



TIME OF GRACE®

Jesus Judges Churches Too: What if Church is Boring?

Study Notes

Summary

The apostle John describes the indescribable day when he saw the risen Jesus, glowing and glorious. This image reminds us that Jesus is not meek and mild but the mighty Son of Man who sits in glory at the right hand of God, ruling over all creation for the good of his church. In the midst of our own suffering, such a vision gives us comfort and allows us to endure until he returns.

- **Revelation 1:9-11** ⁹I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."
- **Revelation 1:12-17a** ¹²I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,^[a] dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.
- **Revelation 1:17b-18** Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.
- **Revelation 1:19-20** ¹⁹"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels^[a] of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

- Big Idea: Jesus is _____.

Points to Ponder

1. How does today's message encourage you to regularly gather with others on "the Lord's Day" for church services?
2. Reread Revelation 1:9. How does doing life with other Christians help you get through the "suffering" that requires "patient endurance"? List three benefits of have a Group when following Jesus is costly.
3. Study Revelation 1:1-8, a section we will not dive into during this sermon series. Meditate on these opening words, noting at least two things that jump out at you.
4. If Jesus judged your budget, what would he say? What Scriptures, if any, lead you to answer in the way that you did?
5. Given Jesus' promise to return (Revelation 1:7), with whom could you share the gospel with this year? Who do you know and love that does not yet know and love Jesus Christ?

Homework for Next Week

Read Revelation 2:1-7

Time of Grace Ministry
Jesus Judges Churches Too: What if Church Is Boring?
Revelation 1:9-20
May 8, 2022

Pastor Mike Novotny

If I'm making eye contact with you right now, that means you're not live here at our church, it means you're watching on TV, it means you're livestreaming on your favorite device. It means that I'm looking at you through the lens of a camera. It's actually one of the three cameras in our church. This is what we call the close-up camera, which is why you can see... like this. Yeah, about half of me.

But that's not the only camera here. There's also this camera. And this camera is the reason I think about these three rows. Did you know that that camera, what we call our wide shot, doesn't just show the pastor up front? It shows the heads or lack of them in these front three rows, and do you know why I think about that every single Sunday? Because many of the people who are watching at home, when they have a TV clicker in their hand, are exactly like you. Do you know what you do when you're clicking through the channels at home? You give every channel about four-tenths of a second of a chance. You can tell me if I'm wrong after church, but I bet you click, decide, click, decide, click, decide, click, decide, click, decide, click, decide.

We had a media consultant a few years ago who told me the sad, but true reality of television ministry, that people won't give me, or our church, or this book, or this message, five minutes of their attention. They will make an instinctual decision about whether this is good enough and worthy enough of their attention, and do you know how they often do it? Based on how many people are sitting in these three rows, if they're clicking through and it looks like there's just a guy in a church that maybe has nine people in it, that must be a bad church. Click. And there might be dozens of you here, there might be hundreds of you here. Every seat might be filled here, but the people up there don't know that. All they know is me and those three rows. And so, the consultant told us, "You don't have to have a megachurch, you don't have to have a huge church, you don't have to have a full church, but what I need to have happen every single Sunday is a head that can be seen in every single chair." Now, why am I telling you this? So next Sunday, you'll pick a new seat? Yes. Yes, actually. That would be very, very helpful!

Oh, my goodness, that small choice that you make on Sunday could help someone at home give this message a chance, because it's not about me, it's not about us, it's about that book, that maybe they could hear if we gave them a good reason to, but it's not just that. I wanted to tell you that story today because so often when it comes to church, we think a lot like the people who are watching at home. We wonder sometimes, "Is this worth it?"

I'm not sure if you're new to church or if you're a long-time church attender, but on occasion there are those experiences that we have in worship that are so good, they're so moving. It's almost like you can feel the presence of God. I don't know if that's the right way to describe it. Have you ever been there, like an Easter Sunday service? We're packed, setting up extra chairs. The classic song starts and people sing so loudly, or you go to a Christian concert and the band plays, like their classic song, and there's hundreds, thousands of voices, and you just get swept up in that spiritual experience. There are amazing moments that many of us have in worship.

And then, there's the other 97% of the time. When you come to a church like this and there's empty seats -- you find your seat ten minutes before church and you start checking your watch and wonder where the other people are. Maybe if you're watching at home, you go to your church where there is a couple dozen people, maybe 50, maybe 100. Most of them sing on key, not all. It's 60 people trying to clap and keep a beat, and it's nice, I guess, but it's not -- it's not like the experience.

And sometimes, maybe like the people watching on TV, we ask ourselves subconsciously, "Is this worth it? Like, if I just watched at home, would that be just as good? If I took a Sunday off, would that be just as good?" I hope I'm not breaking any confidence here, but I asked Jonathan, our worship director, earlier today, "Jonathan, when you stand up here and there's not many people in church, what are you thinking? Like, when the second service comes along" - in our church, that's the much less attended service. There's just a smattering of people and a lot of empty chairs that you're staring at. "Like, what do you think in that moment when worship begins?" And Jonathan told me, "I'm thinking... only an hour till dinner." Right? Like, you know this, right? Like, you get yourself fired up, and you know it matters, and you know it's church, and you know that Jesus said it, but man, sometimes we have to remind ourselves, "Why does this matter? Why is this worth it? If this isn't a megachurch, if not every seat is filled, like, what's the point?"

If you ever feel that way, if you ever come to church and it's not the most moving experience of your life, there is one thing today that I want to encourage you to do: read Revelation. If you're getting a little bit discouraged about your church experience, I think the best thing that you could do is read the first chapters of the last book of the Bible. It says, "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

Just like John had experienced persecution from the local government, many of the early Christians did, too. The Book of Revelation was probably written in the late or to mid-90s A.D., when an emperor named Diocletian hated Christianity, tortured Christians, brutalized them in just unthinkable ways, murdered them. And so, churches wouldn't meet in churches like this, they would meet in people's houses. So, how many people do you think went to the average church service in Smyrna? Maybe if there was a rich Christian in the congregation, they'd have a bigger home with a courtyard. Archeologists estimate, you know, maybe 50 people, like, maybe

75, 150 max, but that was probably what these seven churches were like. You know, not like a big megachurch buying a stadium to worship - these are probably gatherings like the average American church gathering is, about, let's say 75 to 100 people.

And yet, this voice speaks to John, this trumpet-like voice, and says, "I want to send a letter to each of these seven congregations." And do you know who the voice belonged to? Jesus. And not like hippie hair, tie-dye shirt, tattered Birkenstocks Jesus. The John that Jesus saw... actually, look at the next verse, it's Verse 12. John says, "I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes -- his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all of its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead."

Apparently, Jesus right now, is so glorious that the sight of him is so much, that even when his former best friend was reunited, it almost killed him. This Jesus is glorious. He's like a Middle Eastern king, dressed in Egyptian linen with a Versace sash encrusted in gold around his chest. His hair, it glows like a fresh coat of snow on the sunniest day. His eyes are like ovens. They just burn through every excuse, every half-truth, and get to the heart of the matter and the heart of humans. His feet are bronzed, not brittle clay, but strong and unmoving. And when he opens his mouth, Niagara Falls falls out. His words roar and they cut like a sword, a sharp, double-edged sword that gets to a person's very soul, and his face - his face is like the sun, the sun that gives life and can kill you, the sun that you pray comes up in the morning and you reach for sunblock because it's dangerous for you.

This Jesus is glowing, holy, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, and John drops to the ground as though dead. But then comes my second favorite part. Verse 17, "Then Jesus placed his right hand on me and he said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." John isn't sure if he's going to make it. And then, Jesus, with his powerful right hand, he reaches it out in tenderness and he touches John. He says, "John, don't be afraid. I was dead because I died for you. I am alive because I rose for you. The same hand that was pierced for you holds the keys of death itself. If I lock the door to hell, no demon can drag you in. And if I unlock the gate to heaven, there's nothing in this life that can keep you out. Don't be afraid, John."

And he brings John up to his feet and he speaks to him - now my favorite part of this text. Listen to what Jesus says. "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." Oh, yes! Do you want me to read that again? Holy cow, what's wrong with you people? "The seven lampstands are the seven churches." Do you get -- Do any of you get right now what this passage is saying? Where was this glorious Jesus, this

glowing hair, golden sashed, blazing eyes, brilliant face, holy, perfect, beautiful, life-giving, fear-reducing son of God? Where was he?

The text says, "I turned and saw among the lampstands someone like a son of man." And the lampstands are? The seven churches that most of you have never heard of. Jesus Christ, God himself, showed up in Sardis and Smyrna, which means today he shows up in... Appleton, Milwaukee, Wausau, Fort Myers, Chicago, wherever you're watching on TV. Jesus did not stay contained in Jerusalem, or Rome, or the biggest cities of the ancient world. He showed up where Christians gathered - a couple dozen, 50, maybe 100. The glorious son of man walked among the lampstands.

If you're taking notes, here's how I would summarize the best news of my week: Jesus is God with us. He is God. He's not some... meh, higher power. He is God, and he shows up with us, with churches like this, with people like you. It reminds me of this amazing thing that happened about ten years ago. About a decade ago, there was a Roman Catholic priest who wanted to build a new spiritual retreat center on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. So, they came up with the plans, the schematics, and they started to dig, but what the priest didn't know, what no one knew, was just inches beneath - get this, inches beneath the 21st century soil - were some 1st century stones. And they dug down, and the archaeologists realized that they had found something very, very important. They had found Magdala, the city where Mary Magdalene was from. And they didn't just find the city. I'll show a picture. They found the synagogue for Magdala. They unearthed it. You can see it today. You should Google it. I've got to tell you; it is a trip to stand on the very stones where the son of God once stood. But once I got over that experience, here's what hit me about this synagogue - it was so small. If my numbers are right, the synagogue at Magdala measured 33 feet by 33 feet, much, much, much smaller than even this church.

They tried to recreate what 1st century Jewish synagogues were like, and this next picture might give you a good depiction. A podium where the preacher would stand, surrounded on three sides with maybe three rows, pack 70 people in, maybe 100 if everyone squeezed and didn't mind getting in each other's bubbles. And guess who preached at the synagogue of Magdala? Jesus of Nazareth. Which proved in his ministry what Jesus would go on to say in the Book of Revelation, that he is the God who shows up in places just like this.

Now, I can't wait for the weeks to come. In the next chapters of Revelation, we are going to learn that Jesus doesn't just show up in churches like this, he knows churches like this. He has a unique personal message for individual, average pastors and regular Christian people like us. He knows the good, he knows the bad. He has encouragement to give, correction to offer, promises to put wind in our sails. He cares that much about regular churches.

But just for today, I want you to soak your soul in this Scripture, that God is here. He is not waiting for Easter Sunday. He's not like the talented public speaker who only takes the offers in the biggest and best spaces. He is not waiting for our church to grow. He is not waiting for us to be perfect. This Jesus, this glorious Jesus, is in this room here today. Have you ever thought of that?

If before, when you were getting coffee before church, I said, "Everyone, there is a legit angel in our church today," what would you have done? Gotten your phone out and put it on video mode? Opened the door, like, "An angel?" Get this. There are 10,000 times 10,000 angels. There is only one Jesus, and he is among the lampstands. He shows up in churches. He sat down today next to the girl who got cut from her JV volleyball team, and the guy who is working out a new job and he's just not sure if it's the right path for him. Jesus grabbed a bulletin and pulled up a seat next to the couple whose marriage is anything but marvelous, who are working hard in counseling and they don't know where the road is going to end. He's sitting next to the man who just had the greatest moral failure of his life and doesn't know how to tell his family. He's sitting next to the people who have professors who don't know their first names. He's sitting next to those of you who get seven likes on your social media pictures on your good days. He's right here, next to an average pastor preaching a sermon that most of you will forget by Tuesday. Because he's not waiting for us to be better, he is right here.

So, the next time you go to church and it's not a moving experience, I want you to remember what John revealed. I want you to close your eyes and conjure up the imagery of this Jesus. I want you to find an empty chair in the worship space and just look, and just think, and just let your soul rise to the level of this truth, that the most beautiful, glorious, powerful, loving, compassionate, kind person in the universe is right here. He's not waiting in Jerusalem. He's not on the top of a mountain. He is right here. And before the thought of him makes you curl up under your chair in the fetal position in fear, before you fear that his blazing eyes will look to the very depths of your soul, he reaches out that powerful right hand, and he says the same thing he said to John, "Don't be afraid." "I know," he says. "I know all of it. Don't be afraid. I know about your faith. I know how quickly you get afraid. I know how often you stumble. I know how often you fall. I could remember as much of that as I want to, but I have chosen to remember it no more. Do not be afraid." And he would look at you with those blazing eyes, and they would fill up your heart with so much love that you could not walk out of church.

Next Sunday, I'm going to walk up on the stage, I'm going to look at all three of these rows, and they're going to be filled, right? Even if they're not, I'm going to find an empty chair and I'm going to think... "God." Imagine if God was right there, because he is. He is. Let's pray.

Holy Spirit, we ask you today to open the eyes of our heart that we could see invisible things. Help us to see with the senses of our soul things that would make angels fall down and worship for all of eternity. Help us to believe, not in some small God, but the most beautiful vision in all of creation. God, help us to believe that that's you and that you are not far over there, you are right here with us.

Lord, there are people in this space, there are people watching at home, who are afraid of something. And you might not take that thing away, but you can prove to their hearts that you are infinitely greater and absolutely in control. Lord, there are people here who are sick, and if they could believe that you truly hold the keys of death in your hand, that you were dead, but then you rose to conquer death. Lord, help us to believe that this is the Lord's day, not just because you made it, but because you rose on a day just like it.

Heavenly Father, open the eyes of our heart that we could see you clearly and realize just the height, and width, and depth of your love, that we would never be afraid of anything, that we would come running through the doors next Sunday, even if it was just us here, because you have promised that you are the kind of God who walks among the lampstands.

Everything else is temporary, God, except you. Thank you for being here today, next Sunday, and forever. We pray in your glorious, glorious name. And all of God's people said, "Amen."