. He sits on the throne and he stands at the altar. And look at what this priest king does in verse 18.

He says, I am the living one. I live forevermore. I am forever and ever. I have life in myself. I cannot die. Except, just look at what he says immediately after that.

I am the living one. I was dead. Wait a minute. How can that be? The living one was dead.

It's a total paradox. But whatever else it means, it means at least one thing. Jesus chose to die.

He obviously didn't have to. It wasn't inevitable for him. He is the living one after all. But Jesus chose to die and in this way, he turned everything upside down.

[26 : 05] for he died on the cross. That's significant. Now, don't forget, the cross was a symbol of what happens to the enemies of Rome.

It's the way that Caesar tells everyone, don't mess with me. This is what I can do to you. I can crucify you. I'm in charge. But Jesus chose to die in this manner and in this way, he turns everything upside down.

For whereas Caesar crucified his enemies, Jesus was crucified for his enemies. Whereas Caesar said, this is what I can do to you, Jesus said, this is what I did for you.

And in the Jesus way, the cross becomes the path to life. Caesar's instrument of torture is transformed into God's instrument of salvation.

And there is Jesus, our great high priest, sacrificing himself. But Jesus also says, I'm in charge.

[27 : 23] I'm still the king. Look again at verse 18. I was dead, he says, and now look, I am alive forever and ever. In other words, I rose again.

And I hold the keys to death and Hades. And clearly Caesar doesn't possess that kind of authority. Only God does.

And so what is God saying to us? It's this. if you want the way to life, you must partake in death, in Christ's death.

To share in Christ and his kingdom is to share in his sufferings. But look, only he has the key to unlock death. And so that means whatever you face in 2021, whatever you might have to patiently endure for his sake, you are making the right decision.

You are following the right person. For you know the one who has the keys to God's kingdom. And let me tell you what else is key.

[28 : 38] This suffering servant, this supreme sovereign, this priest king, is among the seven golden lampstands. You see that in verses 12 and 13.

In other words, he's among the churches. That's what verse 20 identifies the lampstands as. And just like the priest in the Old Testament would take care of the lambs, so Jesus would take care of his church.

The living one is moving amongst his church. He's not absent. He's not on the outside looking in. He's here. And if we have eyes on the Lord, we will know this too.

He's amongst us. He's here. And so how should we respond? That's our third and final consideration for today, how we can respond.

And what we should do is fall at his feet. That's what John does in verse 17, as if dead. And that is actually the right response.

[29 : 52] For we know that by right, no one can see God and live. He has the feet of bronze, we have the feet of clay. And it is completely by grace alone that we don't fall down dead when we see him.

Now, do you remember that story of when Jesus was out with his disciples in the boat, and he was sleeping when a furious storm came, and Jesus got up and he calmed the wind and the waves with just a word.

And the disciples fell down, terrified. Who is this? They asked. Now, why? Why did they respond like that? Because they knew that only God could do those things, and God is to be feared.

In verse 14, we're told that Jesus has eyes like blazing fire. He sees everything. He can look through all our masks, both literally and figuratively.

He knows everything about you and me. And that is terrifying. Later on in Revelation 19, verse 12, Jesus is once again described with those same blazing eyes, and there he is pictured as both warrior and judge.

[31 : 17] And back here in Revelation 1, at the end of verse 18, we see a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. And that represents the authoritative words of Christ, the words that can pronounce judgment on you.

And so he is a figure to be feared. But remember what Jesus said to his disciples after he calmed the storm? Do not be afraid.

And now he says it again. Do not be afraid. Whatever 2021 may bring, if you belong to Christ's kingdom, you don't have to be afraid.

Because the warrior judge is your priest's king. God is in John's day, Jesus is telling them you don't have to be afraid of Caesar.

So you don't have to compromise. You don't have to feel like you have to collude with him. Because he doesn't hold the keys, I do. And in our day, he's saying the same to us.

[32 : 21] You don't have to be afraid. You can be bold in living for me. Like John, you can and you should order your lives by the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

And perhaps some of you are saying, yes, Lord, yes, that's what I want to do in 2021. I want to live for you. But how do I know what is the way of Jesus? How do I know what is right in your eyes and what is wrong?

After all, I could be thinking that I'm following the way of Jesus when I'm actually not. Well, that's a good question. Well, remember that double edged sword?

Now, the good news is that double edged sword is no longer there to be used to pronounce judgment and condemnation on you. That double edged sword, which is the word of God, is now used to bring justification and life to you.

But, it remains a double edged sword. You see, if we are committed to humbly listening to the scriptures, religious, if we are willing to just think over what he's really saying, well, the word of God can still get very uncomfortable for us sometimes.

[33 : 43] It will wound us because it will challenge us in ways that we don't expect. It will ask us to sacrifice things that we want to hold on to.

It's not too strong to say that it will demand change of us. And that's why it is a double edged sword. And if you never ever feel wounded, well, perhaps you aren't reading scripture correctly.

But faithful are the wounds of a friend. And that's what Jesus is. He wounds you in order to heal.

In verse 17, as John falls down at Jesus' feet, Jesus reaches out to touch him. The same hand that held the seven stars now reaches out tenderly to reassure him.

The same voice that is like the sound of rushing waters now says, do not be afraid. He wounds in order to heal.

[34 : 50] And so the way to know if you're following in the way of Jesus is to let that double edged sword function properly in your life. It's to let Jesus disrupt your version of reality, sometimes painfully, so that he can present you with the true story.

That's what he did to John. John sees his reality as one where Rome triumphs. After all, he is banished to the island of Padmos and all around him he is seeing his fellow Christians being persecuted or seduced.

But Jesus says, the truth of the story is, I win. That's the real ending. And so it's best to get on the right side of history.

It's best to get on my side, Jesus says. And so when we truly listen to Jesus and to his word, rather than to try to talk over him or to try to read our own ideas back into what he says, when we truly listen to him, we will find life.

We will find confidence. We can face 2021. Our eyes will naturally be on the Lord as he truly is.

[36 : 14] and what we will find is not only that his face shines like the sun with brilliance, but that his face shines on us as the one who is faithful, the one who is supreme, the one who is Emmanuel, God with us, the one who is forever and ever.

So my friends, eyes on the Lord. Let's pray. I'll just give us a few seconds of silence again, just to let God's word sink in before I pray.

Let's let God's word sink in before I pray. Father, we thank you for your word again.

We thank you that this vision of Jesus as the supreme sovereign, as our priest king was recorded by John for us today. I pray that you would remind us this morning that this is who you are and even more so that you are among us.

You are in the midst of your church. So help us, Lord, to find assurance and confidence in that. Father, we know that 2021 will continue to be a challenging year with the pandemic still going on, with many of us facing different kinds of challenges.

[38 : 09] But Father, we just pray that we'll be reassured to know that this is who you are and that to follow you is to make the right decision.

So help us, Lord, to keep going on with patience and endurance. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.