

Christ the King—B
Revelation 1:9-18
Jesus Conquers Death

I don't know if you're much into cartoons and comic books and stuff like that. If you're a guy, you probably are. When I was a kid, I sure enjoyed reading comic books. I loved Superman and Batman. One of the comic book heroes, Spiderman, was created by Stan Lee. Another one of his greatest creations, which came out in a very successful movie a while ago, is Iron Man. Have you seen the movies? The basic story line is about a guy who was badly wounded, he's got some shrapnel inside his body that cannot be removed, so he has to invent body armor just to keep himself alive. But he didn't merely armor himself as though it were only defensive. He has a helmet and kind of derisively calls himself "shell head" because it makes him bulletproof. Then he's got rocket pods in his legs so he can fly really, really fast. Mach three. He can out fly even fighter aircraft which sounds pretty impossible, doesn't it? But hey, this is comic books and this is fantasy TV. You can pretty much do whatever you want. Oh, and he's got rocket launchers in his arms.

I think this really plays to the fantasies of a lot of young men. Because, you know, the way society looks at us, we're graded on our strength. We're all terrified of being seen as weak. Every male who's ever lived at one time or another has been made to feel small, weak and insignificant, probably any number of times. It's one of the reasons we love superheroes so much—because we fantasize if only we could fly really, really fast. If only we could be bulletproof, if our skin was made out of metal and the guns would fire at us and the bullets would just bounce off, tink, tink. Wouldn't it be great to be so strong? Nobody could hurt us ever again.

Does it surprise you to know that the Apostle John described our Lord Jesus in a vision that he saw, described him not as a man of iron, but as a man of bronze? Yeah, you probably think I'm making this up, but if you take a look with me, it's in the book of Revelation. Way in the back of the Bible is a book written by St. John when he was an older man. Now, generally, artists who represent the Apostle John always make him look like a real young man because he probably was one of the youngest, maybe the youngest of all of Jesus' twelve disciples. So in artistic presentations he's always described, or pictured, with a clean-shaven chin because he didn't have full stubble yet. He just had kind of peach fuzz. But John wrote the book of Revelation way at the end of his ministry, at a time when the Christians were being persecuted from both sides, both by their Jewish relatives and now by the Roman Empire.

John lived long enough to see that these persecutions went all the way to the top. In fact, the Emperor Nero was the first of the empire-wide leaders who declared open season on Christians when he launched his own persecution of the Christians in Rome and gave permission to his provincial governors that they could do the same with impunity. Nero is generally regarded as the assassin of Saints Peter and Paul, both of whom, according to tradition, died in the city of Rome. Now John was not killed. He apparently was the only—or at least is said to be the only one of the disciples—who died a natural death. But his senior years were no treat. He was himself in exile, driven out of his city of Ephesus where he was the regional supervisor, along with the little churches in the backcountry. You might say that was his circuit to oversee in western Asia Minor, today the country of Turkey. He's in exile on the island of Patmos, which became like a penal colony for him. He couldn't escape. There were reefs and rocks and terrible winds and surf and it would have been impossible to get away by swimming. No boats would take him on because he was a prisoner. So, he was stuck on Patmos, fuming because he couldn't do anything.

Also, he knew that his brothers and sisters were suffering because the regional governors could now blame the Christians for anything they wanted, confiscate their property, beat them up, rough them up without any kind of penalty whatsoever, imprison them without habeas corpus, and even put them to death. The justice system which the Romans were so proud of would just look the other way. So from one point of view, things were not going very well. All his mates had been killed, or it appeared to be so. They had been martyred and died early deaths and John thought: "This is not quite what I imagined." His heart grieved the same way that your heart grieves when you think: "I'm a child of God. Why is my life still so hard?"

He had that same problem, and the Lord gave him a personal vision to boost him and build him up, and then by having it written down in the scriptures, this also enables you and me to see the same thing. In this vision Jesus did not look anything at all like a humble traveling Rabbi who needed to eat three meals a day, who needed to sleep every night just as you and I do in order to survive. Whose method of locomotion was walking one foot in front of the other, just like us, and who took a lot of guff and abuse from people not worthy to tie the laces on his sandals. He said: "Look at me now. I am Bronze Man." That is some encouragement for me and you, as well.

In verse 9 John said: "*I am your brother and companion.*" Isn't that a sweet thing? Even though he was an overseer, an apostle, he could have said: "I am an apostle so you need to listen up." Instead, he introduces himself to his readers, to you and to me: "*I'm your brother and companion*" in three wonderful things: "*In suffering.*" I am a sufferer like you. "*In kingship,*" I trust that God's kingdom is being built. His gracious reign of mercy and love is being expanded as the gospel is touching more and more hearts. And "*in patient endurance.*" So in my better moments, I realize that the pounding we are taking is for good, not for evil. It's for our personal good because it transforms us into tougher, more resilient soldiers for the Lord. But it's also good for the kingdom because pampered, spoiled, donut-filled, lazy Christians sitting in their barcaloungers are not much use to the Lord. But tough, hardened guerilla fighters who've taken a lot of abuse, like the Energizer Bunny who taken his licking but keeps on ticking, those are the people most dangerous for the Lord.

If I can slide in a little interjection right here, you know that to be true, don't you? The counsel and encouragement that you have heard in your life that has meant the most to you came from people who've gone through what you are going through, isn't it so? If you're really broke and you're in big debt but somebody with a huge portfolio of assets, a very comfy life and three cars says to you: "Oh don't worry, God will provide," does that ring in your heart? You kind of say, "Yeah, right. Provided for you! But I'm still worrying how we're even going to make one more rent payment so we don't get evicted from our apartment." But if somebody who has been homeless comes to you and says: "I know it's hard. God helped me, he will help you, too" and they have stories to tell you, man, that really resonates. If you have been diagnosed with cancer and you're just grieving and afraid, and somebody who has perfect health says: "Oh, God will take care of you," you might think: "Yeah, right. Taking care of you! That's easy for you to say because everything's happening easy for you." But if someone else has been a cancer survivor, maybe has had surgery, gone through the whole chemo thing and said: "God will help you with that," that kind of talk has a lot more resonance, doesn't it? So when St. John says: "*I am a fellow sufferer with you, I am a companion in your sufferings because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus,*" it just means so much more because he knows fear, he knows the taste of pain, he knows what it feels like to be broken and to feel helpless. It made him depend on God.

He said: "*On the Lord's day,*" verse 10, on Sunday, "*I was in the Spirit and I heard a loud voice behind me, like a trumpet, saying, 'Write what you see on a scroll and send it to the seven churches'*" probably meaning the seven churches that he supervised, the big city of Ephesus on the coast and then a ring of six inland cities that were probably part of his little pastoral circuits, "*Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia,*" (not the home of the Phillies, this is the original Philadelphia) and "*Laodicea*" (11).

Now, "*I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned, I saw seven gold lamp stands*" (12). The last verse of this chapter tells you that a lamp stand is a visual picture of a congregation, or a church. Which is not a bad metaphor, is it? A lamp stand is a mechanical structure that holds up light for all to see. In those days, they were oil lamps. There'd be a wick in a little basin, in a little bowl, of oil. You'd light the wick and it would be like a kerosene lamp. God, of course, used lamp stands in the temple to demonstrate his eternal presence.

So he said: "I saw my seven churches represented as light givers in a dark world. *Among the lampstands was someone like a son of man*" (12). Well, guess who that is? Whose favorite expression for self-description is Son of Man? Jesus! He loved calling himself Son of Man. He was proud of his humanity. In fact, I put out to you that the humanity of Christ is something to be celebrated even more through his ascension than through his birthday. The whole Christian world goes nuts at Christmas time, right? And rightly so

because God came in person to rescue his people. The incarnation of Christ is one of God's most spectacular miracles to rescue sinful, broken, fallen people. That he came in person and became not like us, not a symbol of us, not a dummy copy, not a holographic representation, not a computer simulation, not a cartoon, but the reality is he came to be us.

So I put out to you something even more extraordinary—he not only came to be fully human, to be us, obey for us, live like us, suffer for us, die for us with real blood, with real flesh pierced by those nails. But he kept his humanity when he ascended into heaven so that he will have arms to hug you when the lines have gone down enough for you to get close to him. I imagine that even the Son of God with his human body will have to spread out his hugs. But when you're in heaven you've got all the time in the world. You can touch him in heaven! He kept his body. He is still the Son of Man. He's not ashamed to stay like us. I think that just blows my mind. I can't get over it.

Through the power of God's word, we get a chance to have a peek at how Jesus wanted to represent himself. John was allowed to see not the humble traveling rabbi, but the Son of God, the Lord of the universe, in all his glory. "The Son of Man *was clothed with a robe that reached to his feet, and around his chest he wore a golden sash*" (13). I don't think that necessarily means when you get to heaven our 21st century clothing will all be ditched and we'll all go back to the days of wearing robes. Kind of like in a kid's Christmas pageant where all the kids are in bathrobes and towels wrapped around their heads. I think Jesus was representing himself in clothing that wouldn't have shocked John, it would have made sense to him.

"*His head and his hair were white, like white wool, or like snow*" (14). That to me is kind of an amazing thing. Normally we think of Jesus as having long, brown, flowing hair. But here, he chooses to be represented looking like an 80 year-old guy, isn't that amazing? That he's got skin like bronze and his hair is like this fluffy, white halo. Not that he looks elderly—normally people with snow-white hair look that way because they're old. This just looks pure and holy. It would be like a ring of bright light around his face, which was his crown of shining white hair.

"*His eyes were like blazing flames*" (14). You know, like when you were a kid and your parents were angry with you and they were coming after you, and their eyes just sizzled. This is how Jesus looks now; no longer meek, but his eyes bore in and penetrate to see everything. He wants us to realize how intense he is about the things that he's saying and the importance

"*His feet were like polished bronze being refined in a furnace*" (15). That doesn't mean that he's Iron Man or, in this case, Bronze Man. It means that he shines with that deep intensity, that glowing of the glory that now belongs to him as the victorious Son of God.

"*His voice was like the roar of many waters*" (15) like Niagara Falls. Not that it has no content, but that the force of it is overwhelming like Niagara going over the cliffs, roaring and splashing down below.

"*He held seven stars in his right hand*" (16). This is my favorite verse because it refers to people like me. The Bible says that the stars are the spiritual leaders, the angels, of the seven churches. It's a metaphor for their pastors, for their spiritual leadership. And I've got to tell you that all of us who work in the church of the Lord as pastors feel an awful lot of pressure. Some of it we put on ourselves, other times we feel that it comes with the calling. We feel an enormous amount of pressure because we're very sensitive to how you are doing spiritually. And when you're doing poorly or when people, in spite of our best efforts seem to drift away from the Lord, how do we not beat ourselves up for that? I find—and the needs of the church are changing so fast—we often feel like our brains cannot keep up with what we need to be doing to stay relevant, to stay engaged, to stay real because it seems to outrun our ability to keep up. And alas, the church, the visible church in many ways, has often seemed so behind the curve, hasn't it? We often feel bad about that. It is a great comfort to me to know that the Lord Jesus wants me to know that I and my other fellow pastors are like stars that he holds in his hand. He doesn't look at us like a bunch of idiots who don't get it, that he's so disgusted with us. He views us as precious parts of his strategy for rescuing the world and he holds us and keeps us close so that we continue to learn and absorb from him. That just thrills me to death to know that I'm in his right hand.

"*A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth*" (16). There's another metaphor. What's the sword coming out of his mouth? His word. The scripture describes the word of God as a sword so sharp it cuts

through all malarkey, all the bologna in the world, divides even to the joints, like it splits you right down to where you live, cuts through all of pretenses, all armor, all defenses and cuts right to the heart. It has a “*two-edged sword*.” Some of God’s message is bad news for you and for me. Cuts through all our bragging, our lying, our tap dancing, our blaming and says: “You all are unworthy. You all have joined the rebellion. You all are convicted of Satan’s doom and you’re headed off to hell and rightly so.” That message of his law gives us the shivers, and it just cuts through all our lying and pretending. But the other side of that blade also cuts through all of Satan’s deceits and deceptions to let you know that “my mercy is greater than your sin and I have already paid the price to rescue you from the punishment that you had coming.” And the other edge of that blade is where you and I find great comfort and solace. The sword that comes out of his mouth cuts through all the human lies and tells us the truth that there is hope.

John took a look and the next thing that he saw was: “*His face was shining as the sun shines in all its brightness*” (16). The last book of the Bible in the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, called Jesus the “*Sun*” (s-u-n) “*of Righteousness with healing in his wings*,” meaning, the rays. Healing in the rays of the sun. You know, we northern people shiver and chatter all winter long and we wear lots and lots and lots of clothes. So by those warm spring days, we’re so eager to start ditching some of those heavy winter clothes and that first time when the temperature spikes and it gets kind of hot, we just ditch clothes as much as we can because we love to feel the sun on our body. It just makes you feel really, really good. When the Lord Jesus smiles on us, there’s healing in the rays of his smile.

At first it’s scary—John said: “*When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He placed his right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid’*” (17). This is a wonderful, abbreviated way to describe the gospel of Jesus. Look, don’t be afraid. When I smile on you, you will feel better, just like the rays of the sun feel good on us winter people up north here after a long cold winter. Don’t be afraid. Because there’s healing in my wings. I’m going to heal you spiritually, emotionally, and physically. I am going to make you feel better because of the mercy with which I smile upon you.

Jesus continued: “*Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last*” (17). I have existed from all time. I’ve set everything up and I’ve been watching and involved in everything that has happened in human history and my existence goes on unlimited into the future. I’m the originator of all things and I get the last word in every human situation. When I get the last word to all who trust and believe in me, that last word is “victory.” That last word is “you win.” We win because you’re together with me. Your faith bonds you and binds you to me. I have won. That makes you a winner. That’s my last word. Don’t sweat the in between stuff because you win in the end. I solemnly guarantee it because I AM the First and the Last. I span the entirety of the human experience.

“*I am the Living One*” (18). I am Mr. Life! I am alive, I give it to those who believe in me. “*I was dead and, see I am alive forever and ever!*” (18) Death couldn’t keep me.

John was allowed to see Jesus in a way all the disciples wished they could have seen him earlier. The disciples loved it when Jesus did his miracles because they thought great, the new age, the millennium is now here. Heaven is on earth and Jesus had to keep bringing them back to reality. “No, heaven is not yet. You still have a lot of tribulation to go through.” But John was allowed to peak at the end game and I think he loved what he saw.

We are terrified of things in life and some of the deepest fears we struggle with is the fear of our own mortality. We not only hate death, we hate dying, too. We hate watching ourselves grow weaker. It’s a hard, hard thing for our pride. We don’t like living with pain. We don’t like the gloom of realizing that when you hit age 17 or 18, that’s as good as it’s going to get physically and then comes the long, slow decline. We make jokes about it but who likes admitting it? Not a one of us enjoys the aging process or the dying process.

Jesus said: “Don’t be afraid. I was dead and now I’m alive. Your problems of aging, dying and death itself, I can reverse in a flash.” Just as he once turned a funeral procession inside out and made it a come-back-to-life celebration. They were leaving Nain with a dead boy and went back in to Nain with a living boy, given back to his mother. Jesus said: “This is what I do. This was a preview. This was a demo. This is what lies before us when I return. I’m going to do that on a grand scale, undoing and reversing funerals.”

These words are so comforting and so powerful: *“I was dead and, see, I am alive forever and ever!”* (18) And Jesus said to John, and he says to you and to me: *“I also hold the keys of death and hell”* (18). Keys of death. He can unlock his grave from the inside out and come out under his own steam, under his own locomotion. And because he controls the power of death itself, because he’s Lord over death, he also shares that victory and that promise with us. And he says: *“Even more than that, I hold the keys of hell.”* Hell is the place of everlasting damnation. And Jesus said: *“I can let people out because I went there myself. I suffered, I went voluntarily, did a victory lap around the enemy’s capital and I left voluntarily, triumphant and victorious and announced my victory over Satan. He couldn’t keep me and now those whom I’ve forgiven, he can’t keep them either.”*

This is Bronze Man, his face now shining like the sun, glowing with glory. This is the voice speaking to you and to me.

Now St. John, when this vision passed away from his eyes, still had a 90 year-old body, still full of aches and pains, still slowing down, still knowing that he was near death, outwardly it didn’t look like he was much of a victor. But this vision sustained him and gave him courage for the final chapters already shown to him to be victorious. This is encouraging for you and for me, as well. We’re in the middle chapters of our life, too, but now you’re allowed to see the end game. The One who’s alive forever and shares with you the keys over our worst enemies. Jesus is Lord over death. That’s good news for God’s people!

Dear Lord, I come to you now on behalf of all of the people who really struggle and grieve over the concept of their own death and who are afraid. Lord Jesus, let your wonderful victory over the grave be their victory. Let your confidence in your own resurrection and everlasting life become theirs. Let your victory, your victory and holding the keys of death and Hades, be also their victory so that no one, not a one of your children who trust and believe in you, will ever be afraid again. We pray Lord Jesus, in your name. Amen.