

Supplication for a Sinful People

Dr. Brian DeVries

Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.

—Daniel 9:17–19

On June 26, 2013, our Supreme Court voted in favor of homosexual marriage. I believe all of us have heard about this court case and have been praying since. The Supreme Court of the land overturned the wishes of voters in California and voted in favor of homosexual marriage. Not just the voters in California, but the law of God was despised by our Supreme Court. They ruled against God's commands and God's desire for people on earth. They went against His law and His Word. This ruling is significant because it is an indication of deeper issues that we face. This was a death blow, and we felt it when this case was heard. It is indeed an indication of deeper issues, deeper spiritual problems that we face as a nation. America is morally bankrupt—and not just America. Western nations such as Canada and in Europe are morally bankrupt.

While Western society is morally bankrupt, the modern church in our society today is spiritually bankrupt.

On June 30, 2013, the Crystal Cathedral in California held its last service. Some of you may know about this church through The Hour of Power radio and TV program with Robert Schuler who preached many years in that church. It was a very large church building in California, and it has become an icon of the modern evangelical church in North America. This large church was famous for its teaching of “positive thinking.” Many politicians and world leaders visited and worshipped there, enjoying the music from the very large organ as well. But in the last few years they have had problematic transitions of leadership and economic crises; three years ago, the church declared bankruptcy. The building was sold.

This is a symbol of the bankruptcy of the modern church in North America. The power of positive thinking hasn’t really gotten us anywhere, has it? Society becomes morally penniless when religion becomes only a message of positive thinking that encourages us to get through the week, when the church is only a social club or entertainment, when the church no longer influences society with a prophetic voice speaking against the sins of society, when a nation of so-called Christians violates God’s law and despises His Word. Then society and religion are both spiritually insolvent. There are corrupt judges, politicians who blaspheme God, shallow religion, moral brokenness, idolatry of athletes and music stars, sexual pollution, devalued life, degradation, and selfish greed on every hand—bankruptcy.

Daniel’s prayer in chapter 9 speaks to us in this situation. In a society that seems hopeless Daniel’s prayer gives us an excellent example of spiritual leadership. He himself lived at a low time in the church, a time of desolation of God’s people and of the city called by God’s name. But he sets an example not only by his attitude and tone by which he addresses God in his prayer, but also by the words of

this prayer, a pattern prayer for us as we live in a society of increasing sinfulness. Let us consider how to supplicate for a sinful people by examining Daniel's confession, his confidence, and his request.

Daniel's Confession

When Daniel Prayed

The book of Daniel is divided into two sections. Chapters 1 through 6 are largely historical narrative with some commentary; chapters 7 through 12 are largely prophecy with some commentary. Daniel 9, however, is an exception to the second part. The first nineteen verses are Daniel's prayer, particularly verses 4–19, for his people. The last part of the chapter, verses 20–27, is God's immediate message of response to Daniel. We will be looking only at the first nineteen verses together.

Daniel's life history in Babylon was long. He lived to be an old man, and through several regime changes Daniel was an influential leader. Chronologically, chapter 9 probably comes just before or just after chapter 6. Notice in verse 1, "In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes." This occurred when Darius was in power in Babylon. Remember the story in chapter 6 of Daniel in the lion's den? Chapter 9 is about at this time, at the end of Daniel's life, after enduring many challenges and problems due to his faithfulness and integrity by God's grace.

Daniel lived in a time of great political intrigue. First was Artaxerxes, then there was his son—kingdoms were rising and falling. Then the Medes and Persians came, and Darius took over. Later there was Cyrus. Through the changes, Daniel was set over the prominent leaders and was later elevated to a position of even higher authority, to the third or second in command. World powers were shifting. Later prophecies speak about the goats and the

different animals as representing world powers that were coming and going and fighting each other. This was a time of political upheaval.

Spiritually, it was also a time of turmoil. God's people had been exiled and Jerusalem was destroyed. The city that was called by God's name lay in ruin. The temple was burned with fire, God's people were now in exile in Babylon and other Israelites were scattered throughout the nations. Yet we read in this book of Daniel that God the Most High is still directing the affairs of men, still guiding the events of history, all for the sake of His people, preparing them for the coming Prince (see the second half of this chapter—the coming of Christ and His eternal kingdom). Daniel knew about world events. Undoubtedly he was praying three times a day for these very issues.

Daniel Confesses for a Rebellious Nation

Verses 5 and 6 reveal Daniel confessing that “[w]e have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments: neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.” Verse 13 adds, “All this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.” This is Daniel's prayer confessing the sins of an unruly nation that rebelled against God's law and authority and rejected His prophets. Daniel admits that his people despise the Word of the Lord. The book of Daniel comes historically toward the end of the Old Testament, so all the prophets from Moses forward—Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah—pleaded with the people, “Hear the word of the Lord, you rebellious nation.” But the nation rejected God's Word and refused to repent,

even after experiencing God's punishment. Again, Daniel is acknowledging these evils to the Lord.

Can we claim anything different today? These words resonate with us, do they not? We are living in a similar situation, increasingly so, as our society becomes godless and pluralistic. Christianity is one of many options and often not a good option at that. Our nation has defied the Lord's authority. The nations rage, and the people imagine vain things. They do not want the Lord to reign over them; they want to live their own way, no matter how difficult or sinful those lifestyles may be. Our nation has rejected God's prophets and the Word of the Lord that has come to us so clearly from the Bible for many years. Our nation and society refuse to repent. Perhaps that is our greatest sin. We know our sin; we see it; it is clear before our eyes. We know what the truth is but we refuse to obey it. We are a stubborn nation, as the prophets say.

Daniel takes all these sins to God in prayer. While he was busy serving in the government, living as a godly witness in the society, active in what God had called him to do, Daniel takes these problems prayerfully to the Lord. At least three times a day, he pleaded! We learn from his example. This is an example, by God's grace, of spiritual leadership.

Daniel's Confession over the Condition of the Church

Daniel also laments the state of the church in his day. This was really a burning issue on his heart. His heart's cry is clearly for the people called by the Lord's name, the city of God in desolation. The sanctuary, the temple, had been burned with fire. The people of God are "a reproach to all that are about" them and "a byword" among the nations. This was Daniel's spiritual lament to God in prayer. He takes these things to God's ear. He doesn't complain about others or become discouraged. Maybe he

did have times of discouragement; it does not say that here. But we do find him praying, bringing these things to the Lord in prayer: “Lord, Thy people are a byword among the nations,” which is an echo of Psalm 44, isn’t it? These problems motivate him to prayer.

Daniel’s Personal Confession of Sin against God

It is not just for the nation or the church—Daniel’s confession turns personal as well. Daniel personally confesses his own sin. Look at how he prays: “We have sinned.” Let’s get a grip on who is praying here. This is Daniel, the man of God. Ezekiel holds up Daniel, Noah, and Job as examples; we look to them as holy men, perhaps some of the most holy examples in all of the Old Testament. We don’t find any sins of Daniel listed in the history of God’s inspired truth. No doubt he was a sinner as we all are; he needed grace and he experienced that grace. But we are talking about Daniel, the righteous man of God, here. And what does he say? “We have sinned.”

Was Daniel guilty of the sins of his nation? When he was just a boy, Jerusalem was burned, and he was taken into exile in Babylon. He was just a boy when his nation was destroyed, and he lived with integrity and righteousness in a godless community. This is Daniel. He lived godly in an ungodly society. He was known by all the officials in Babylon, the heads of the government, as being blameless. And yet he prays, “We have sinned.”

Is it fair to say he is guilty of sin? Daniel doesn’t get distracted by that. He knows he is a sinner. We all have sins to confess—personal, national, and church sins. Daniel knew his own heart. When we are honest with ourselves, we cannot hide our sins before God. By virtue of being part of this sinful nation, he bore responsibility for its sin.

We are called to live as godly witnesses in society, and yet we find ourselves often being the opposite, not living as we should. Parents, we try to raise our children in the fear of God. We try to do it the right way and guide them so they will also be built on this foundation. And yet what happens? We find sin in our hearts. Church leaders, we are called to be examples in spiritual leadership, and yet we have our own sins to confess. And so did Daniel. He knew his own heart and he knew the sins that lived there; thus he prays, “We have sinned.” If we know our own hearts, we will pray the same. When we look at the sins of others, we are often filled with self-righteousness. But we all know our own hearts to some degree; a study of our own hearts is healthy if it leads us to confess our sins. That is a good activity for the Lord’s Day—to set aside time to confess our sins to the Lord in prayer, knowing that He is just and righteous to forgive them. Daniel knew this.

Consider Daniel’s Posture in Prayer

The word “posture” refers to our position. What is Daniel’s spiritual posture in his prayer to God? He lived with a view of two realities: Daniel lived with a view of the *holy sovereign God*. As we read this prayer, and the entire book of Daniel, this theme emerges: the sovereignty of God. Daniel was living among sovereigns and kings and powerful people, but the God he worshipped is the Sovereign One, the Lord who made heaven and earth. Daniel’s prayer magnifies this sovereignty: “And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God” (v. 4). He respected this God of sovereign power, this holy God who is in total control of all events in the universe. His prayer is in the posture of reverent humility before God.

Daniel's second viewpoint was of *himself as a vulnerable sinner*. So we see two postures—a holy sovereign God, but also himself as a vulnerable sinner. This great man of God and influential leader is here on his knees in repentance and confession. He is a vulnerable sinner coming to a righteous God, pleading for mercy.

What is your posture in prayer before this God? For some people it is *indifference*—"I do not really care. I do not care what is happening in the world today, and I do not really care too much about who God is. Does He even exist? I do not know. Does it matter? I do not care." This apathy is easy to find in our society today. We are bombarded with this indifference, and we are influenced by it as well.

But there is also in society today, and in our own hearts, *defiance*. "I do not want to listen; I want my own way. I do not want to obey God's law as He commanded."

Or perhaps we are better educated about religious matters and our posture before God is not indifference or defiance but *demanding*: "God, I need this and I need that! Why is this happening to me? I want answers now!" We demand our rights.

In contrast, Daniel's posture is one of *vulnerability for sins committed*. "We have sinned and done wrong." He is submissive to the Lord's law. And not only that, he also displays *expectant hope* because he knew the Lord's great mercy.

Daniel's Confidence

The Grounds for Daniel's Request

Where is Daniel's hope placed? We know from the historical narrative of this book that Daniel's situation was not all that positive. In fact, it seemed hopeless. Either before or after this chapter, he was thrown into the lions' den. He certainly was a lone voice in a godless society, not just in

the political and socio-economic spheres but the spiritual as well. The city of God lay ruined. Society was filled with idol worshippers, and even God's people were not faithful. Daniel's situation seemed beyond remedy.

With recent events on our minds we can be overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness. What can we really do if the foundations are destroyed? What can the righteous do? Do we have hope for our nations? Do we have hope for our countries once built on Christian principles?

I was thinking on a recent 4th of July that it is so good to celebrate the blessing of independence and freedom. But if we worship a Christless freedom, what is that but an idol? We demand rights without repentance. What is that but defiance to Almighty God? How can we celebrate the idolatry of misunderstood freedom? Christ alone has set us free. Christ alone has saved us from the yoke of slavery to sin. And yet our nation has, for the most part, forgotten Christ. We want nothing to do with the Lord and His anointed. It does seem hopeless. Has any modern country ever turned around from the course that we have set for ourselves?

But Daniel does not lose heart. He is not distracted by his own sinfulness or the seeming hopelessness of his society. Rather, he concludes his prayer with expectant hope in God, confident and assured through faith in Christ that God will be true to His Word.

Three Reasons for Daniel's Confidence

1. *Expectant hope in God's compassion.* "O my God, incline thine ear, and hear...for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies" (v. 18). This man of God, this spiritual leader, this man of integrity, had nothing personal to claim, and the situation was hopeless—yet he prays, "But because of thy mercies, have compassion." That word "compassion"

(great mercy) has the idea of tender compassion, like the natural affection of a father for his child (Ps. 103) or a mother for her child, a parental bond of affection, of pity (Micah 7:17), of lovingkindness. This is the word Daniel uses here: “For thy name’s sake have compassion.” God sees His people as a father sees a suffering child. God looks upon His own people with the tender mercies of a loving Father God. This is the claim Daniel makes; this is where he places his hope—in the God of all compassion, of tender mercies. He grounds his request on the unchanging truth of God’s character and His steadfast love for sinners.

That is where we find our assurance, too. It is not in what we have done or not done. It is not in saying, “Oh, I have failed here, I have fallen short there.” It is not in looking at ourselves that we find assurance of faith, but in looking to this God of compassion. It is the Father’s lovingkindness for His children.

2. *Expectant hope in God’s name and glory.* “O Lord, hear...for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name” (v. 19). “Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord’s sake” (v. 17). Daniel prays for the name of the Lord that is being despised and has become a byword among the nations. God’s people are seen as fools and God’s name is not glorified. And we now have a prayer request because God’s name is at stake. It is not our name or our honor. It is not even our nation, our own country, or our own freedom. That is all secondary. God’s name is being despised, and what will we do about it? It drives Daniel to prayer.

Learn the power of prayer that Daniel knew. He did not hope in himself for anything, but his expectation was in the God of compassion and mercy, and he prayed for the

name, the sake, the cause, and the kingdom of our Lord God and His Christ.

God responded to Daniel's prayer. Interestingly, He responds with a prophecy about the coming Messiah, the coming Prince who would rule His people. A Prince would come and restore His people, restore the honor of His name, and institute a kingdom not made with hands, like a stone cut without hands that would become a great mountain and fill the earth. This was the One who was coming and Daniel's prayer is answered immediately with a prophecy of the coming One, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our hope in troubled times must be focused on Christ. In Him we find the tender mercies and the fatherly compassion of our God. In Him we are washed clean of our sins and are delivered from our unrighteousness. In Him we see in full display the righteousness of God revealed. We see His mercy and His love. Our sins are atoned for, the covenant promises are fulfilled in Christ, and the glory of God is revealed in this world. And He has come! He has established righteousness and His kingdom will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. That is a promise for God's glory. Do you believe it? Our Lord Savior, our King, will be victorious. The nations rage, the people imagine vain things, but Christ is on the throne. How encouraging!

3. *Expectant hope in God's promises.* Daniel knew the promises of God. Later in this chapter, an angel visits him. I don't think any of us has been visited by an angel, and why do we want angels anyway? We have the Word of God, which is so much better. But Daniel was visited by an angel while he was praying, fasting, and studying God's Word. He was reading the Bible. Daniel, the revealer of dreams, the one to whom angels came, was busy reading his Bible. He had his priorities straight; he

knew what he needed. He was reading two books. One was Jeremiah: “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (v. 2). Daniel was reading Jeremiah 25:11–12, and notice even here he calls it “the Word of the LORD.” This prophecy was written only seventy years earlier and had already been recognized as Scripture. And he was also reading the books of Moses, as referred to in verses 13–14: “As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God,” etc. Daniel was reading Deuteronomy where it says, “If my people do not serve me they will be followed by the curse and all these evils will come upon them.”

Daniel was busy reading Scripture during times of trouble and strife, and we can learn from that. Being in the Word of God gave him spiritual balance and spiritual perspective as he lived in a sinful society. Let’s not get distracted by all the events taking place. Let’s not get distracted by extra-biblical media, or prophecies, or even angels. It is the Word of God that gives us stability and perspective in times like these.

We need what Daniel had: spiritual balance, spiritual perspective, and confidence in God’s compassion, God’s glory, and God’s promises. Do you have this confidence? Do you live with this assurance in God’s glorious mercy in Christ Jesus? Perhaps you, like Daniel, are groaning over sin—sin in the world, sin in your own heart. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Perhaps we are wrestling over particular issues in our families, in our church, or in this community, and we see enormous challenges. But the hopelessness of the present situation is never a cause for us to forsake or to reject our hope in the God of all mercy. In fact, it should motivate us to more faithfulness, more earnestness, more

seriousness as we petition our Lord who is on the throne to hear and to turn back the evil that surrounds us and to honor His own name through us in all the earth.

Some of us are weeping for our nation and for the situation of our society. Take this also to Christ, the Giver of true freedom, the One from whom true freedom comes. Let us confess our sins together. We have sinned; we have done unrighteously. But spiritual assurance comes from meditating on the promises of God. His truth, His glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. It comes from meditating on the glory of God revealed in Christ. It comes from meditating on God's character itself, God's compassion for sinners. This is the confidence that Daniel demonstrates in this prayer. That is the confidence upon which he makes his request, which brings us to our third heading.

Daniel's Requests

Where Daniel Makes His Request

It does not come at the beginning, does it? He actually saves his request until the very last verses. The location of his request is also instructive for us. He makes this request in verse 19 only after repentance and confession with a confident trust in the mercies of our God and the glory of His name. He makes this request after he puts himself in the posture of humility before this holy God, as a vulnerable sinner in need of grace. Then he makes his request. Because you see, true prayer is the ongoing activity of faith and repentance, and obedience as well. Prayer is not a laundry list of things we need, want, or desire. The Lord does say, "Bring your needs to me," but prayer is ultimately a spiritual exercise that gets us into a proper healthy posture before God. Have you worked out lately? Are you exercising? Sometimes older men will ask each other, "What is your exercise program? Are you staying healthy?" Prayer is our spiritual exercise that puts us in a

proper posture before Almighty God. We exercise. I think I need to do more exercising. I need a better exercise program, because my prayers do not compare to this prayer of Daniel. Daniel's prayer demonstrates for us an example of what our prayers should be.

What Daniel Requests from God

“O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God” (v. 19). Daniel asks God to work. He was busy himself in his position of influence; he was setting a godly example of integrity, righteousness, and blamelessness, but that wasn't enough. Daniel begs God to work. Listen to him in verse 17: “O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications.” “Hear the prayer of Thy servant”—we can pray that, can't we? We don't look to ourselves or to our spiritual leaders, as godly as they may be. We look to Christ. “O God, hear the prayer of Thy servant. Listen to His supplications.” The Prince, the Messiah who worked redemption, whose saving blood washes us clean, is now the King on the throne. He is seated by His Father's side, all victorious and all powerful, and we pray, “Hear the prayers of Thy servant.” Jesus is praying for us. He is making supplication even now for His church to the Father, saying, “Father, give My people grace. I don't pray, Father, that Thou wilt take them from the world, but give them grace to live godly in the world. I pray that Thou wilt keep them in Thy truth, Father, because I have died for them.” Christ is praying for us right now. That is really our prayer, isn't it? “Father, hear the prayer of Thy Son. Listen to His prayer.”

There is more to Daniel's request. “O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive.” Here we find the confession of sin and unrighteousness. He does not say, “Forgive *them*,” but he says, “Forgive *us*; we have sinned.” Daniel prays, “O

Lord, hearken.” In other words, “Give attention to what is happening. Look, see the desolations of Thy city and Thy church—the people called by Thy name. Hearken, pay attention, do not turn away from us in Thy wrath but remember mercy. Remember who Thou art; remember Thy favorite characteristic. Take action. O Lord, do.”

Many of the psalms celebrate the work of the Lord. The sovereign Judge of the nations is coming to judge the people in righteousness and restore truth and justice. The King of the empires is coming with power and authority to undo all wrong and to usher in a reign of righteousness. “O Lord, do. Take action, O Lord, take action. The nations despise Thy truth; society is godless; we have sinned; the city is in desolation; the church is in ruins. O Lord, do take action; Lord Jesus come quickly, come with power and with righteousness and justice, and let Thy name be known.” That is Daniel’s request.

We can’t help but echo him, can we? We who know the Lord and love Him and have given our lives for His service, in whatever our calling, echo that prayer in our hearts. It resonates with us because we desire the same thing—“O Lord, hear for the sake of Thy Son. O Lord forgive, we have sinned. O Lord, give attention, hearken, see our needs, see the desolations that we have brought upon ourselves and take action, O Lord, take action. O Lord, do.”

What do we need in a spiritually bankrupt society? What do we need when the modern church is morally and spiritually bankrupt? “O Lord, do. Come with omnipotent power, come with Thy Spirit, come with fresh revival among us. For the sake of Thy name and of Thy people called by Thy name, give repentance, give revival. Restore us that we may rejoice in Thy goodness and in Thy glory. Make Thy face to shine upon Thy people again.”

Revival must begin with the church. We personally need to be revived by the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking the truth of Christ afresh in our lives, in our churches, and in our families. Death to spiritual apathy; repentance of our materialism and our waywardness and our sinfulness and our pride; restoration of holiness. We need revival in our hearts and in our families. What else can turn around the rapid decline? It is not hopeless with Christ the King on the throne; not with Him praying at the Father's side. Our hope is in Christ.

What Are You Praying For?

It is easy to be distracted and discouraged by all that is happening around us. We can be discouraged even by our sinful apathy and our spiritual sin that make us lose sight of our Savior. But this is our hope: the Savior promises mercy. We are all sinners; we all need grace, whether we have known Christ for years or do not yet know Him. We need the Spirit to work these prayers in our rebellious and stubborn hearts so that we could cry out, "O Lord, take away my unbelief. O Lord, give me faith in Christ afresh. Give me the posture of humility, contrition, and repentance. Help me to see Thy greatness, Thy power, Thy majesty, Thy sovereign ability, Thy mercy, and Thy grace. Give me this assurance of faith that Thou wilt be true to Thy own Word and honor Thy promises that are sealed with Thy blood." That is what we need. Let's make that our prayer. "Holy Spirit, fill us with these holy desires so that we bow before King Jesus and worship Him as our Sovereign." That puts us in the right posture before God and before the watching world.

Conclusion

How do we respond in this present age of moral and spiritual bankruptcy? How do we deal with the current

events that cause us to fear for our children and for our grandchildren? Let me conclude with four responses from Daniel's example.

We Should Not Be Surprised by Evil

We will see the increase of evil, the rising tides of degradation, and the moral decadence of Western society. This is the result of spiritual bankruptcy and of sin in our hearts, in our churches, in our society. This has happened before and will continue to happen as long as there is unrighteousness and sin on earth.

It is undeniable that Western nations are morally bankrupt. The modern church at this time seems to be largely bankrupt. This was prophesied in Daniel's book. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. The kingdom of Rome rose, and it fell. Kingdoms in Europe rose, and those kingdoms fell. America rose, and America will fall. Do not be surprised when desolations come on earth.

Trust in God's Kingdom, Not Man's

Do not put your reliance in political movements or religious organizations. We work for them, and should be busy trying to make a difference. We defend religious liberties and we stand up for morality. We seek for the best for our nation because we love her. We pray for our nations and our people and we celebrate the freedoms God has given us but we don't put our hope there. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. His Name is all glorious. His kingdom will come. His kingdom is sure and will never fail. His glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Citizens of an Eternal Kingdom

The church is not dead. Christ's bride is still alive. Though dirtied by sin and in desolations at times, the church is

not dead and she will not die because our Christ is alive. He is risen from the dead and He reigns! His kingdom of Christ continues to be eternal. Our supreme Judge rules in His court of righteousness. Our King loves justice and delights in mercy. Is He your King? Are you a citizen of the heavenly kingdom by faith in Christ? That makes all the difference. Earthly kingdoms rise and fall. Eventually we all face death. But Christ's kingdom is eternal and unshakeable. Are you a citizen of Christ's kingdom?

Our Eternal Hope

We see the harbingers of the increase of evil. We hope it is not true, and we work that it will not be true, even though it seems that it might be true. We pray against it. We know that Christ is coming. We hear His footsteps. And when we see these things, we do not lose hope. We don't look to ourselves and give up in fear. Let fear motivate us to prayer. Unto Christ upon the throne we lift up our heads; we look up because our redemption is drawing nigh. Our King is coming. The Prince is on the throne. Our hope is eternal in our Savior, beyond this existence, beyond this political and economic situation. Our confidence in Christ is eternal if by faith we are made citizens of His kingdom and trust in Him. Therefore, "though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled.... [yet] there is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God" (Ps. 46:2–4). There is a church of God longing for His coming. There is an eternal throne of grace where our Savior even now is praying for us.

The Eternal Throne of Grace

This is our duty and our responsibility, following the example of Daniel, and even more so following the example of our Savior: to pray for Jerusalem, pray for the people

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of God, and for our families. We are to pray earnestly and passionately like Daniel. This is our duty and our glorious privilege as the people of God. We have a place to go—to the King on the throne—an eternal kingdom, and a grace that is always available. This is our glorious privilege, to pray to a God who hears, and who has acted, and who will come again. Amen.

Broken, Black, and Appalled¹

Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven

For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

—Jeremiah 8:21–22

It is staggering to consider the legacy that will be left to our children if our Western nations continue along their paths of immorality and irresponsibility. There will be crippling economic debt; the moral landscape of our nations will be bleak. The reverberations of the sins of our day will be felt for generations to come if the Lord tarries. But have we considered what spiritual legacy we will leave our children if the church continues to be influenced and even lead in the sins of society and the culture? Have you ever considered what the church will look like if the current social and political conditions are prolonged? What will it take for the church to be revived and reformed in order to bring Spirit-worked change? The answer from our text is this: “when the church becomes convicted of God’s displeasure and repents of her complicity and toleration of the sins of our society.”²

The prophet Jeremiah brings this same message to the Israelites. He is a prophet to the nations, but he is called

1. This sermon was preached on the occasion of the 2014 mid-term elections in the United States.

2. Terry Schlachter, *The Next Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids: Ephesians 3:20 Publishing), Kindle Edition, Loc 571 of 2605.

first of all to address the people of God, those in special covenant relationship with God. He addresses the church in the Old Testament and his message is strikingly contemporary for the church today as well. If he addressed the people of God first, surely we ought to begin there ahead of the coming elections. America's greatest hope for change is not in the White House, the House of Representatives, the Senate, state legislatures, courts, or city councils. America's best hope for change is in Christians who weep for the state of the church, begin to pray for her revival, and intercede for her in her backsliding. This is what we learn from the prophet Jeremiah as he weeps over the state of God's people and as he sees the judgment of God in the future. He laments in Jeremiah 8:21, "For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold of me." He is broken; black is symbolic of the state of mourning and he is astonished or appalled at what he sees among the people of God and in the future in terms of looming judgment. He is "Broken, Black, and Appalled" 1) at spiritual apathy; 2) at impending judgment; and 3) at the refused remedy.

Spiritual Apathy

Jeremiah mourns because of the spiritual apathy of God's people. Apathy is a lack of concern for things that really matter. Spiritual apathy is a lack of concern for spiritual things. It's an "I don't care attitude." This is one reason why Jeremiah is appalled. He is to bring this message to those who are spiritually apathetic. This is reflected in several different ways.

Spiritual apathy is, first, *a refusal to repent*. God contends with His people in verses 4–6 in terms of their stubborn refusal to repent. Israel has turned to her own way, plunging headlong on a ruinous course. In verse 4, the Lord pleads with them, and I paraphrase, "If someone

falls, isn't it normal for them to get up? If someone loses their way, don't they return to their starting point?" It gives a picture of the spouse who refuses to ask for directions and continues to stubbornly drive on, putting the occupants of the car in danger. The condition of Israel is one of perpetual backsliding. There is no stopping them. They are like the horse rushing headlong into battle with one focus in mind. The Lord says, "They refuse to return; no man repented him of his wickedness." He compares them to the animals, and the animals come out looking intelligent and the people spiritually apathetic. They refuse to repent.

But that's not all. Their spiritual state is also reflected in *their failure to discern truth*. This lack of discernment begins with the scribes and the prophets, of all people. They have the law of the Lord, as we see in verse 8. They presume upon their knowledge of the law but they don't walk according to it. They boast of their wisdom but choose foolishness. They reject the word of the Lord in favor of their own wisdom (v. 9). They sow presumption and will reap judgment. They deal falsely with themselves and with the people. This comes through in the preaching of the false prophets. Jeremiah feels the hurt of the people as his own, but the false prophets only treat that hurt lightly by saying there is peace. In the words of Jeremiah 5:13, "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so." The prophets and the scribes fail to properly discern and apply the truth.

But spiritual apathy is also reflected in an *inability to feel shame* for their sins. That's the question that God asks of His people in verse 12: "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush." They had become so hardened that they could no longer feel shame. It is

a picture of someone who knows what is right and yet chooses what is wrong. This is described in 7:26: “Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers.” They became desensitized to sin. It shows a gradual slide into sin where sensitivity and shame are slowly dulled.

If Jeremiah is speaking to the people of God, then we need to take notice. These words of Jeremiah sound hauntingly familiar, don't they? We look out on the wider church and even among some here tonight, and we notice this spiritual apathy setting in—a refusal to repent, a failure to discern and apply the truth of God, and an inability to feel shame. We see in our own hearts a stubborn refusal to repent of the sins of wider culture. We need to own them as our own, not that we have committed them directly, but that we have not spoken out as we ought to and we have shown a general lack of concern for our own personal spiritual condition and the spiritual condition of the church as a whole.

How we must guard against the failure to discern and apply the truth of God correctly! How we must guard against “Band-Aid theology” which says that all things are well with the church when God is displeased. People in the church speak out against sin, but are we hurt for the hurt “of the daughter of my people”? Are we weeping and mourning and appalled at the spiritual condition of the church as a whole? We need to guard against an inability to feel shame for the sins we have committed. We need to be appalled at the sins that we see happening in the church and in our broader culture. Jeremiah is broken over the brokenness of his people. Are we broken when we see seminaries that were once faithful to the Word of God breaking away? Are we broken for the brokenness of denominations that were once sound and faithful and who are now anemic and tolerant of abominable sins such as homosexuality

and abortion? Are we broken for the spiritual apathy that we see in ourselves and in the lives of our children and our churches? This view of spiritual apathy ought to stir us up to cry out to God for revival instead of judgment—judgment that will be coming upon the church; perhaps it already is here because of spiritual apathy.

Impending Judgment

Jeremiah's sorrow and astonishment is multiplied as he is called to bring a message of solemn judgment to the people of Israel for their spiritual apathy. He sees off in the future what will happen if the people of God continue in this path.

The first part of this coming judgment is *utter barrenness* in terms of agriculture. In verse 13, we read God's own words, "I will surely consume them, saith the LORD: there shall be no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things that I have given them shall pass away from them." What a solemn message that is! Their spiritual barrenness and apathy will be reflected in the physical destruction of their vineyards and their fields. Their livelihoods would be destroyed. The gifts they had received from the Lord would only testify against them in judgment rather than leading them to repentance.

At that message of judgment, the people of Israel begin to find ways to protect themselves but God's judgment would leave them in *defenseless terror*. They tried to find protection by fleeing into the fortified cities. They speak to one another, "Why do we sit still? Assemble yourselves, and let us enter into the defended cities, and let us be silent there: for the LORD God hath put us to silence, and given us water of gall to drink, because we have sinned against the LORD." They know what they have done, but they choose rather to defend themselves against impending judgment.

They know they have sinned, but rather than confessing, they remain silent and blame the Lord for bringing them to silence. But God says in Hosea 14:2, “Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.” They know they have sinned and yet they retreat into their own fortifications and silence regarding their sin.

Even hunkering down in their fortified cities cannot protect them from the judgment that is coming. In verse 15, we read their conclusion as they gather in their cities, “We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble!” They sought safety within the walls of the city, but they were only met with terror and destruction. All their presumption was met with sorrow and terror.

God’s judgment also came in the form of *foreign invasion*. And as they sought refuge in the city, this would not stop the impending foreign invasion of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Jeremiah prophesies of this in verse 16, “The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan: the whole land trembled at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones; for they are come, and have devoured the land, and all that is in it; the city, and those that dwell therein.” The massive and formidable army would be sent by God to destroy everything in its path. They would practice a scorched-earth policy, destroying everything, taking captive, and killing at will. This army is compared to creatures that would infest the land. “For, behold, I will send serpents, cockatrices, among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the LORD.” Poisonous serpents would come for which there would be no cure. Judgment would be unstoppable and incurable. Death would be the end of it all.

How we need to take this passage to heart today! We need to ask the question, both corporately as the church

in North America and nationally: are we ripening ourselves for judgment? Is the clock almost done ticking? What of the scourge of sin plaguing the church? What of the influences of postmodernism, relativism, and religious pluralism which say that each can determine what is right for himself? What of 9/11? What of the economic downturn in 2008? What of acts of terror on our own soil and our troops fighting wars? What of the Ebola outbreak? What of ISIS flexing its muscles of terror and blood and extremism? Is the patience of the Lord coming to an end with us? We are called to weep, to be broken for the sins of the church in its silence and complicity and toleration of sin within its midst.

What about individually? Are there still those in our midst who seek their own defenses and remain silent under the hand of God even though they know their own sin? Oh, take this solemn passage to heart and turn to the Lord with fear and trembling and with words. Tell Him the situation you are in personally. Learn that running from the Lord will not work. Accusing Him will not work. Submitting and weeping before Him in repentance is the only way.

The Refused Remedy

What is even more astonishing and appalling for Jeremiah is Israel's refusal of the remedy. The remedy was right in front of them, and yet they streamed past it to their own destruction. They refused to acknowledge their rightful King; instead, they rejected Him. Not much had changed since the days of Samuel when Israel demanded her own king. There the Lord said to Samuel, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me." This is reflected in the questions of verse 19, "Is not the LORD in Zion, is not her king in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their graven images, and with strange vanities?"

This is the Lord speaking again of being rejected by the people. It's as if He's saying, "Here I am, but they have rejected me as their rightful King. I have made my abode in Zion and yet the people have forced me to flee." Is this what the Lord must say about the church in America and the West? He has sought to make His abode with us, but have we inevitably pushed Him aside and set up our own kingdoms in the church? These are hard questions, but ones that we must think about and answer corporately and individually, and then repent of. We need to look long and hard at ourselves as a local church and a broader church. We are being addressed today. It's not first of all the nation, though the United States and its citizens will be held accountable for what they have done in light of the gospel being preached across the nation, but we, *the church of God*, are being addressed by God Himself.

Not only has Israel rejected her rightful King, but they squandered glorious opportunities. They refused the remedy by squandering the gospel opportunities they received. In verse 20, this is especially addressed: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." This is the voice of the people, acknowledging their hopeless spiritual condition. Here is spiritual fatalism at its worst. In a sense, it's another accusation against God: He had not saved them. They had looked for help in the time when it was best for wars to be waged (between spring and harvest), but no help came. The summer came and went. The harvest came and went and yet no one came to their rescue.

If they had listened to the voice of the Lord through the prophets, Israel would have recognized that He was giving them opportunity after opportunity for salvation. Everything in her midst spoke of salvation: the Tabernacle, the sacrifices, the prophets coming with the message of repentance. As Paul writes, "Who are Israelites; to

whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever” (Rom. 9:4–5). Yet they squandered every opportunity.

How we need to take this to heart! Beware of looking anywhere else for help to remedy the situation that we are in, both as a church and nation. Let us not waste the opportunities that God has given us to repent and apply to Him for help. He is the church’s hope and salvation. He alone is the sinner’s hope of salvation. Don’t squander the opportunities that God has given to repent and seek revival with humility.

What is most baffling about Israel is her rejection of healing balm. The words of the prophet come to a climax with these words in verse 22, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?” The balm of Gilead was a well-known healing substance taken from the trees that grew in Gilead to treat wounds of every kind. Jeremiah uses this as a symbol of the healing balm that was available to the Israelites, which they openly rejected. For every prophet, for every preacher, that is the ultimate hurt—when people openly refuse to hear the Word of God. Will this be the perplexed question of faithful preachers written over our church here and over the wider church in North America—“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” The physician has been proclaimed over and over, but have you brought your wounds? Have you come with our corporate wounds, with the sins of the culture that have crept in, such as the erosion of truth, a general apathy at the Word of God and its claims upon our lives, a resistance to Christ’s rule over our lives, the toleration of sin by church leaders across North America?

How we have fallen and failed to shine as a light in the world as a church!

And these are not only the words of Jeremiah to the Israelites; these are also the words of Christ as He wept over Jerusalem and her rejection of Him, the Balm of Gilead, the Great Physician. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” And then again, when verse 35 was fulfilled and He came in triumphal entry in Luke 19:41–44, He repeats the same lament over the hardened spiritual condition of Israel. Even though her King was in Zion and her Physician was in Jerusalem, “when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.” Once more the Lord comes to us with the gospel, with the healing balm as He passes through in warning.

How do we see the mercy of the Lord? He warns us today to repent. He gives another opportunity to turn to Him. He points out the grave condition of the church and the nation. He warns of judgment. As you go to the polling booth this week, how will you cast your vote? Will you be lamenting only for our nation? Or will you also be broken, black, and appalled at the spiritual condition of Christ’s

Bride? Will you go repentant and broken at your own sin? Will the sin of the church and the nation take you not only to the polling booth but to the foot of the cross, where our only hope for life is to be found? Amen.

First Vision: Christ Amid the Seven Candlesticks

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Revelation 1:9–20

The first great vision in Revelation is one of many, but the drama of this first vision surfaces repeatedly throughout the book. Our text is Revelation 1:9–20, specifically verses 12–13: “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.”

Understanding John’s Visions

John tells us in verses 9 and 10 that he had a vision on the island of Patmos. He “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” when he heard a voice and turned to see who was speaking to him. This is more than just a description of the spiritual frame of mind John was in on this Lord’s Day, which, incidentally, is the first reference in Scripture to the Christian Sabbath as the *Lord’s Day* (cf. Mark 2:28). Note that it is the *Lord’s Day*, and not the *Day of the Lord*. Some scholars wrongly say John is being carried forward in a vision to the Day of Judgment. Not so—John is relating what he sees on a particular Lord’s Day, the first day of the week. In exile on the island of Patmos, John’s thoughts turn to his brothers and sisters in Christ to whom he had ministered on the mainland. As John prays about these people, something remarkable happens to him. He is taken up in

the Spirit, lifted out of the realm of time and space so that he may see heavenly things.

Let me illustrate this. Nearly all of us have been in an airplane. We fly over a large city, seeing people below who move like little matchsticks and cars that scurry about like ladybugs. How small everything looks from the heights above!

This is similar to what John experienced. On earth, in time and space, we do not know what the future will bring. But John says God lifted him up out of the realm of time and space to see a heavenly vision of the church, represented as candlesticks or lampstands. In that vision, God shows John the whole sweep of church history. God shows him everything from beginning to end. God doesn't have to wonder what lies around the next corner; He already knows. He sees everything at a glance. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). This is what John experiences while "in the Spirit on the Lord's day." He is lifted up out of himself, out of the realm of time and space, and given an unforgettable view of the church, the world, and reality. The Book of Revelation is exciting because it lets us see this same view. John sees things as God sees them, and we see them through John.

In the first vision, John says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last...what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia.... And I turned to see the voice that spake with me." John had often heard the voice of the Lord Jesus when Christ was among the twelve on earth. But this voice is so very different. It is a great voice, much like that of a trumpet. It is a strange voice, yet there is something recognizable about it. When John turns around to see the voice, he says, "Being turned, I saw

seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks was one like unto the Son of man.”

John offers us a *word picture* here, not an artist’s impression. Some people have tried to paint this description of Christ, and the results have been absurd. You cannot and should not try to produce a picture of Christ in any way.¹

God was wise to send His Son in human flesh before the age of the camera, videotape, and internet. He came before it was possible for us to make a permanent record of His physical appearance. We are not meant to have such information. Whatever else you do, do not think about Christ’s physical appearance. John wants to tell us *who* Jesus is, not *what* He looks like. So this vision is not to be understood literally. How can you paint a head that is white like wool, as white as snow, with eyes as flames of fire? How can you paint a face shining like the noonday sun? Or feet that burn as brass in a furnace? A hand great enough to hold seven stars? A mouth out of which goes a two-edged sword? We are meant to understand this vision scripturally and spiritually so that we know who and what our Lord Jesus Christ is.

So let us examine this word picture of Christ, looking at it in three ways: (1) the identity of Christ in verses 12–16; (2) the impact Christ has on John in verses 17–18; and (3) the interpretation of this vision in verses 19–20.

Christ’s Identity Established

John’s vision includes a description of Christ’s clothing, His head, hair, eyes, feet, voice, right hand, mouth, and face. But again, we should resist the temptation of probing these features in detail, for if we did so, we would lose the overall effect of this vision. We need first to regard it as a

1. See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 35.

whole to see just whom it is that John saw. Bearing this in mind, here is what John sees:

1. *Christ as the Son of man.* John says, “I saw...one like unto the Son of man” (v. 13). *The Son of man* was one of our Lord’s favorite titles for Himself. The New Testament refers eighty-one times to the Son of man, and in all but a few places our Lord is speaking about Himself. Liberals have misunderstood Jesus’ use of the term, saying He was trying to impress people that He was only human. Indeed, some evangelicals have also made that mistake. They say “Son of God” refers to Christ’s deity, while “Son of man” refers exclusively to His humanity; but this is not the true meaning of “Son of man.” When our Lord uses this title, it is loaded with messianic connotations from the Old Testament, where the title is introduced in Daniel 7:13–14.

At the crucifixion trial in Mark 14, when Christ identifies Himself as the Son of man, the reaction of the high priest is stunning. Scripture says after tearing his clothes, the priest asks, “What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye?” (vv. 63–64a). Everyone present then condemns Jesus to death (v. 64b). Calling Himself the Son of man, Jesus thereby declares Himself to be the Son of God. He is saying, “Yes, I am the Christ; I am the Son of the blessed God. And I tell you something else; I am the Son of man prophesied by Daniel. I am the Son of man who will come in the clouds of God’s divine and heavenly glory.”

Notice that John says, “I saw One *like* unto the Son of man.” John knew the Lord intimately here on earth. John was called the disciple whom Jesus loved, implying a special relationship between John the man and Jesus the man. They were close friends. John was part of the inner circle of disciples. But when John says as he gazes into heaven, “I saw one *like* unto the Son of man,” in effect, he is saying: “There is both something familiar and yet

different about the One I see. He has changed beyond all recognition, yet I recognize Him.” That is what John means when he says the person he sees is “like unto the Son of man.” He says, “I see Jesus, but oh, He is so exalted, so magnificent, so glorious, that I can scarcely believe my eyes.”

If we are believers, we too will be changed in glory. We will have new bodies like Christ’s glorified body. We will have souls made perfect in holiness. We will see Jesus as He is, and we will be like Him! We will be gloriously changed, yet we will still be ourselves, and those who are with us in heaven will recognize us.

2. *Christ as the great high priest.* When John turns to see the voice, he sees in the midst of seven candlesticks one like the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot and girt about the chest with a golden sash. His head and hair are as white as wool, or, snow. John sees our Lord Jesus Christ, glorified and exalted, wearing the vestments of a high priest.

How wonderful it is to know that our exalted, glorious, majestic Savior is also our great high priest, “that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Heb. 5:14). As the propitiation for our sins, He presents His crucified body to the Father as a perpetual memorial that He has fully satisfied for all our sins with His precious blood. As our Advocate with the Father, He ever lives to make intercession for us, pleading the merits of His shed blood.

Moreover, Christ is walking in the midst of the candlesticks, which are symbols of His churches. That is hinted at already in Matthew 5:15, where Jesus says, “Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” Christ has kindled these lights and placed them on the candlesticks, and He continues to tend the lamps, trimming their wicks, refueling them with the oil

of the Spirit so they will continue to burn brightly. What John sees is the exalted and heavenly Christ in relationship to His church on earth, caring for her and upholding her so that her light continues to shine in the darkness of this world.

As He walks among the churches, Christ's head and hair are white with holiness and purity (cf. Dan. 7:9). His holiness is the perfect holiness of the living God: "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). By contrast, we read about fallen man's want of holiness in Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Note the two extremes. Man's depravity and sin is one extreme, staining him with guilt that is as scarlet, red like crimson. Sin is not just a stain on the surface of our lives; it has penetrated the very fabric of our nature. It cannot be eradicated because it is part of our being as the offspring of fallen Adam. Yet Scripture promises us that though our sin is red as crimson, we can be washed in the blood of Christ and become as white as snow. Total depravity gives way to perfect holiness. Our sins are covered by the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ, and in God's eyes we are accounted as He is, without spot or blemish.

What a wonder that is! Recently, I was visiting a family when a young lady tipped over a glass containing a red beverage onto a white carpet. The women of the home sprang into action, using various cleansing solutions and a ton of energy to rub out the stains. Despite their best efforts, they could not make the carpet white again. When it comes to the scarlet stain of sin, only Jesus Christ, the great high priest, can make us white as snow.

3. *Christ as Almighty God.* As John looks at Christ, he perceives that Jesus Christ is God. The words, "His head

and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow,” appear in Daniel 7:9: “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire.” Now Daniel sees the Ancient of days and the Son of man as two distinct persons: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom.” Daniel goes on to say, “I saw the Ancient of days and His head and His hair were white like wool. I saw the Son of man who came to the Ancient of days.” But John doesn’t see the Ancient of days and the Son of man as two distinct persons any longer; he sees that the Son of man *is* the Ancient of days.

4. *Christ as the righteous Judge.* Verses 14–16 say of Christ, “His eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars; and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.” All of these word pictures point to Christ as the coming Judge.

First, John says, “his eyes were as a flame of fire” (v. 14b). They are like laser beams penetrating the heart of His church and its people. John here is telling us that the light of Christ’s omniscient gaze allows nothing to be hidden from Him. He is the eternal God, dazzling in holiness and purity, and He sees everything. The psalmist cries out, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” (Ps. 130:3). So the prophet Malachi asks, “Who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth?” (Mal. 3:2).

A radio commentator once asked a guest, “Do you believe in God?” The man answered, “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t really care, but if there is a God and if there is a day of judgment, I’ll have a thing or two to say to Him. When I look at everything that has gone wrong in this world, I’ll stand before God, and ask Him my questions, looking Him in the eye.” What blindness! Oh, my friend, who could stand and look into those burning eyes? Who would dare to so much as lift up his head in the presence of such a righteous Judge?

Second, John looks at Jesus’ feet, saying they were “like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace” (v. 15a). Brass must be purified in a furnace and then thoroughly burnished to shine with such luster. Here, too, is an image of purity and perfection. Perfect in holiness from head to foot, with white-as-wool hair, laser-like eyes and burnished feet—Jesus, the Son of man, is coming to judge the world in righteousness.

Third, John says Christ’s voice is “as the sound of many waters (v. 15b).” It is like the crashing of the surf against the rocks of Patmos. His voice is the ultimate, definitive, authoritative voice of Judgment Day. We will be speechless as He pronounces His verdict, for His voice will be “as the sound of many waters.” “The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty” (Ps. 29:4).

Fourth, John says, Christ has in His right hand seven stars (v. 16a). These stars are His messengers or servants, for whose immediate benefit these very things are being written in a book (Rev. 1:1). These servants will also join with Him to judge everyone who has ever heard His Word. Christ gave warning of this very thing in Mark 4:23–25: “If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.... Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given.

For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.” The key to this parable is the biblical requirement to hear the Word with faith. To hear the Word without faith is only to add to your guilt and condemnation when you appear before the righteous Judge.

Fifth, John says out of Christ’s mouth comes a “sharp, two-edged sword” (v. 16b). The sword is a symbol of Christ’s Word, full of life and power (Heb. 4:12; Isa. 49:2). Philip Hughes says, “The sword which is the Lord’s word has two edges [so] it never fails to cut. If it does not cut with the edge of salvation, it cuts with the edge of condemnation; for the word of redemption to all who believe is at the same time the word of destruction to those who refuse to believe.”²

Finally, John says, the Man’s face is as bright as the sun in full splendor (v. 16c). According to Spurgeon, John sees an “inexpressible, indescribable, infinite splendour” on Christ’s face, an “overpowering pre-eminence” that is “justly terrible” to the ungodly and “intensely joyful” for the godly.³

Who can stand before this righteous Judge? He is coming to judge the living and the dead. And He is none other than God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the Son of man in His glorious and exalted state as the high priest of His people, the Almighty God, and the Judge of all the earth.

Christ’s Impact on John

It is almost impossible to convey all that John saw, but we can see something of the impact. John tells us in verse 17, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.” When he sees his Master in the full glory of His exaltation, John

2. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 27.

3. Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Sermons*, 43:9.

is overwhelmed. You would expect John to be overjoyed to see his Savior again, but, no, he falls into a dead faint at this awesome glory of Christ. James, the half-brother of Christ, reflects a similar awe and esteem for his Lord. He refers to Jesus not as his brother, but as “the Lord of glory” (James 2:1).

We grieve the Holy Spirit when we take the name of Jesus lightly upon our lips. No New Testament writer would have done that. Certainly they wrote in their narratives that “Jesus did this or that.” But when they approached Him in worship or prayer, they addressed Him as the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers, we too know Jesus in a very personal way. However, we must never address Him or speak of Him in a way that detracts from His glory. He is infinitely more than a personal friend of ours; He is Lord and Master of the universe.

John was a cherished friend of Jesus while He was on this earth, but John is not yet prepared to look upon Christ as Eternal God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. This means as earthly creatures we cannot enter the kingdom of God or look upon God in all His glory. To do that we must have a soul made perfect in holiness and a resurrected body like Christ’s. God told Moses no man can see God’s face and live. After we die and go to heaven, we will understand why even John, though a holy man, was yet unable to look upon the glorified Christ without falling down “as dead” (v. 17a). John was a dear child of God, but he was still a sinner. We look up to New Testament saints such as John, Peter, and Paul, yet we must remember that they too were men such as we are. They still battled sin and corruption. So John could not look upon this revelation of the risen and exalted Christ without fear.

We see similar reactions throughout the Old Testament when God appears to people such as Moses,

Abraham, Job, Elijah, and Isaiah. In Isaiah 6, the glory of God is revealed to Isaiah in the temple. The prophet cries out, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Likewise, when God appears to Elijah on Mount Horeb, the prophet covers his face with a mantle.

Daniel had a vision of Christ similar to that of John. He says, "Therefore I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength. Yet heard I the voice of his words: and when I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground" (Dan. 10:8, 9). In describing the physical impact of this vision, Daniel is saying, "I became like a corpse. I was white as a sheet, and all my strength drained out of me. I fell to the ground like a dead man."

Saul on the road to Damascus had the same experience. He encounters Christ on the Damascus road and "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven" (Acts 9:3). He sees "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The proud, self-righteous Pharisee responds to the sight of Christ by falling to the ground. Divine glory overwhelms earthly humanity; heavenly light is too much for earthly eyes. Saul is struck blind and must be led by the hand into the city of Damascus. Like all others who have truly seen the glory of Christ, Paul has been humbled to the dust.

You are not a Christian unless you have experienced this kind of humiliation. God's Word tells us we have not come into the presence of Christ until we have fallen on our face before Him. You can clap your hands and sing at the top of your voice, but if you have never felt your unworthiness and sin in the presence of Christ, you have never seen Him at all.

Two wonderful truths are taught here. First, though John is overwhelmed by the glorified Christ, his response is different from that of an unbeliever. Think, for example, of the guards at Jesus' tomb who responded to His resurrection by fleeing in terror. Likewise, in Gethsemane, the enemies of Jesus fell backward in terror when Jesus gave Himself up to them. By contrast, John falls toward his Lord. He falls down at His feet. The enemies fall *away* from Christ, but His people fall *toward* Him.

Second, Christ does not leave believers to lie in the dust. Christ lays His right hand on His beloved disciple and says, "Fear not; I am the first and the last." While He was on earth, Jesus laid His hands upon many people, healing them of sickness, disability, and sin. He could have just spoken a word and healed them, but He usually accompanied those words with the touch of His hand. With that touch, He conveyed that He loved those poor, wounded sinners.

We need to remember that when Jesus Christ touched sinners during His three-year ministry, He was in the state of humiliation. As the Man of Sorrows, He was one of us, bone of our bone. His Godhead was hidden. But even now in His state of exaltation, He touches John as the Son of man. Though exalted as the King and Head of His church, Christ remembers what it was like to move among sinners and rub shoulders with them. So He reaches for John as if to say, "I understand your fear; I sympathize with your human weakness and your inability to take in this great revelation."

"Fear not!"—how often John heard Christ say those words. He heard them during the storm on the Sea of Galilee, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and when Christ first appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. Now, years later, John hears the same reassuring words, "Fear not!"

Those words were not only for John. They are also spoken to those who humble themselves before the Lord, those who suffer for the sake of Christ, those who endure hardships because of the gospel, and those who are distressed and discouraged. If your sins bring you to fall down at the feet of Jesus Christ, He will also say to you, "Fear not!" We must approach the holy and majestic God in fear and trembling. But the Lord then reveals Himself to us in mercy and says, "Fear not, I am the Savior."

He speaks about Himself for our comfort and that of the living church of all ages. He says in verse 8, "I am the first and the last," "Alpha and Omega," "the beginning and the ending" (Rev. 1:8, 11). John already understands part of this "I am" statement because he had already written in the first chapter of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). So John already knows that Jesus was from the beginning. But he now realizes that Jesus is also the end of all things. Christ stands at the beginning of history as the Creator who made all things; but He will also appear as the Judge when everything comes to an end. In between, everything that happens is under His control. The grand theme of Revelation is that Christ is the King of kings who controls all things visible and invisible, all forces of nature, all affairs of men and nations, and every aspect of our own lives.

Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of your salvation, too. He was the Alpha when He began His saving work in you, when He revealed Himself to you in His holiness and majesty, when He showed you your sins and misery, but also when He first brought you to faith and repentance. He began that good work in you. But He is also your Omega, meaning He will bring what He has started in you all the way to perfection. Paul says this in Philippians 1:6. All the while in between, from beginning to end,

Christ provides for and protects His people, individually and as a body, in the church. He is the first and the last. Fear not.

Christ goes on to say, “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore.” He is reminding John of His death and resurrection, in order to assure John that the Master John knew and loved on earth is the same exalted One who stands before him now. Christ endured death because God required it. But when Christ died, He overcame death. He rose from the dead so that now He can say, “I am alive for evermore.” So now He assures John, “Behold, I am alive, you know I did not stay in that grave because you saw Me after My resurrection, but now I repeat this again for your comfort, *I am alive for evermore. Amen.*” The word “Amen” here is a resounding affirmation of the truth of Jesus’ statement. Jesus says He is alive for evermore, so no one need ever lose the hope of eternal life.

Then He says, “I have the keys of hell and of death.” *Hell* in this place is used to translate the Greek word *Hades*, understood as the grave, the state of the dead, and the power of death. In Greek, the place referring to eternal punishment is *Gehenna*, an entirely different word. When Christ says, “I have the keys of Hades,” He reminds us that the wages of sin is death. Death is a prison, where sinners must endure confinement under the power of death, with no hope of escape. But now Jesus says, “The devil tells people that he wields the power of death, and has taken everyone captive to it, but that is not true. I have the keys of Hades and of death.” A key both locks and unlocks a door. Jesus says, “I lock the door when people go into the grave at my command, but I will also unlock that door so they may come out. My people will not abide under the power of death but will come out of their graves to be with Me, to live with Me forever.”

Now John is told to write down the things “which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter,” so that the church may receive instruction and comfort. To have this comfort we must be like John, who trembles before the resurrected and glorified Christ. Do we have personal knowledge of Christ? Have you experienced the bond of love to the Savior? Are you His? If the Lord Jesus Christ is going to *reconstruct* our lives and make us like Himself, He must first *deconstruct* us. He must break us in pieces, then transform us into glorious creatures remade in His image. Are you a child of God? Do you live for Him and suffer for His name?

Today few people tremble before God. Few are willing to endure suffering for His Name’s sake. My friend, if you have never trembled before God, you will tremble very soon when the Lord takes you. Then you will be brought face to face with the One whom John saw in His glorious revelation, but then it will be too late. God will say, “Depart from me, ye cursed. If you have never learned to tremble here, never learned to seek Me and give your life to Me and to say farewell to the world for My sake, then you will tremble forever.”

Christ’s Interpretation of This Vision

The vision given to John is not meant to terrify us, but to encourage us. Look at the last two verses in our text: “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches” (vv. 19–20).

Jesus is saying to John, “You have seen this vision and felt its impact. Now I will explain what it is all about.”

First, it is about the church. The seven stars are seven ministers of the gospel. People differ about who the angel or “messenger” of the church is. I don’t see how it can refer to anyone other than a minister of the gospel. John is instructed to write down the visions he sees and give them to the messengers sent to the churches. The word is sometimes used in Scripture to refer to supernatural beings, that is, angels sent from heaven. But it frequently is used to refer to human messengers, such as prophets or preachers of the Word.

Jesus Christ is saying that ministers have been given a heavenly work to do in bringing the Word of God to His people. Our forefathers, particularly the Puritans, made much of this. James Janeway wrote, “His ministers are sent to do the work of inferior angels, to preach glad tidings of great joy.”⁴ Cotton Mather said if you bring the gospel to those in the shadow of death, your ministry “will do the work, and give you the welcome, of a good angel unto them.”⁵ In this he echoed the apostle Paul’s statement that the Galatians once welcomed him “as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4:14).

These writers were referring to the basic meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words, which link angels and ministers ultimately to Christ as the “Angel of the Covenant” (Mal. 3:1).⁶ The Hebrew word *malak* and the Greek word *angelos* are usually translated as “angel” in the English Bible, and both mean messenger. Thus the Old Testament priest who taught God’s Word was “the

4. James Janeway, *The Saints’ Encouragement* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 43.

5. Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), 74.

6. Thomas Manton, *Works* (London: James Nisbet, 1870–75), 10:468.

messenger [literally, angel] of the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 2:7).⁷ The name of the prophet Malachi means, “My Angel,” or “My Messenger.”

The Puritans also found evidence of the angelic nature of a pastor’s calling in Revelation 2, where the seven letters are addressed to the “angel” of each of the seven churches (Rev. 2:1, 8, etc.).⁸ William Fenner reasoned that these angels could not be the angels in heaven because they are sometimes rebuked for faults. They could not be fallen angels, either, because they are sometimes commended. He said, “It remains then, that a metaphorical angel is here understood as the minister of the church.”⁹

Other Puritans confirmed this interpretation by citing Revelation 14:6, in which an angel in heaven preaches the everlasting gospel to every nation. James Durham (1622–1658) commented, “The angels are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14), but they do not have the everlasting gospel to preach. This treasure is put in earthen vessels so that the excellence of its power may be of God (2 Cor. 4:7). Likewise, ministers are called angels because they are God’s messengers, entrusted with a high and heavenly employment.”¹⁰

7. James Durham, *Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation* (Willow Street, Pa.: Old Paths, 2000), 63.

8. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, n.d.), 3:952.

9. William Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 6. Fenner realized that at least some of these churches had more than one elder (Acts 20:17). He interpreted the singular “angel” to refer to the ministers collectively, implying that they should stand together in unity (p. 19). So also Durham, “By *angels* we understand all the bishops and presbyters that were over those churches.... Therefore take we the style *angel*, to be collective... *ministers* of such a church” (*Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*, 63–64).

10. Durham, *Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*, 736. In Durham’s historicist interpretation, the angels of Revelation 14 represent the preaching of the gospel and shaking of the kingdom

Matthew Poole (1624–1679) wrote, “This angel seems to me to represent faithful ministers’ speed and diligence to preach the gospel in all parts of the world.”¹¹

Puritan writers identified the following points of likeness between angels and ministers:

1. *They both study God’s mysteries.* Benjamin Keach wrote, “Angels desire to pry into the mysteries of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:12). Christ’s true ministers also make it their business to dig into the hidden mysteries.”¹²

2. *They are both God’s servants.* Angels do not come to men unless they are sent by God, Fenner said. Likewise ministers may not serve unless they are sent by God (John 1:6; Rom. 10:15).¹³ As angels fly to do God’s will (Isa. 6:6), ministers also must heed the command to bring in the harvest (John 4:38).¹⁴ Keach wrote, “Angels are very obedient to God, they do his commands, and wait for his word. The faithful preachers of the gospel are very ready to obey God’s commands, though they are thereby exposed to great danger, if God bids them go, they go (Rom. 1:15).”¹⁵

3. *They both serve the church.* God sends angels to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14). Likewise, Fenner

of the Roman Babylon, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, by the Reformers like Luther. See also Thomas Goodwin, “An Exposition of Revelation,” in *Works* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 3:86–88.

11. Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 987. See also Arthur Dent, *The Rvine of Rome, or, An Exposition upon the whole Revelation* (London: by N. O. for Simon Waterson, 1633), 271.

12. Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 828.

13. Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 9.

14. Fenner, *Christ’s Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 12–13.

15. Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 828.

said, ministers exist for the good of the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:22).¹⁶ They work mainly for God's elect.¹⁷

4. *They both comfort the downcast.* Keach wrote, "Angels are often sent to comfort the saints when cast down, as they ministered to Christ in his agony. So are gospel preachers sent to comfort the feeble-minded¹⁸ [those given to doubt and indecision], and support the weak; they know how to comfort others with the same comfort whereby they themselves are comforted of God (2 Cor. 1:4)."¹⁹

So our Lord is saying to John that the seven stars in his vision are seven gospel preachers, and the seven candlesticks are the seven churches they serve. Though these churches face a hostile environment that threatens their very existence, Christ is in their midst. He commends her graces, comforts her in her sufferings, rebukes her faults, calls her members to repentance, warning them of judgment to come, commands her to cast out the unrepentant and unbelieving, exhorts her to persevere in the grace He supplies, and holds forth the promise of great reward. The church will always shine in the midst of all the darkness of this world, yet Christ is ever with her.

A Fourfold Comfort

Let us conclude this sermon with four comforts that we find in John's first vision. First, Christ comforts His church. The true church has no reason to fear the present or the future, for all is safe in our Lord's hands. Our divine, glorious, exalted Prophet, Priest, and King is with His church, to the very end of time itself. He has every

16. Fenner, *Christ's Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 9.

17. Fenner, *Christ's Alarm to Drowsie Saints*, 16.

18. See 1 Thessalonians 5:14; W.E. Vine prefers the translation, "fainthearted." See *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1940), 70.

19. Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 829.

situation under control. He will ever be the defender of His church. He promises, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20).

Second, Christ enables His church to shine in the world. In the Old Testament sanctuary, the lamps on the candlestick burned continuously. Likewise, Jesus says to us, “Ye are the light of the world.” The church may not merge into the background of this dark world. We are told to stand out and shine forth and be different because we are new creatures in Christ. If there is no difference between believers and unbelievers, why should people take notice of the gospel? Christ’s presence will not allow that, for He makes the church shine. He stands in the midst of the candlesticks. He fills them with the oil of the Holy Spirit. Even when He rebukes the faults of His church, He also tells her members to ask Him for whatever they need. He says, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see” (3:18). In her lowest state, the church is not beyond the power of Christ to raise her up and restore her to health and strength, to shine once more in the darkness of this world.

Third, Christ is jealous for His church, for it professes His name. He will not indulge her in any error, weakness, sin, or folly. Often in Israel’s history God’s wrath broke out against ungodliness in Israel, the professing church of God, to show the whole world that the name of God and His holy things must not be trifled with.

Fourth, Christ maintains His church. Sometimes the church is expanding, sometimes diminishing. Christ will keep His church forever, even if only a remnant remains to serve Him (Ps. 22:30–31). The Belgic Confession says, “This Church hath been from the beginning of the world

and will be unto the end thereof... And this church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though she sometimes (for a while) appears very small, and in the eyes of men, as to be reduced to nothing.”²⁰ Spurgeon graphically portrays this truth in a gripping story. He tells about a woman who prayed long for her unbelieving husband. She went to worship at a meeting house in northern England, but her husband never went with her. He was a drinking and swearing man, and his wife had much anguish because of this. She never ceased to pray, yet she never saw any change in her spouse. She went to the meeting house alone, with one exception; her dog always went with her. The animal would curl up under the seats during the service. When the woman died, her husband was still unsaved. But the dog kept going to the meeting house. His master wondered why the dog did that, so he followed the animal one day. The dog led him down the aisle to his mistress’s seat.

God led the minister that day to preach the Word with such power that the widower wept until he found the Savior. “So never give up your husbands, good women, for the Lord may use even a dog to bring them to Christ when you are dead and gone,” Spurgeon said. “Never, never give up praying, or hoping, or expecting. Fear not, believe only, and you shall have your heart’s desire.”

Today there is little for tourists to see on the Isle of Patmos. But when the apostle John was there, he saw everything necessary for believers to continue to hope to the end, until Jesus Christ comes again. Let us thus turn with John to see who speaks to us, then worship the glorious, exalted Son of man, who says to those who trust in Him alone for salvation, “Fear not, I am the first and the last.” Amen.

20. The Belgic Confession, Article 27.

