

# A Portrait No Artist Can Paint

by C.H. Spurgeon

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of being held up in Christ's right hand, representing faithfulness to Him, and the power of the gospel residing in Christ Himself.*

**Duration:** 40:35

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:14, John 3:19, Revelation 1:16

**Topics:** "Christology", "Idolatry"

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## Description

The sermon transcript discusses the description of Jesus Christ as seen by John in the isle of Patmos. It emphasizes the impossibility of capturing the glory of Christ's face through any form of art. The sermon highlights the detestable nature of worshiping images of Christ, as it goes against the divine purpose. It also emphasizes the power of Christ's words, likening them to a sharp two-edged sword that can penetrate the hearts and minds of individuals. The sermon concludes by mentioning that Christ's presence brings purification and separation, separating the chaff from the wheat.

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## Transcript

The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit. A portrait no artist can paint. A sermon intended for reading on Lord's Day, January 3rd, 1897.

Delivered by C. H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on Lord's Day evening, April 26th, 1885. Revelation 1, verse 16. 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.

While reading this description given by John of what he saw in the isle called Patmos, I think you must have noticed that it would be quite impossible for any painter to depict it upon canvas, and equally impossible for any sculptor to embody it in stone or marble. Those who have attempted to copy the lines here given have signally failed. They may paint a picture of the garment down to the feet and the golden girdle, but the rest, if it be viewed from an artist's aspect, would be found to be incongruous.

His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were as a flame of fire. No great painter would ever venture to give us a portrait of our Lord with his head and his hair white like wool, as white as snow. If he did, it would be quite impossible to depict eyes that were as a flame of fire.

How would it be possible to make us realize with the aid of any pen or pencil that his feet were likened to fine brass as if they burned in a furnace? The task would have to be given over as quite hopeless when it reached this point. 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. I believe that this difficulty of giving a truthful representation of the Lord Jesus Christ is according to the divine purpose.

Nothing, it seems to me, can be more detestable to the Lord's heart and mind than the worship of his image in any shape. If any are determined to break the law about making graven images and bowing down before them, then let the idol be the image of something that is on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. But, O ye idolaters, pray do not, as it were, make the Lord Jesus Christ accessory to your idolatry.

That he never really can be, for he abhors it. Get thee behind me, Satan, would be his answer to every proposal that his image should be worshipped, for he could not endure it. It is a dreadful thing that men should ever dare attempt to make any likeness of the Son of God himself to be the occasion of sin.

If he must make an image, make it, if he will, of a serpent or of an ox, but not of the Son of God, who came on purpose to redeem us from this, among other sins. Let us not degrade his sacred personage by making even it to be an image before which we prostrate ourselves. I know it is said that idolaters do not worship the image, and that they worship God through the image, but that is expressly forbidden.

The first commandment is, Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Then the second commandment forbids the worshipping of God by or through any symbol or image whatsoever. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.

Thou shalt not bow down Thyself to them nor serve them. The worship of the image of Christ appears to me to be not the more excusable form of idolatry, if there be any that is less evil than others, but it seems to me to be the more intensely wicked form of it, since it is making even the glorious personage of the Lord Jesus subsidiary to an act of transgression against the commandments of His Father. If we cannot say concerning the divine and human personage of our Lord, Ye saw no similitude, yet we can say, Ye saw no similitude such as can be engraven in any way whatever.

The fact is that we have in this apocalyptic vision very extraordinary hieroglyphics put together. Hieroglyphic language does not aim at the artistic and the poetic. A hieroglyph has a higher object than the mere gratification of taste.

It is intended to give us mental ideas, not ideas for the eye, but ideas for the heart. Not what we shall see, but that which we shall feel and understand. Hence these figurative representations of different parts of our Lord's person, though they cannot be put together so as to form a picture, are nevertheless deeply instructive to every loving and reverent heart.

So I want you, dear friends, without wishing to make a complete portrait of your Lord, to try to follow the teaching in this verse. There are three things here. First, the stars in Christ's hand.

He had in His right hand seven stars. Then, secondly, there is the sword in His mouth. Out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword.

And then, thirdly, there is the glory of His face. His countenance was as the sun shineth in His strength. First, then, when John saw our Lord Jesus Christ, he naturally looked to His hand, and therefore he saw the stars in His hand.

Note, dear friends, that our Lord Jesus has a hand. He is not as some fancy and abstract idea of a personage without life. He has a hand, and that hand is a working hand.

The hand that was pierced by the nail is not paralyzed. It has strength to hold in itself seven stars. The hand that wrought out our redemption has not ceased to work for us.

Christ holds in His hand that which He bought with the blood of His heart. John saw that His Lord held in His right hand seven stars. Let us always think of our Lord Jesus Christ as full of power and actively using it.

Let us think of Him at this moment as having a deft and skilled and mighty right hand, which He will lift up on behalf of all those who put their trust in Him. On the right hand of the Majesty on high, there sits a right-handed Christ, still carrying on according to His own good pleasure the work of the Lord, whichever prospereth in His hand. When John looked at Christ's right hand, he tells us that in it he saw seven stars.

These are generally understood to be the ministers of the seven churches of Asia. We are told in the twentieth verse that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And I do not know who the angels of the churches can be unless they are the messengers of the churches, those ministers of whom Paul wrote, they are the messengers of the churches and the glory of Christ.

At any rate, we shall take it for granted that these stars represent the pastors of the churches, the ministers of Christ. These stars are said to be in the Lord's right hand first because He made them stars. They are in the hand of Him who made them what they are.

Under the old covenant, there were to be in the tabernacle seven lights always burning upon the seven-branched candlestick or lampstand. But John saw in Christ's hand seven stars, not ordinary lamps, but stars shining with a greater brilliance and a more heavenly light than could ever be seen in the oil-fed lamps in the ancient tabernacle. If any man in the church of God shines like a star to guide others to the port of peace, he owes his light entirely to Christ.

It must be so because it is Christ's right hand that has made Him what He is. He is a light because Christ has given Him light. He owes His spiritual radiance entirely to Him who is the Lord and Giver of light in the midst of His church.

My dear brethren in the ministry, if you want to shine for Jesus, you must be made into stars to be held in His right hand. There is no possibility of your being of spiritual use to your own fellow men or exercising a ministry that shall tend to their eternal salvation except as you are made into a light to be held in the right hand of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the education in the world, all the natural talent that any possess, all the acquired practice of oratory, all the powers which are the result of long experience can never make a good minister of Jesus Christ.

The stars are in the right hand of Christ. Ministers are not made by men but by the Lord Himself if they are worthy to be called ministers at all. So the stars are in His right hand first because He made them.

They are there next, dear friends, because He holds them up. Every Christian has to face great perils and every Christian has need to pray to the Lord, hold Thou me up and I shall be safe. But ministers of Christ, ministers whom He makes to be stars are exposed to sevenfold peril.

Against the leaders of the spiritual Israel, the sharpest arrows of the enemy are sure to be shot. The word seems to be still passed round to our adversaries as in the ancient day of battle when the king of Syria said to his captains, Fight neither with small nor great, save only with the king of Israel. If there be anywhere a captain who leads the way and comes to the very front of the host, the temptations that gather about him will be most fierce and terrible.

Slander, misrepresentation, and every kind of evil shall dog his heels. And he above all men who are on the face of the earth must cry to his Lord, Hold Thou me up and I shall be safe. The mercy is that the true minister of Christ is held up in Christ's right hand.

He shall be kept faithful even unto death. He shall not fall. And God helping him, he shall be caused to shine on right to the end of his ministry.

Every now and then we hear a rumor that some of God's own children have fallen from grace. I do not believe it. It is said that they have fallen away and perished.

I do not believe it. Those of you who live till next November and go out late at night may see a great many shooting stars. And some of your little children will cry, Look, Father, the stars are falling.

And possibly some children will believe that stars have fallen from their places. Take the telescope and look at the heavens. Sweep the sky as far as the range of the instrument will permit.

Jupiter is all right. And Saturn and Mars and Venus and Mercury and all the planets, they are all in their places. And the fixed stars are shining on as they have done ever since the Lord first kindled them to charm away the gloom of night.

I do not know what these shooting stars may be. There have been many guesses with regard to them. Neither do I know what these apostates may be.

There have been a great many guesses about those that did flame out so brightly once. But I do know this, that Jesus still holds the seven stars in his right hand and he will not drop even one of them. They shall not be reduced to six or five or four or three or two or one or vanish altogether.

Neither shall it ever be so with any of the true sons of God. Our Lord himself has said, they shall never perish. Neither shall any pluck them out of my hand.

My father which gave them me is greater than all and no man is able to pluck them out of my father's hands. If you, my brother, are kept in the right hand of Christ, then you are kept. If you wish and hope to shine for Jesus through all the years that you shall live, then you must be held in his right hand for he alone who made you can hold you up.

Next, are not the stars represented as being in Christ's right hand because he holds them out as well as holds them up? As a man holds out a lamp in his hand and holds it up and out as far as he can that its light may shine the farther, so does Christ hold his servants up. Sometimes he holds some of them up high aloft above the multitude so that on the Sabbath they rise quite out of themselves. They say what they

could never have thought of saying by themselves and they are enabled to plunge into mysteries which aforetime had not been opened up to them and they are given unto them burning words that shine as well as burn for their Lord lifts them up and holds them out.

Dear friends, pray much for us who are called to preach the gospel that we may always be lifted up in the right hand of Christ. If we try to shine simply with our own natural brightness, it will be a very poor, miserable exhibition of darkness. And if we try to work ourselves up, as some do, into a state of excitement, we may goad ourselves into a condition of semi-madness and lead others into the same folly, but no good will come out of it.

That elevation of spirit which comes from the right hand which once was pierced for us, that lifting up of holy speech which is given through contact with the right hand of him who spake as never man spake, that is the kind of uplifting that we want. Pray, beloved, that every star in the right hand of the Lord Jesus Christ may be held up and held out and so shine yet farther and farther across the wild waste of the waters of sin and sorrow. Do you not also think that by the stars being in the right hand of Christ he meant that he claims them as his own? Every faithful minister is Christ's property.

He belongs to his Lord, and he recognizes that blessed fact. Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price, is true of all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is specially true of as many as are called out from among their fellows that they may be the mouth of God and that God may speak by them to the feeding of his flock and to the bringing home of his lost sheep.

They are peculiarly and especially in the hand of Christ, for they belong entirely to Christ. Is not this the highest honor any man can have, that he should be in Christ's right hand because he belongs to Christ? You see, it is specially mentioned that these stars are not in the left hand of Christ, but in his right hand, as if the Lord intended to put peculiar and special honor upon his servants who are faithful to him. Brethren, it does not become any of us who preach the gospel to seek honor of men.

What is it, after all? What is the value of commendation from the lips of men? Suppose they should praise us and flatter us and say that we are thoughtful men, abreast of the times, and I know not what. All such stuff as this is but carrion, fit for the scavengers of the earth, but not worthy to be set before the angels of the churches. The true servants of Christ may well be satisfied to eat of the crumbs that fall from his table rather than to feast upon the dainties that load the tables of the ungodly.

If our hearts be wholly set on shining for Christ and shining for nothing but Christ and shining with nothing but Christ's own light and the light of Christ's own truth, then are we, as the stars in his right hand, beloved of him and precious in his sight. Verily I say unto you, there shall be a glorious reward at the last for those who are made by Christ into stars and who are held up and are held out in the right hand of their Lord and so claimed by him as peculiarly and specially his own. So much, then, concerning the ministers of Christ.

Brethren, pray for us and pray for all the preachers of the word that they may be stars in the right hand of Christ. But now, secondly, and upon this I would dwell with great emphasis, notice the sword which comes out of Christ's mouth. Out of his mouth went a sharp, two-edged sword.

The conquering power of the gospel is in Christ himself. It does not lie with his ministers. The power with which Christ contends for the mastery against all the powers of darkness resides not with his servants but dwells within himself.

The two-edged sword of the Lord is in the mouth of the Lord. We shine, dear friends, such little twinkling stars as any of us are. We shine and God blesses the shining.

But if ever there is a soul saved, we have not saved it. And if ever there is an enemy of Christ who is wounded and slain, the deed is not done by our sword. By ourselves we have no power.

The really effectual work is done by Christ himself and by him alone. The sword that goes out of our mouth is a poor, blunt instrument which can accomplish nothing. It is the sword that goes out of Christ's mouth that does everything in the great battle for the right.

Notice how the right hand of Christ has to be used even to hold up these stars. Ministers are not his right hand. They are only as stars that he holds up with his right hand.

They derive all their power from him. But even when they are held up by his right hand, they are not the real warriors. It is not their strength with which the battle is fought and won.

The power is in Christ himself. It is out of his mouth that there goeth the sharp, two-edged sword that wins the victory. Notice, dear friends, that the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to conquer men is a power which is like a sword.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, comes out of the mouth of Christ himself. And coming out of his mouth, it does several things which I will briefly mention to you. First, it is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

This sword pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow. When I am preaching most earnestly, some of you may find it possible to go to sleep. While I am talking to you even about the most sacred things, they may glide over you as oil might run down a slab of marble.

But if my Lord speaks to you, you will be compelled to feel the power of this sword that goeth out of his mouth. Every word that comes by his Spirit out of his mouth will seem to rip you open and lay you bare. For all things are naked and opened under the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

And he can make you feel that he is discerning the thoughts and intents of your hearts. The Lord Jesus Christ, when he comes into our midst, brings his fan in his hand, and with it he will thoroughly purge his floor with every movement of that fan and every breath of his Spirit he is separating the chaff from the wheat. There is no escaping his observation when he is at work amongst us.

Private thoughts are detected. The secrets of the heart are laid bare. The precious and the vile are severed the one from the other when he is working in the midst of his church.

For out of his mouth goeth the word which is sharper than a two-edged sword. When this sword comes out of the mouth of Christ, it wounds as well as discerns. As a sword cuts, pierces, pricks and wounds, so does the word of God.

I do not wonder that people are sometimes angry with the word of the Lord. Who would not be angry when he is cut as with a sharp sword? I am not surprised that others retire to weep as if their hearts would break. Who would not weep when the knife cuts into his flesh and touches his very marrow? When the Lord Jesus Christ blesses the word by his Spirit, the wounded are all around him.

The ungodly begin to tremble and the godly ones, finding that Christ is fighting against the sin that is within them, are wounded and bleeding in a hundred places because of that two-edged sword of his which cuts through coats of mail and wounds even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. Out of Christ's mouth comes not only a wounding but a killing sword. When he speaks with power and awe, how I wish that he would do so just now, sinners feel that their self-righteousness is killed and that all their carnal hopes are killed.

They can say, and I trust that some of you can say with John, When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. I was alive till I saw Christ. I seemed to be all that I wanted to be till I saw Christ.

But when I saw him on the cross, when I read the mystery of his passion and understood what it cost him to redeem a soul from death, then I saw what a sinner must be. And I also saw what would be the result of my sin if I had to bear the penalty of it. And then I fell at his feet as dead.

Brethren and sisters, let us pray the Lord Jesus Christ to use that sword which is in his mouth constantly to use it among us. For what is the use of the seven stars in his right hand? What is the use of anything unless Christ's own voice is heard and Christ's own truth is driven home to the hearts of men? We have a good deal of preaching nowadays, do we not? But one word out of Christ's mouth would be worth fifty thousand after the mouth of the greatest preachers who ever lived. Oh, if we will but speak, the preacher may be very illiterate and he may not have much to say.

But if God speaks through him, there will be a power about his message which cannot be resisted. On the other hand, the preacher may be one who has been well trained and taught. He may speak eloquently so as to please his hearers.

But if God does not speak through him, what mere froth it is. It is gone like a vapor and no result comes of it at all. Do let us keep on crying that the master himself may be at work in our midst with the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God proceeding out of his mouth.

Did you notice that the text said that out of Christ's mouth there went a sharp sword? There is nothing so sharp as God's word. When we are speaking, it is very seldom that God blesses merely our words. It is usually that we quote from the scripture that is the means of the salvation of our ears.

I think it was McShane who said, It is not our word, but God's word which saves souls. I noticed that in most conversions the point of decision has been reached when a text has been quoted. The word which God has blessed has been mainly scriptural.

Even if the truth has not been spoken in the exact words of inspiration, yet it has been most clearly and manifestly a quotation from the scripture put into other words. There is nothing so sharp as the word of God. People will get round what we say, but they cannot get round what God says.

They can ignore your opinion and my view of the case and another person's dictum upon it, but they cannot forget that which comes to them with this message. Thus saith the Lord, it is written. And when the spirit of God applies the truth to their hearts, it is indeed a sharp sword.

It is also two-edged. For the text calls it a sharp, two-edged sword. There is no handling this weapon without cutting yourself, for it has no back to it.

It is all edge. The word of Christ, somehow or other, is all edge. I remember preaching a sermon upon the resurrection on purpose to see whether God would bless it to the conversion of sinners.

There were many brought to Christ by that discourse. With the same intention, I have preached divine sovereignty and the election of grace, and I have seen many won to Christ by those stern truths. I have often noticed that when I have been preaching for the comfort of God's people, there have always been sinners wounded even then, for the word is all edge.

And even the consolations of the gospel, while they cheer the believer, will cut the sinner in twain. There is something even about that which is the sweetest truth to the believer, which is sour to the unbeliever and cuts into his conscience. Only let us preach the gospel, and we shall never find any other weapon like it.

As David said of Goliath's sword, so may we say of the sword of the Spirit. There is none like that. Give it me.

When I am invited to preach the novel doctrines of the present age or to try the modern methods of fighting the devil, I look these new weapons up and down, and I advise those who offer them to me to send them to the exhibition of inventions up in the west of London. You may see them there, but you will never see them here. The old sword suits my hand, and God blesses it to the cutting and the wounding and the killing of sinners.

God, the Holy Spirit, who made it, uses it most effectually, and so by the grace of God we will keep to it and use no other as long as we live. I beg all of you who try to bring sinners to Christ to stick to that old sword, the two-edged sword that goeth out of Christ's mouth. If souls are not saved by the preaching of the truth, they will not be saved by the telling of lies.

I have sometimes heard really awful doctrine preached at revival services, and an easy-going brother has said, Well, you see, it was an evangelistic meeting. Yes, but you should not tell lies at evangelistic meetings. Oh, but then if we were to preach the same truth to these sinners that you would proclaim to a company of believers, it would not do them any good.

Well, then nothing else will depend upon it. If the truth will not have any effect upon them, your toning of that truth down or your screwing it up will not improve it, but will spoil it. I believe that the very gospel that comforts saints is the gospel that saves sinners.

That there is but one gospel for all purposes and all people, and that therefore two gospels will never be required. You have only to strike this way with one edge of the sword and then that way with the other edge of it, or to swing it to and fro like that ancient warrior did with his great two-handed sword, and you will strike sinners down right and left, smiting the self-righteous this way and the licentious the other way. Only keep you to that grand old sword which the apostles used, which was in the martyrs' hands and by which Christ himself triumphs, is triumphing and will triumph even to the end.

The third part of my subject will have but few words from me. Perhaps the fewer I shall say, the better it will be. The point to which it refers is the glory of Christ's face.

His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. I will not attempt to explain these words, but will only call your attention to one or two thoughts concerning them. First, what do you see in Christ's right hand? Seven stars, yet how insignificant they appear when you get a sight of his face.

They are stars, and there are seven of them, but who can see seven stars or, for that matter, 70,000 stars when the sun shineth in his strength? How sweet it is when the Lord himself is so present in a congregation that the preacher, whoever he may be, is altogether forgotten. I pray you, dear friends, when you go to a place of worship, always try to see the Lord's face rather than the stars in his hand. Look at the sun and you will forget the stars.

If you look for the stars, it may be that you will see neither star nor sun, for the Lord may withdraw his light from his servants because you are looking to them rather than looking to him. In Christ's hand are the stars, but his countenance is as the sun shineth in his strength. What does this mean, that there is about our divine Lord an inexpressible, indescribable, infinite splendor? No man can look at the sun.

It would blind him. The sun, when it shineth in its strength, not when it is rising in the morning, nor yet when it is setting in the evening, nor yet when a cloud passes over it, but the sun in its strength, no man can look at that. He would soon lose his eyes if he did.

So who shall ever know, much less tell, the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ? To know him is our great ambition, but his love surpasseth knowledge. That is our confession after years of endeavoring to search into the height and depth and length and breadth of his love. Think of your Lord, then, as covered with inconceivable glory.

But this expression is to be regarded also as setting forth Christ's overpowering preeminence. The best of his servants are only stars, but he is the sun. In Christ there is more light than there is in all the prophets, saints, and apostles who have ever lived.

All their light came from him, but all their light was still remaining in him. And all the light that ever shall be through all the ages will be as nothing compared with the light that there is in him. One said of Harry VIII that if all the tyrants who ever lived had been dead, they might all have been considered as reproduced in that one man.

I may say of our Lord Jesus Christ something very different. That is, if all the good things and all the virtuous things and all the loving things that have ever been since the world began were gone, they are all to be found in him. As the sun is the great source of light and heat, so there is an overpowering preeminence about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet further, this is a communicable excellence. The sun, when he shineth in his strength, is pouring out his light. The sun has not light merely for himself, but his light is for all the worlds that are round about him, as the face, the glory, the excellence, the merit of Christ is for all his people.

He is forever pouring it forth. And this is his splendor, that he shines upon the sons of men to fill them with joy. Yet this figure of the sun has in it something justly terrible.

Who could fight against the sun that shineth in his strength? If all the powers that be contended against the sun in an attempt to invade his territory, the sun would consume them all. And who shall fight against thee, O sun of righteousness? Thou shalt utterly consume them in the day of thy wrath. There will be something terrible about the face of Christ when he comes to judgment.

Then shall men cry, Hide us from the face of him that sitteth upon the throne. But to his people, there is something in his face that is intensely joyful. We shall never be in the dark, for our Lord's face is like the sun.

Put out all the lamps and let all temporal comfort and all spiritual comfort vanish. Yet spare us Christ, give us but to see his face and to be favored with his smile. And we shall need no candle, neither light of any other sun, for the face of Christ is as the sun that shineth in his strength.

Dear friends, are you on the Lord's side? Are you on Jesus Christ's side? If so, be happy that you have such a Savior. Are you an opponent of his? Then tremble and bow before him. Kiss the sun, lest he be angry and he perish from the way when his wrath is kindled but a little.

Blessed are all they that put their trust in him. May he send this choice blessing to you all for his dear namesake. Amen.

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