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A Bigger Vision of Jesus

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Series: What's Wrong With the Church?  
Revelation 1

**BIG IDEA – YOU NEED A BIGGER VISION OF JESUS SO YOU CAN  
HAVE A CLEARER VISION FOR YOUR LIFE**

Happy New Year's, Two Cities Church. How are you guys doing? You're looking thinner already. Your resolutions are working. I have another one for you based on that video, which is just a normal, average, everyday, simple, straightforward video. How about *this* one? "God, use me in the life of other people."

That story is so ordinary that I love it. Here's the question you might want to ask this year: "Who has God already put in front of me?" For Mom and Dad, it's going to be your kids. It might be your neighbors. It might be your coworkers. It might be your classmates. Guys, the gospel goes forward... I'm going to keep saying this. Look. I'm still wearing my ONE bracelet or wristband or whatever you want to call it.

This is what we say here: "The gospel goes forward one relationship and one gospel risk at a time." That's it. That's the only way the gospel goes forward. That's the only way the mission advances. That's the only way the kingdom expands. Guys, when you got in, we gave you a ministry plan. Go ahead and grab that.

Now, the ministry plan is not the Bible. The ministry plan is how we're trying to apply the Bible to the life of our church. So grab that. Turn it on the back, and you're going to see our mission on the very back at the very top in big letters. We're a young church that believes very old things. We're only seven and a half years old.

We were getting into this building. You know, everything is changing and nothing is changing at the same time. You know what I'm talking about? So we're like, "Okay. Who are we?" We said we need to have a new level of simplicity and a new level of clarity if we're going to go into the next season as a church.

So we said what we've already been saying, but we just wrote it down. It's also in the lobby, by the way, on one of our signs in there. It's this: "We exist to make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship." If you want to know what we are doing here, which is a fair question...

Like, "Why am I here? What are we doing in this room? I just dropped my kids off at Kids ministry. What's going on? You want my kids to come to Students. What are you going to do? What are you trying to accomplish?" Answer: we want to make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship. If you came back in 30 years, we're still going to be doing exactly that. We're building and baking everything into this vision.

So, I want to tell you a little bit about it, just a couple of things. First, I want to talk to Mom and Dad. Hey, Mom and Dad. If you open up the front... It's not hard. Open it up. That's all we have. That's it. On the left side, I want to thank both of you who are going to read my letter that I wrote to you guys. There's that. On the right side is what you're excited about: our key and catalytic dates and events.

Guys, we take a lot of energy to create the environments we wrote down there. It takes a lot of energy to do Kids Week. It takes a lot of energy to do retreats and mission trips. So, Mom and Dad, we're telling you months and months and months in advance. I know every family is different. I know you have athletics and activities and academics. I get all that.

I'm just telling you: get your kids in these environments. They are life-changing, life-transforming environments. We cannot replace you, but we're trying to resource you. Hopefully you get that. Also, our prayer nights. We only have three. We're doing Nights of Prayer and Worship. We are going to build a prayer culture. We are going to build a response culture in this church. If we have to build it brick by brick, we're going to do it.

One of the ways we're going to do it is through our prayer and worship nights. So, if you have something else scheduled, respectfully, move it. You have to be there. There are three of them. We want this room full of Christians passionately seeking God's face and God's heart for our city and the nation and the world.

Then, finally, we have some incredible people. A couple of you have already come up and said, "I can't believe [so-and-so] is going to be here." I said, "Me either." This is incredible. Lee Strobel... Maybe if you're under 40 you don't know who that is. In a momentary lapse of judgment, he agreed to come speak here.

*New York Times* best-selling author...*The Case for a Creator, The Case for Faith, The Case for Christ*. It just so happens he's going to be here the week before Easter. Wow, that's strategic. So invite your lost or your seeking, skeptical neighbors and friends. He's going to be here, and then we're going to go right into Easter.

I know a lot of you... Listen. Last year was a good year and a hard year. We had several people in our church die. We don't know what 2024 is going to hold for us, but we know there are people who are asking a lot of questions about heaven, so I'm bringing in Andy Davis.

Andy Davis is my former pastor. He has the entire New Testament memorized. Yes, that's correct. There's nobody I've ever met who's more serious about the Bible than him. I've asked him to come and speak to us on the topic of heaven. You don't want to miss that. That's going to be in June.

Guys, I don't know if anyone is paying attention. It's an election year. Yikes! I don't know what's going to happen. You're like, "I'm not even laughing at that. You're right. What's going to happen here? I don't even know. He said, 'Yikes.'" November 10, Dr. Al Mohler is going to be here. Imagine this. He's going to be coming here. The election happens on Tuesday. He'll be here Saturday, live Q&A in here.

If you don't know who Dr. Al Mohler is, he has one of the top religious podcasts in the world. He is the smartest evangelical alive, and he'll be here doing a live Q&A the Saturday after the election. He'll be preaching all day here Sunday. It's going to be incredible.

Then, of course, we have men's events and women's events. We have Jen Wilkin for the ladies and Jon Tyson for the men. Again, if you guys don't know... Just spend some time this afternoon. Google who these people are, and you're going to be like, "Oh my goodness! I don't want to miss any of this."

So, here's your role. My job, as a leader, your job if... All of you are leaders at different levels. The job of a leader is to paint the big picture and show everybody their place, to answer the question...*Where are we going and what is the role?* Here's what we're asking. What would it look like for you to personally own and embrace the vision and values of this church this year?

To go, "You know what? Yeah, making and mobilizing disciples in an environment of prayer and worship sounds like a good vision for my life." Then on the back we have our five values. We've said *gospel, community, mission, truth, and stewardship* as what we think arise out of Scripture of utmost importance. That's what we're doing.

I'm about to take us into Vision Sunday in a minute, but let's pray to begin the year together.

Lord, we have an interesting year ahead of us, an exciting year. This is a year that we're in the building. We're so excited, Lord, and we just want this to continue to be a home and hub for ministry. I hope that what this ministry plan communicates to the people in this room is you don't want to miss this year at Two Cities Church. Lord, we are so expectant of what you're going to do in, through, and beyond us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Guys, it's Vision Sunday. Some of you came and you didn't know it was Vision Sunday, and that's okay. Some of you go, "Why do you do a Vision Sunday?" I don't have a Bible verse. There is no Bible verse that says you have to do a Vision Sunday. We have not always done a Vision Sunday.

Why do we do a Vision Sunday? It's because of what happens in your life and what happens in my life and what happens in churches and what happens in your marriage and what happens with your family and what happens at work. It's called *vision drift*. Do you know what I mean? It's called *mission creep*. You know, everybody ends up somewhere, but very few of us end up there on purpose...that kind of idea.

What happens is... I know how this works. I don't know a lot of things, but I know the church world. It's all I've known for 20-plus years. Here's what happens in churches. Churches lose vision all the time. You can tell. The sign that a church has lost vision is it is in maintenance and management mode ("We must protect. We must preserve everything we have. Please stay. Please come") instead of missionary mode.

They have cruise ship mentality instead of warship mentality. So, what I want us to do today is I want us to get a big view of Jesus. If you'll type to or turn to Revelation 1, I'll meet you there in a minute. See, vision is so powerful. I hope you'll get it. Let me give you a definition of *vision*. Everybody needs vision. You can't live without vision.

Vision is a picture of the future that produces passion in the present. Vision is so powerful. We're like, "Somebody, give it to me. I'm looking for a vision for my life." What vision does is it immediately gives you purpose. Having vision and having purpose are the same thing. Vision also... This is what will disrupt your life. Vision and realignment or reorganization of priorities are the same thing.

Here's the thing. Most of us are going to fit into one of three categories. We're going to fit into the category of "We have no vision for our lives." You'll meet people like this. Especially, I meet a lot of older people with kids in their 20s and 30s, and they're just

heartbroken over the condition of their kids. This is the aimless, anxious, addicted age. How do you get there? No vision.

It's like, "Oh, my son is so aimless." He has no vision. "My daughter is so anxious." That might be no vision or that might be too many visions. "I could do anything and be anyone" is too many things. You need a focused vision. Most of us, maybe, have too small of a vision. I mean, don't say it out loud, but all of your resolutions...

I know you want more vacation, and I know you want to be healthier and fitter than you are and retire earlier and save more money. I get it. They're all great. Nothing wrong with that, but you need a bigger vision than vacation and health. Some of us have itty-bitty vision, and we need to have big vision.

So, here's where we are. We are starting a series today called *What's Wrong With the Church?* Let me just give you the short answer. The long answer is going to come over the next seven weeks, but here's the short answer: you and me. What's wrong with the church? You are. I am.

There are a lot of answers to what's wrong with the church. We're going to get there. Like, what's wrong with the church? They compromise their message. Churches do that. They compromise morality. Churches do that. They compromise mission. Churches do that. Those are all symptoms, but what's the sickness? The sickness in the church is we've lost a big vision of Jesus Christ.

I'm going to show you this. You should read Revelation for yourself, but what Revelation does is it gives us a big vision of Jesus before it gives us a vision for our lives or a vision for our church. The reason so many people (I'm speaking of Christians) have no vision for their life is they've lost a big vision and view of Jesus.

So, here's the big idea for the rest of our time together: *you need a bigger vision of Jesus to have a clearer vision for your life.* Whatever you're looking at will determine how you're living. If you'll turn to Revelation 1, we get a description of the Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, it is the only physical description of Jesus in the Bible. Can you believe that?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...no description of Jesus, physically. Yeah, I know he hung out with sinners. I know he walked around. I know he taught. I know all that. But could you imagine if you didn't know what somebody looked like? Like, if you didn't know what Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift looked like.

When you have a friend and she says, "I'm starting to date this guy" or "This girl is into me," or whatever, what's the first thing you do? You look that person up on Facebook.

"What do they look like?" Right? Imagine if you didn't know what Joe Biden or Donald Trump looked like.

We have no idea what Jesus Christ looked like in his humanity, but we get one picture of him in Revelation, chapter 1. It's this vision of Christ in his exaltation. What I want to show us with our time together is five principles of vision. I hope you'll embrace these personally and practice these consistently. First, I want to show you this.

## **01 BIG VISION COMES FROM GOD'S WORD**

Verse 1: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ..."* By the way, *revelation* means to unveil, to pull back, to show you something that has been hidden. *"...which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw."*

He defines this book, which we're going to be spending the next eight weeks (including this week) looking at, as the revelation of Jesus Christ. It's not the revelation of John; it's the revelation of Jesus Christ. It says, *"...which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place."*

Okay. Here's what I want you to understand about the Bible. The Bible is a gift. That's what it's supposed to be. The Bible is a gift from God to you. In fact, we define the Bible here... This is the best definition I know of. It's from God, it's about Jesus, and it's for you. You can go wrong if you don't get those right.

The Bible is not man's thoughts about God; the Bible is God's thoughts given to man. If you're like, "What is God's perspective...?" By the way, one of the things we are is meaning-makers. That's what you are. You can't help but try to interpret life all the time. You're like, "Well, how do I interpret life?" According to God's Word.

The Bible is about Jesus. This is amazing. Here's what this means. If you're new and don't understand Christianity or you grew up in some religious home and don't get it, at the center of Christianity (this is good to know) is not practices. You might think that. "Is the center of Christianity going to church?"

At the center of Christianity isn't a philosophy. "Is it a way to think about...?" No. At the center of the Christian church isn't even principles, as much as I love principles. I

really love principles. It's not principles. This is amazing. At the center of Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ.

Here's the interesting thing. It says the Bible is given, but then look at verse 3. It's a gift from God. It says, "***Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy...***" That's me right now. "***...and blessed are those who hear...***" That's you right now. "And who keep it." Uh-oh. Fewer of us. "***...and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.***"

The Bible was given not to be a burden but to be a blessing. But how do people look at the Bible? They look at it as a burden. Even, unfortunately, often Christians do. I know a pastor... Maybe you should try this for 2024. He started the discipline of when he grabs his Bible in the morning... I know for many of you that will be your iPad that has the Bible on it.

He says, "Whenever I grab my Bible, I just make it a discipline to say, 'Thank you, Lord. I love this book.'" You're worried about disciplines (I get it) and commitments and resolutions for 2024. Keep all of those. That's great. What about a new posture toward God's Word that says, "I want to be under the Word, and I want to be blessed by the Word."

See, here's what I know about you. You will give your time to that which you think will bless you. You can't lie with your money. You can't lie with your budget. You can't lie with your calendar. You can't lie with your schedule. It's going to tell the truth. So you're going to give your time, whatever you're doing. The relationships you're engaging in, the shows you're watching, the hobbies you're pursuing, the sins you're delighting in... It's all because you think it's going to bless you.

Now, here's the key. What if 2024 was the year of obeying God's Word and, therefore, being blessed? What happens at the beginning... I've been in Christian circles for long enough to know that at the beginning of the year everybody realizes they haven't read their Bible as much as they would like to the year before. You got to Leviticus and gave up. Anyone else?

So you recommit to some version of getting through the Bible. In fact, Tara-Leigh Cobble became very famous with her *Bible Recap*. Great. I think that's great, but understand the goal of reading the Bible is not to get through the Bible but for the Bible to get through you. The goal of reading the Bible is not to mark up the Bible but to be marked by the Bible.

Insight is not the same as application. A lot of times we think, "If I understand what the passage says, I've obeyed it." No, those are different things. Sometimes you'll talk

to someone... "Oh, I had a great study. Did you know that the Greek word...?" It's like, "Who cares?" Seriously. Who cares? How is that going to change your marriage? How is that going to change your family? How is that going to change your day?

## **02 BIG VISION COMES FROM LOVING WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR YOU**

He starts with the Word of God, and he goes right to Christ. *"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace..."* Which is exactly what we're all looking for in the age of anxiety. He says, *"Grace to you and peace from him..."* Look at the order. *"...who is..."* I thought you'd maybe start with who was. No, no, no. God exists. That's the key point.

*"...who is and who was..."* You'd think he'd say, "And who will be," but no. *"...and who is to come..."* Will once again intervene in history. *"...and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth."* Here it is. Before you can get a vision of what you're going to do for God, you need a vision of what God did for you. Look at this.

*"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"*

Before you do anything for God, you have to understand what God has done for you. Notice that Jesus says to John at the very beginning, "You have been set free by his blood." Here's what I want you to know: in Christ, because of what Christ has done in his life, his death, and his resurrection, he has removed all barriers to you having a relationship with God and being used by God in the lives of other people. It's unbelievably exciting. So, first you start with God's Word. Then you start with the cross, what God has done. Then here's the other thing:

## **03 BIG VISION HELPS YOU SEE YOURSELF RIGHTLY**

Look here. Verse 1 again: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw."*



Notice, by the way, John defines himself not as an apostle there but as a servant and a witness. That's how he sees himself in light of who God is. Let's talk for a second about who John was. I didn't spend enough time on this. At the beginning, John talks a lot about Jesus and a little bit about himself, and that's probably what you and I should do as well. John is a great model in that. He talks a lot about Jesus, then a little bit about himself, and then a lot about Jesus.

John, if you don't know, at this time is going to be in his 80s or 90s. He's the last living apostle. He has been through a lot. (We'll get to that in a few minutes.) He's on the isle of Patmos. He's all by himself, and Jesus appears to him. I don't know how 2023 was for some of you, but for a lot of people it was a difficult year. John is having a difficult year, and God comes to him and meets him where he is.

Let me tell you three things about John that may be true about you, at least one of these. John was all alone. Have you ever been all alone? Some of you are all alone right now. That's how you feel. Even though you're in a room with a lot of people, you feel very much alone. John is all alone. He's on an island. He's enslaved. (We'll get there in a second.) Jesus comes and meets him in his loneliness and gives him a vision.

Secondly, John thinks he's done, probably, I would imagine. John is 85 or 95 years old. So, I think God meets you when you think he's done with you. How about that? That can happen... If you're not dead, God is not done. That's why you're still here. We know that. But people can often look back... I think maybe John was tempted to do this. Maybe some of *you* are tempted to do this.

You look back on a certain season of your life and go, "That was when God was really using me. I don't know that God is going to use me anymore." John could have done this. He could have been like, "When I was in my 20s and was walking around with the Lord Jesus and we were healing and I was watching him preach, and then he died and I took care of his mom...that's when God used me."

Or maybe he thinks, "No, no. It's midlife when God used me, because it was in my 40s and 50s and 60s where I wrote those books everyone reads...John and 1 John and 2 John and 3 John. Now I'm 80 or 90 years old. What am I going to do?"

The third principle is God meets you in your suffering. John had been, tradition tells us (imagine this), boiled alive and then banished to an island for slave labor. He's suffering. He's suffering all of the emotional and physical things. He's suffering old age and illness and no friends and loneliness and all of that.

I've said this so many times, but it's worth repeating. God will often use your greatest suffering to create your greatest ministry. The reason for that is very simple. You just have to think about it for one minute. People who are suffering want to be ministered to by people who have suffered, often in the same ways.

So, John is suffering enormously, and guess what is a top five book in the Bible to encourage people in suffering? Revelation, because it gives us all of these pictures of the future and the final judgment and the reconciliation of all things. Here's what you need to see. John is in three places. How can you be at three places at one time? I'll show you this. John is in three places at once when Christ meets with him.

First, he's in Patmos. Verse 9: ***"I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."*** The first place he is in is Patmos. It's an island 5 miles by 10 miles.

John has a physical location. You would say, "I'm in Winston" or "I'm in Kernersville" or "I'm in Advance" or "Lexington" or "Mount Airy," whatever you'd say. The thing is he's in a place where he probably thinks, "God is not going to use me. How is God going to use me on the isle of Patmos?" Well, he's going to use you to write the final book of the Bible.

Oftentimes we don't realize... This is so simple. God would like to use you where you are. Or the positive version: God is going to use you where you are and not somewhere else. So many of us are not present where God has us. Young people are in Winston. They're like, "I want to be in Charlotte! I wish I was in Raleigh!" It's like, "Uh, you're here."

Another way people aren't embracing where they are and being used by God where they are... They're always looking for the next season and stage. So, high schoolers want to go to college. College students want to get out in the real world. Single people want to get married. Married people want to have kids. People with kids want those kids out of the house.

People who have a great job are looking forward to retiring, and people who are retiring are looking forward to their kids giving them grandkids. We're just never present where we are. We should take the advice of Jim Elliot, the famous missionary, who said something like, "Wherever I am, may I be all there."

He's in Patmos. Look at verse 9. It says he is in Jesus. It's interesting. It says he's in Jesus, but there are three words that are used to talk about being in Jesus: *kingdom*, *tribulation*, and *endurance*. That's interesting. By the way, this is for Christians. It

says every Christian has a physical location (Winston or wherever you're living), and then you have a spiritual, eternal location (that's in Christ).

It would be a lot to talk about what it means to be in Jesus. Well, he gives us at least two main ideas of being in Jesus: *kingdom* and *tribulation*. Now, we love kingdom. If we're talking about being in Jesus, you want kingdom. What is kingdom? Well, that's a lot too, but it's whenever the gospel, the power and presence of God, breaks through into new people and new places. Like whenever you pray, "Lord, may your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

You're like, "Lord, I'd like you to break through, please. Would you break through in this person's life?" Okay. That's the fun part of being in Jesus. The less fun part is tribulation. Now let me explain this. Tribulation is not general suffering that all humans go through. Everybody suffers, Christian and non-Christian alike, young, old, rich, poor. Suffering is part of the human experience. Suffering is no respecter of persons. You get it.

Tribulation is the unique suffering a person goes through because they're following Jesus publicly. Notice he says the tribulation that is in Jesus... He says, "Because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." That's what verse 9 says. So, there's a certain amount of suffering that happens when you consistently go public with your faith.

Now, here's the principle. When you're in Jesus, here's what happens. Kingdom and tribulation always come together and always in the same measure. What do I mean by that? Well, if most of us would probably say, if we looked back on 2023, "I didn't see as much kingdom as I wanted to," it might be because we've been avoiding tribulation.

This is a word for many of us, I think. You need a vision for 2024 that does not exclude suffering. I know most of our visions for our lives are about how we could... Who else except for the local church is going to say, "You need a vision for your life that actually includes suffering because it's part of what it means to be in Jesus"?

He says that's why you need endurance. We have to have a marathon mindset if we're going to make it. The reason we have the book of Revelation is it's a bunch of symbols and images and pictures to encourage us as we go through the difficulties that are associated with going public with our faith.

He's not just in Patmos (that's his physical location) or in Christ (that's his spiritual location). He has one other location. Look at verse 10. ***"I was in the Spirit on the***

*Lord's day...*" What does that mean? So, he's in Christ and in Patmos and in the Spirit. This is the idea of personal worship. This is spending time alone with God.

When I was in college... This was back before the iPhone existed. You know, we rode our dinosaur to college and all that. We used to have the kinds of calendars you had to fill out with a pen and paper. I remember the guy who disciplined me. He said, "I want you to put 'TAWG' on your calendar every day." T-A-W-G (time alone with God). He said, "I want you to learn this at a young age. I want you to put 'TAWG' on your calendar every day."

See, John is going to get this great vision for his life and for the church when he is personally spending time alone with God. We believe here in public worship and personal worship. Obviously, I put a lot of time and energy (so does a lot of our other staff) into this experience every weekend, this public worship experience, but you know this. You can't get in shape doing anything one day a week.

If I was like, "Guys, listen. I'm going to lose a ton of weight this year," and you were like, "How?" and I said, "I'm eating healthy one day a week," everyone would roll their eyes, because we all know you can't get healthy doing that. The problem is many people don't value public worship. The point of public worship is to fuel the fires of personal worship.

When we sing songs like that and, hopefully, you see things in the Scriptures and hear testimony videos, and every once in a while we do baptisms and Communion, you should be going home going, "I love God. I love his Word. I need to spend more time with him."

Then, as you do that all week, your private worship should fuel your public worship. You show up and you're like, "Man!" I just had someone this week say, "I'm glad we're in Revelation. I've been reading and studying and praying through Revelation." I'm like, "Well, you're probably going to get more out of it than the average person, then."

This is a very interesting thing. I want you to see something that happens with John. He's in the Spirit. He's praying. Verse 10: ***"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..."*** Okay. Imagine you're shooting a movie to show this scene.

John is 80 or 90 years old. He's kneeling, sitting, or standing. He's doing one of those. He's praying to the Lord. He's seeking the Lord, whatever he's doing. Jesus is going to appear. Jesus is going to take the time to appear. Wouldn't you normally think Jesus would appear right in front of him? Jesus makes this long journey and then shows up behind him. Do you think it's a little strange? I think it's a little strange.

Why does Jesus show up behind him? We'll see in a few minutes it's because he is going to have to turn from where he is to see Jesus. That would be the same for you in 2024. If you want more of Christ and more vision for your life, you're going to have to turn in 2024. I don't know what that means for you.

For some of you, I'm like, "You need to turn from something," and immediately... You would never tell anyone, but immediately when I say, "You need to turn from something," you're like, "I know exactly what that is. That's my secret, shameful thing. That's it. I wouldn't share it with the Community Group and all that, but that's it."

For others of you, it's just a good thing that's keeping you from the best thing. For some of you, you just need to turn during certain parts of the day. You're like, "I need to turn more to Christ in the mornings." Basically, Jesus isn't turning to us; we have to turn to him. We have to reorient our minds, our hearts, our emotions, and our affections toward him.

Look at what happens when he shows up. I think this is very interesting. Verse 11. Jesus shows up to him. It's like, "John, you've not seen me in person in 50 years." This is what he says to John: *"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."*

I find this interesting. Jesus shows up, appears to John, and doesn't talk about John. He doesn't say, "John, I know you're old, and I know you're suffering. I know it has been a long journey. I know all of the other apostles died, and I know you're a slave to here." He shows up and gives John something to do, and he gives him a vision and purpose for his life that isn't all about himself.

Can we just admit that, for some of you, 2023 was the year all about you? Can we not have 2024 be your year? Could it be about something else and somebody else and something bigger and a greater mission? What some of us need, even if we're suffering... John was suffering greatly.

We need a mission that's greater than ourselves and not about ourselves, because when you get a great vision, what you get is a new perspective, and then what you have is you have problems, but you have problems and a new perspective. So, he gives John this great vision. Let me show you the next thing.

## **04 BIG VISION COMES FROM SEEING CHRIST RISEN, REIGNING, AND RETURNING**

***"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest."*** Christ appears to him, but he doesn't appear to him by himself. He appears to him with a bunch of... It's kind of strange. This is the beginning of the symbolism and imagery that has confused so many in the book of Revelation.

It's the image of being around all of these lampstands. He's like, "What is that?" Well, that represents the church. By the way, this is going to be written to churches for 2,000 years. It's going to be written to these seven churches. Certain churches are suffering and struggling and all this. He's trying to say, "If you want to know where Jesus is, Jesus is in the midst of his church."

You've probably heard this many times. People say, "I love Jesus. I can't stand the church." That's impossible. That's like telling some guy, "I love you. I can't stand your wife." Uh, probably not the best. The church is Jesus' body. The church is Jesus' bride. The church is Jesus' brothers and sisters. He deeply loves the church. So, he's in the midst of the church, and look at this vision. We get this picture, actually, of his face, his appearance. It says:

***"The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."***

It's interesting that the focus of this description of Jesus is primarily his face. You can tell a lot about a person just by looking at their face. You can tell how old somebody is. You can look at someone every once in a while and go, "You are not doing well." You can tell that by looking at their face.

We're given this image. First of all, we're given an image of Jesus Christ with white hair. Most drawings of Jesus do not show him with white hair. Here's the thing. You cannot think of Jesus only in his humanity. You have to think about him in his divinity. You can't think about Jesus just in his humiliation. That's the Gospels and him living his life and being rejected and dying on the cross.

You have to think about him not just in his humiliation. A comprehensive picture of Christ is that, but it's his humiliation and his exaltation. It's his humanity and his divinity. What does the white hair represent? Age and wisdom. That's what it represents: that Jesus Christ is very, very old. He has always existed. I know it hurts the head to think of it.

We're told about so many different areas. I'll just focus on maybe one more. We're talking about his eyes. It's the penetrating gaze of Christ. Here's what this means. Jesus sees everything. Now, that's always both encouraging and terrifying, depending on what you're doing.

If you're one of those people who is like, "I am serving, and I am sacrificing, and I basically feel invisible and forgotten. I feel like I'm doing all of the right things. No one sees my secret prayer life. I'm not onstage. I'm not getting credit for any of this stuff. Nobody knows..." Jesus sees. That's the encouragement.

The other side is if anybody thinks they're getting away with anything, there is no such thing as secret sin. People are like, "Well, my wife doesn't know. My husband doesn't know. I only do it when I travel." Jesus sees. So, he has this big vision of Jesus, but let me show you something else.

Verse 17. This is what you and I would do too. ***"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.'"***

He gets this image of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. See, what happens with a lot of Christians... When we did our ONE Initiative we said, "Share the message of Christianity with other people." A lot of people will say... I've been guilty of saying this. We'll say something like, "You know what? I need to tell you that you're a sinner, and Jesus lived a sinless life in your place." It's like, "Okay. Good so far."

"He died on the cross for your sins. He died in your place, a substitutionary death." Great. So far so good. "Actually, if you will repent and believe in him, you can have eternal life." Okay. We skip the resurrection. Oftentimes, we do not think enough about the idea that Jesus Christ is alive and well. Jesus is not a figure from the past. He did not just live; he lives.

So, we have this beautiful picture of Christ, but here's the focus of the book. The focus of the book of Revelation is actually verse 7. We're going to go up to verse 7. ***"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen."***

This is the idea that Jesus Christ will return. Here's the interesting thing. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus will return visibly, bodily, from the sky at the end of time. When it comes to the return of Christ, we are not on the planning committee; we are on the welcoming committee.

People have a lot of questions about the return of Christ, but let me bring this down and make it very practical for you. If you want to know how you're doing spiritually... We're very given to self-deception, for sure. It's hard to ask the right question that penetrates your own self-deception, your willful ignorance.

One of the questions you can ask is, "How would I feel if Jesus Christ came back today?" Nothing will tell you about the condition of your spiritual state like thinking about the return of Christ. Too many of us would say, "Yeah, Jesus. I'd like you to return, but not quite yet."

Martin Luther, that famous monk turned Reformer... He's such a salty character. He had so many great lines. He said about Jesus... Imagine if you felt this way. He said something like, "I feel as though Jesus Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming back tomorrow." Christians should be those who have a vision that Jesus Christ will one day return.

Now, we don't know when. The best illustration I know how to give... How should you think about the return of Christ? Those of us who have had kids... Whenever you have the due date for the baby... You're like, "All right. February 15." Well, you kind of know any window within two weeks before and any window within two weeks after the baby could come.

That four-week period is how our lives should feel about the return of Christ. It's like, "Well, I've got other things to do, and we've got to go to work. Life has to go on, but at any moment it could be interrupted, and I'll be excited when it is." That's how we should be about the return of Christ. That leads to the final thing. So, big vision comes from God's Word. It's based on what Christ has done. It helps give us perspective for our own lives. It focuses on Christ.

## **05 BIG VISION IS ABOUT WHAT GOD IS DOING THROUGH HIS CHURCH**

I'm going to get into this in the weeks to come, but I'll just look at verse 11 here. *"...saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'"*

When Jesus reveals himself, this massive revelation of himself, he says, "This is how I'm going to work. I'm going to work through the church." Someone said there are three humiliations of Christ. We talked about the humiliation of Christ earlier. There are three humiliations of Christ. There was the humiliation of Christ in becoming a



man. He humbled himself to become like us. That was the first humiliation. That would have been enough.

They said the second humiliation was dying. Not just dying but dying a criminal's death. That was called the *second humiliation of Christ*. Then they said there was a third humiliation of Christ. What is that? Deciding for the rest of human history to work through his church. The way God primarily works in the world is through his local church. It is God's plan A.

This can sound self-serving. I don't mean this to be. It could be any church. It doesn't have to be Two Cities Church. I hope you will get a vision for the local church, because there is nothing as powerful and as potent as a local church when it's running on all of its cylinders, when it's doing what the Bible says.

Listen. This is the type of church we are trying to be, and we want you to help us. Here's what happens in the local church when it's functioning right: The gospel is preached powerfully. The lost are found. The least are served. The saints are equipped for ministry. Jesus Christ is honored publicly, and God gets the credit for all of it.

So, guys, in the weeks and months to come... I mean, look around. It's already getting full in here. We are already architecting a plan for the future. We are going to be continuing to have a city vision to go deeper, wider, and stronger. We're going to unpack it in the weeks and months and years to come, but I want to invite you to be a part of this, to move from the sidelines to the front lines, from the fringes to being part of the family, from being a consumer to being a contributor.

If you want to deepen your affections this year, deepen your commitments. Let me just give this final word. For us to go to the places that we're going to go, for you to go to the places that you're going to go... Vision creates courage, but it also takes courage. When you get the right vision you're like, "I could run through a wall for that vision." It creates courage, but it does take courage.

I've done a lot of reading this week just thinking about vision, thinking about vision for your life and my life and my family and your family and our church. When I read all about vision, it was really interesting. It basically said there are always four components to vision. If you learn nothing else, maybe you'll take this away and try to apply it to your life.

They said there are always four components to vision. If you're trying to develop... If you want to take this and go, "Okay. Well, what part am I going to play, and how am I going to be part of this and advance the mission?" the first thing you have to ask is

"What's the problem?" Every leader knows this. To cast a vision you have to go, "Here's what's wrong, and this can't stay the same."

We might say, "Hey, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Our city is full of religiously lost and rebelliously lost people, and we've got to tell them about Jesus." So that's the problem. The second thing... And you only have to figure this out for yourself. What's your plan to solve that problem? That's the exciting part. Defining the problem and defining the plan is the fun part. Like, get everyone together. "What's the problem? What's the plan?" That's fun.

The third part is not as fun...the price. Every vision has a price tag. Everybody loves vision until it costs them. The moment it costs them something emotionally or financially or relationally or with their schedule, it's like, "I'm out." We need to see the problem, be part of the plan, and count the cost, the price.

The final thing is to make a lasting and long difference, there needs to be partnership. What we're trying to do together... We're figuring it out. This is all new this year in this building. We're figuring out "What does it look like for us to lock arms together as a church?" We know that if you want to go fast you go alone, but if you want to go far you go together.

If you'll close your eyes and bow your heads with me, I just want to give us a chance to respond for a minute. Where do you need vision for your life? Where do you need a bigger picture of Christ? Where do you need to see Christ instead of whatever you're looking at?

Whatever you're looking at will determine how you live. If all you look at is money, then it'll be obvious in the way you live. If all you look at is attractiveness and how people look, it'll be obvious in how you live. If all you look at is comparing and competing, it'll be obvious in how you live.

Lord, would you give us a picture of Christ? All across this room, as we sing this final song, would you give us a picture of Christ that's better than our sin and bigger than our suffering? Lord, we're going to sing "I've Witnessed It," and I pray that we would make decisions today and in the weeks to come that we could genuinely, at the end of this year, sing this song about our own lives. Not about other people's lives, but that we witnessed the power of the kingdom as it broke through to new places and new people. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.