

Revelation's
GREAT
LOVE STORY

MORE THAN I
EVER IMAGINED

LARRY L. LICHTENWALTER

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DEDICATION

To my sons
Erich, Ehren, Ethan, Evan, and Steaven

So they will never forget why I love Jesus,
Why they can love Him, too,
And how we can experience His love together through eternity

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CHAPTER 1
I LOVE
JESUS BECAUSE . . .

HE'S BIGGER THAN I AM

Famous Last Words

Revelation 1:9-18

It was a colossal enterprise involving more than 1 million square feet of shimmering aluminum-colored fabric, 90 specially trained rock climbers, 10 miles of bright blue polypropylene rope, 220 tons of steel structure, and 120 construction workers. And 24 years of planning and negotiating. Tailored as carefully as a dress and billowing in the wind, it was a work of art, a cultural event, a political happening, and an ambitious piece of business. The cost? A fat \$10 million. All to wrap Berlin's historic century-old Reichstag building. But it was a dream come true for Christo Javacheff and his wife Jeanne-Claude. The New York artist couple spend their time creating art on a monumental scale by temporarily transforming natural or human-made landmarks with fabric. Their purpose is to so alter the familiar so that it is seen anew, turning it into something that we can no longer take for granted or overlook.

I had a midnight tour around the "Wrapped Reichstag." The Reichstag is an immense stone hulk, a heavy and stolid building from the nineteenth century. But there against the night sky and bathed by spotlights all around, it looked light, almost delicate, as if it could float away. It shimmered where it was once solid. And it was refined where it was once unattractive. The wrapping brought a transforming image to a building that had lost its mystique for the German people. For years following World War II it lay a bombed-out shell. But the wrapping forced the eye

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to confront the Reichstag anew. By stirring the imagination, it helped to bring the Reichstag back into the mainstream of Berlin, where it now, fully renovated with modern furnishings and services, once again houses Germany's Parliament.¹

Like the old Reichstag, Jesus can become so familiar to us that, unless we take pains, we hardly see Him anymore. Unless Jesus is wrapped in a way that forces the eye to view Him differently, we will go on in our lukewarmness and satisfaction with the lesser things of this world. Thus Revelation presents a transforming vision of Jesus. One that enables us to see Jesus in a new way that can both awaken spiritual life and draw us into an ever deepening sense of His presence. It's a vision that can awaken our love for Him.

In Revelation 1:9-11 John sets the scene for his first glimpse of Jesus in more than 60 years. Sentenced to exile on the island of Patmos, one day he found himself "in the Spirit" as the Holy Spirit took hold of him. Then, before he saw Jesus, he heard His voice—loud and peremptory, behind him, like the blast of a trumpet. It commanded to write down what he was about to see, and to send it to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, beginning with Ephesus, the capital and the nearest to Patmos, and continuing north and then southeast on the circular road that linked them all together.

When he turned around to see whose voice it was, John first had his attention caught by seven golden lampstands. They were only the framework of the scene, however. Much more important was the person standing in their midst. The person John sees has human form—one "like a son of man" (verse 13, NIV). Yet He is a commanding, glorious, and divine figure dressed in a long robe that reaches down to His feet and is secured by a golden sash around His chest. They are the kind of garments a king, a priest, or a judge would wear. "His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength" (verses 14-16, NASB).

Here we find a portrayal of Christ found nowhere else in Scripture.² Revelation's Jesus is not the Gospels' man of sorrows, but King and Lord over the entire universe. He is not a weakened Christ doggedly tempted in the wilderness, thirsting at Jacob's well, or a tragic Christ nailed on the cross. Nor is He a benevolent Christ holding little children in His arms, a

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compassionate Christ touching a leper, or a Socratic Christ in sharp-edged dialogue with Nicodemus.³ Rather we behold a majestic, commanding, glorious, powerful Christ. An eternal Christ who never changes. And a sovereign Christ who challenges us to follow Him today. He is a Christ that we can love.⁴

Think of the imagery here. Standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands, He wears glistening white robes and has white hair. Jesus has fiery eyes, molten red feet, and an arresting voice. His hands clutch stars, a sword emerges from His mouth, and His face shines like the sun. Jesus reveals Himself to John in the language of prophetic symbolism (drawn primarily from Daniel 7 and 10), not in a literal depiction of His resurrection body as He now sits at God's right hand. We are not to think that the glorified body in which Jesus ascended to heaven has a sword in place of a tongue, snow-white hair, or a face so overpowering with physical light that the pure in heart cannot view it with joy (see Matt. 5:8; Rev. 22:4). The symbols seen by John in the vision reveal not what Jesus looks like, but what He is like. They depict Him as the searcher of hearts, full of consuming holiness and boundless wisdom. He is the perfect priest standing for His people before the Father, the perfect king defending them against the devil by His invincible Word. Revelation's visions show us how things are, not how they might appear to the physical senses.⁵ Such images let us feel and connect with who Jesus really is—thus providing all the hope and encouragement we could ask for.⁶

From this grand opening Revelation unveils a virtual gallery of pictures of Christ.⁷ Jesus is one like a son of man (Rev. 1:13), the first and the last (verse 17), the lamb and the lion (Rev. 5:5, 6), the thief in the night (Rev. 3:3; 16:15), both priest and sacrifice (Rev. 1:5, 13; 5:6; 8:3, 4), the one who was dead and came to life (Rev. 1:18; 2:8), King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16), the divine judge riding a white horse (Rev. 19:11-21), and the heavenly bridegroom (verses 7-9). These and other metaphors tumble out of John's fertile mind. We see Jesus now supervising His churches (Rev. 1:9-3:21), now sharing God's throne in heaven (Rev. 4; 5), now controlling the course of history (Rev. 6:1-8:1), now calling the world to repentance (Rev. 8:3-11:19), now standing victoriously on Mount Zion with 144,000 faithful followers (Rev. 14:1-5), now riding a white horse in judgment (Rev. 19:11-21), now promising to return soon to claim and to marry His bride (Rev. 19:7-9; 22:7, 12, 20), and now beckoning and encouraging with His grace (Rev. 22:17, 21).

Such vivid images assure us that the connection between God and His

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people is close and definite. Jesus Christ is everything that we need, especially as history approaches its close.⁸ Thus Scripture's last words on Christ leave us waiting, hoping, expecting, longing, clinging to the threefold promise that Jesus is coming soon (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20, 17). Revelation is all about Jesus and why we should love Him!

The Only Right Response

Notice what happens to John when He meets this eternal Christ—the Jesus he loves and whom he hasn't seen in more than 60-plus years. He makes the only right response that humans can when confronted by the eternal Christ. “When I saw Him, I fell at his feet like a dead man” (Rev. 1:17, NASB). The radiance and purity of the exalted Jesus overwhelm him. Conscious of his weakness and sinfulness before a holy and commanding Lord, he falls down at His feet like a dead person, just as he had done earlier on the Mount of Transfiguration (verse 17; cf. Matt. 17:6). Jesus is bigger than John, and the disciple can't handle it. No human being can. Daniel's reaction to a similar vision was the same:

“As soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground. Then behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. . . . When he had spoken to me according to these words, I turned my face toward the ground and became speechless. . . . ‘O my lord, as a result of the vision anguish has come upon me, and I have retained no strength’” (Dan. 10:9-16, NASB).

Isaiah's woeful sense of defilement in the presence of “the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5, NASB) and Paul's collapse to the roadway before Jesus' blinding light (Acts. 9:4) show the sheer shock that mere mortals experience when confronted by the Holy One. If the experience of biblical prophets is any measure, being slain by God's holy presence is anything but pleasant. Even holy angels cover their eyes in deference to God's glory (Isa. 6:1-5).

Here is more than sheer overpowering physical light that blinds the eye. It is a consuming holiness and glory that pierces moral consciousness.⁹ Whenever God reveals Himself, or discloses something about Himself, it forces human beings to recognize something about themselves. His divine holiness invades their private world. It cannot be avoided. Insight into God's moral nature brings insight into their own. Ethical implications touch the conscience, highlighting character and throwing it into moral and spiritual contrast with God.

Revelation's imagery of Christ's eyes as flames of fire reveals Him as

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the one who searches the mind and heart (Rev. 1:14; 19:12, cf. 2:23). Nothing remains hidden from Christ's penetrating gaze. He sees everything there is to see (Ps. 139). His eyes don't look *at* us but right *into* us. His holiness gets inside us, and when it does, it challenges us. And if we allow, it will change us!

In his *Confessions* Augustine quips, "You set me in front of my own face."¹⁰ "When I get into the presence of God," Oswald Chamber writes, "I do not realize that I am a sinner in an indefinite sense; I realize the concentration of sin in a particular feature of my life. A man will say easily—'Oh, yes, I know I am a sinner'; but when he gets into the presence of God he cannot get off with that statement. The conviction is concentrated on—I am this, or that, or the other. This is always the sign that a man or woman is in the presence of God. There is never any vague sense of sin, but the concentration of sin in some personal particular. God begins by convicting us of the one thing fixed on in the mind that is prompted by His Spirit; if we will yield to His conviction on that point, He will lead us down to the great disposition of sin underneath. That is the way God always deals with us when we are consciously in His presence."¹¹

"The closer you come to Jesus," Ellen White observes, "the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan's delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you. No deep-seated love for Jesus can dwell in the heart that does not realize its own sinfulness. The soul that is transformed by the grace of Christ will admire His divine character; but if we do not see our own moral deformity, it is unmistakable evidence that we have not had a view of the beauty and excellence of Christ."¹²

If such things can happen in a heart without the presence of visible physical phenomenon, we can only imagine what it would be like to see, as did John, the eternal Christ in person. But John is a microcosm of the church, a brother of his hearers who shares with them a threefold treasure: "the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus" (Rev. 1:9, NASB).¹³ His experience with Jesus is paradigmatic, suggesting that we too—through faith's eye—can share John's experience and behold the eternal Christ. Such is the power of Scripture and the mighty work of the Holy Spirit, who speaks in behalf of Christ (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Revelation's opening vision reminds us that Jesus is always more than we anticipate, more than we bargained for, and infinitely more than we

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will ever be. In fact, He is more than some of us care to have around or to get too close to or even to look at (Rev. 6:16). Yet I hear John saying, “This is precisely why I love Jesus. I love Him because He is bigger than me. He does something to me deep down inside whenever I meet Him. I see myself as I really am—a weak, sinful person in great need and incapable in myself of ever being like Him. The eternal Jesus reads my thoughts and understands my heart. He recognizes the real me (which I often don’t see myself)! Not only holding me accountable, He challenges me and He wants to change me. Christ’s blazing eyes may be unnerving, but I welcome His piercing gaze. Not only do I want to know what He sees in me, but I need to know if there is anything in me that shouldn’t be there (Ps. 139:24). Anything that dishonors either Him or me. I cannot see Jesus and remain the same. Above all, I want to see a Jesus who is and can do what I can never be or do. While I am inadequate and vulnerable, my eternal Christ is able and mighty!”

He Touched Me!

While our hearts grapple with the moral implications of gazing into the blazing eyes and blinding face of Jesus, we must look ahead and see what this eternal Christ does when John falls at His feet like one slain. Jesus places His right hand on him, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:17, 18, NASB).

Imagine the scene. John lies prostrate on the ground, face buried in his hands. Jesus now touches him with His right hand. To do so, Jesus must bend down low. You cannot touch a man lying prostrate on the floor with your hand unless you do so! The glorious, majestic, intimidating, holy Jesus bends down to touch His servant John. I imagine Him almost kneeling, just as He did when He washed John’s feet in the upper room (John 13:1-17).

Not only does Jesus touch John—He talks to him. The commanding voice that had thundered like a trumpet and rushing waters now speaks comfort—comfort based on Jesus’ mighty power. They are words of hope and promise. “John, don’t be afraid of Me. As the First and Last I have power over time. As the Living One, I have power over life. As the one who was dead and alive forever, I have power over sin. And because I have the keys of death and the grave, I have power over death.”¹⁴

That touch tells us why John or anyone else would ever love Jesus. The gesture is personal and intimate. When you reach out to touch someone who is frightened or hurting, you do so because you care. Jesus