

He Has the Keys

Revelation 1:17-18

Introduction:

Death Come Near: Death is a horrible thing. There are not enough flowers to bloom, or songs to sing, or poetry to quote to hide its terror.

- “Nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes are inevitable” (Ben Franklin). This year tax day and Good Friday fell on the same date, and even tax day had to concede (get your taxes done by Monday).
- We all will face an ultimate and final defeat.

Avoiding Death: Where people would frequently die in their homes, surrounded by family, in years past. Now, we relegate death to hospitals and nursing homes. We try to avoid looking at or thinking about death.

- There is a tradition, however, of remembering death (*memento mori*). It is not meant to be morbid but, rather, to clarify our purpose. We all will die, so we should live this life now with that in mind. What must I do before I die? What happens after I die? What is worth living for? What is worth dying for?

“When the reality of death is far from our minds, the promises of Jesus often seem detached from our lives... Once we’ve learned to see the shadow [of death], we’ll be able to apply the light of Christ... [S]o long as death remains someone else’s problem, Jesus will remain someone else’s Savior... If death is not a problem, Jesus won’t be much of a solution. The more deeply we feel death’s sting, the more consciously we will feel the gospel’s healing power. The more carefully we number our days, the more joyfully we’ll hear that death’s days are numbered too... When we think carefully about death and how it swallows up what we love about life now, we’re prepared to see that what Jesus offers is what we’ve needed all along. Jesus offers eternity, the promise of deathless life, to all who trust in him. And that means he offers joy that won’t be clouded by sorrow... We’re often focused on what we want from this life. But Jesus doesn’t promise to give us more of what death will only steal anyway. He wants to give us what death can’t touch” (McCullough).

- The average Jewish lifespan from 300 BCE to 700 CE was 27-28 with high infant mortality (Allison). If one lived to 30, death was ubiquitous. In our passage today, we see a young church facing persecution and death.
- Despite ignoring the truth, death is undefeated. In fact, for the first time in a long time, the average life expectancy *dropped*.
 - We’re somewhat quietly closing in on 1 million dead Americans from COVID. But other components such as increasing rates of cancer have contributed. In our city, we see up close other contributing factors such as a rapid surge in drug overdose and homicide. Our neighborhood is not immune.

“But the great hope of the Christian faith is that this seemingly insurmountable enemy, Death, has also already been defeated and his fortress has been plundered... [Jesus has] declared that Death no longer has dominion over those in [his] kingdom” (Emerson).

Revelation Introduction: Been in Paul's letter, now we have a letter from John to early churches. This letter to these seven churches is meant to encourage them in the midst of intense persecution. "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. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 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" (Rev. 1:9-11)

- "The book of Revelation is not a prophecy chart about the future but a call to be a disciple of Jesus" (Schreiner). This apocalyptic, prophetic letter is meant to call Christians to faithful, fruitful, joyful obedience even in the face of despair and death.
- Jesus is standing among his churches, encouraging them. They go nowhere that he has not gone first.

Jesus: It's helpful to see what happens in Revelation in the midst of suffering, persecution, and death. What does God give his people? "He doesn't say a breakthrough is just around the corner, he helps make sense of our suffering in light of the coming reign of Christ. If we suffer with him, we will reign with him" (McCaulley *adapted*). What these suffering Christians get is not a removal from the pain of the world but a vision of Jesus to focus their endurance until the end.

- Jesus shows his power and plan so that John and these churches (and us) can maintain hope and faithfulness in the midst of tribulation.

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. 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 (Rev 1:12-16)

- We see Jesus described as the Son of Man (taken from prophecies in Daniel). Son of Man is Jesus' favorite description of himself in the gospels. Though "son of man" *can* be used occasionally to describe a human being, it is almost universally understood by the time of the prophet Daniel and definitely by the time of Jesus to the royal description of the God's Messiah. It's a description of how God the "son" took on flesh ("man").

"A more glorious description of Jesus is not to be found in all the sacred writings" (Charles Simeon).

- In one of the Sunday School classrooms (or hallways) in the church I grew up in, there was this picture purporting to be of Jesus. [The one I'm thinking of was painted by Sallman Head in 1940, one of the most successful works of popular Christian devotional art. It is estimated to have been reproduced 500 million times.](#)
 - It lacks the earthiness and Semitic nature of Rembrandt's "Head of Christ" (one of which I think is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art).
- Not only is Sallman's painting ethnically confused with a Western European looking Jesus, it follows in a tradition that paints Jesus as numinous and divinely beautiful. He has a golden halo of light surrounding his Pantene Pro-V Nic Cage hair.

- Jesus was a *construction worker* and itinerant preacher who slept in olive gardens and borrowed shelters.
- Jesus is gentle in spirit not weak in power. Don't mistake his humility for inability. "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17-18).
- And his true power is unveiled here in Revelation. Crazy hair, fire eyes, bronze feet, voice of a lion, a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth, and a face emanating the full power of the sun (for context, every second the sun produces the same energy as 1 trillion 1 megaton bombs).
 - John is seeing the full power of Jesus unmasked for a moment. These symbols are trying to give him a glimpse into who God really is.
- This might explain his response.

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."¹

Falling Face Down: He falls at Jesus' feet as though he were dead. I think he legitimately and rightly thought he was going to die.

- This is the right response of the human to the divine, of the creature to the creator, of the sinful to the holy.
- This is the response of Ezekiel, and Joshua, and Daniel.

Fear: John should have been afraid of being put to death, but in this moment, he is *rightly* afraid of Jesus. But Jesus laid his right hand on [him], saying, "Fear not." When you fear the right thing you don't fear the wrong thing (e.g., fear shots, but fear disease more, so I don't fear shots). If you fear God, you don't have to fear persecution, or suffering, or tribulation, or loss of reputation, or poverty, or sickness, or death.

- The one person we should fear we don't have to be afraid of because he loves us and is for us (e.g., Dad is strong, superhero, fear him but he loves me so I don't fear him).

See Jesus: On this Easter Sunday, there is one thing I want for you, to see Jesus in all of his glory and power. When the early Christian churches were facing persecution and death, they were not given immediate relief from their circumstances but an unforgettable vision of the Son of God. In times of suffering, you and I don't need a sentimental Jesus who simply makes us feel warm at night. We don't need Jesus as a lucky charm or life coach, we need to see Jesus as the sovereign Lord over all the powers at work in our world.

- Some churches feel that Easter is their superbowl, the music has to be spectacular, drag in the pyrotechnics, drop 1,000 eggs from a helicopter. I just feel different: we don't need to be spectacular because **Jesus is spectacular**. You don't need us to pull out all the stops, you need to see Jesus clearly!!

¹ ¹⁷ Καὶ ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν, ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός, καὶ ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ' ἐμὲ λέγων, Μὴ φοβοῦ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος ¹⁸ καὶ ὁ ζῶν, καὶ ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου.

We don't have to fear death (or anything) because Jesus is our sovereign, victorious, Savior and King.

- Three things we see about Jesus in this passage.

1. Jesus is the Eternal God I am the first and the last

Alpha and Omega: Jesus is the first and last: he is God. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8).

- The Triune nature of God is not just some historical artifact, it is the attempt by faithful Christians to articulate what Christ and his Scriptures say about the nature of God.
- God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit. God is one God in three persons.
- Jesus is not just the most powerful of created beings, or the most persuasive of human teachers, or the most righteous of human beings: he is God become flesh. He is God himself. When he tells you not to fear, he has the power to back it up.
- Any theology that minimizes Jesus' identity as God, is heretical, unbiblical, and dangerous.

Beginning and End: α to ω = A to Z. This is not just a theological truth but a practical encouragement. Because Jesus is God, it means he was there at the beginning and he'll be there at the end.

- And if he was there at the beginning and he'll be there at the end, we can be sure he's in control in the middle.
- Already and not yet (salvation, sanctification, glorification). Illustrated in the space between the cross and the resurrection.

Trust: I heard the story of a young girl who was terminally ill and when the time came for the little child to leave this home, she said to her mother, "Mom, it's getting dark, and I'm afraid." Her mother came close and softly replied, "My child, Jesus is in the night as He is in the day. He is in the dark as He is in the light, and He will take care of His own. Do not be afraid."

- "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer." (Corrie Ten Boom)
- Jesus' character allows us to trust him from inception to conclusion. His sovereign power gives us full assurance. That trust guards us against despair in the face of suffering and prevents us from compromising with the world.
- Trust in God inoculates us from fear even when everything around us seems to be falling apart.

2. Jesus is the Living Savior [I am] the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.

Cruciform Christianity: "We preach Christ crucified" (1:23). The cross is at the heart of our faith. In that moment, Jesus takes our place, dies the death we deserve, and pays the penalty of our sin. *But he's not still on the cross.* He died, but he's not dead anymore.

Dead: In his humanity, Jesus really did die. He experienced death. We walked through the experience we deserved.

- He didn't pretend to die. It didn't just look like he died. This wasn't some grand illusion or myth passed around among his followers.
- The reason some have tried to explain away Jesus' death is because they don't want to believe his resurrection because they don't want to submit to his authority.
- His resurrection broke all the rules.

Dead AND Raised: Friday and Sunday go together. Jesus really did die and he really was raised.

- Julian, called "the Apostate," was born in 331 AD, a nephew of the Roman Caesar, Constantine. He was brought up in a Christian household and in a Christian family. In young adulthood, he repudiated the Christian faith and embraced paganism. It was his avowed purpose when he became emperor 361 CE to blot out Christianity from the face of the earth. In the days of that reign and his bitter persecution against the faith of Christ, one of his arrogant subjects and followers said to a lowly Christian, "This Jesus, your carpenter of Nazareth, what is He doing now?" And in that dark day and despairing hour, the humble believer replied, "Sir, He is building a coffin for your emperor." In 363 AD, after he had reigned for only two years, he fell mortally wounded on the field of battle in a campaign against the Persians. And as they carried Julian off the field, he said in his death, one of the famous sentences of all history, "O Galilean, You have conquered."

Jesus doesn't stay in the grave. He is raised from the dead.

- Everyone else may have thought death won on Friday and Saturday, but God knew better.
- The time between Friday and Sunday is a reminder that there is always a "what it seems like" and a "what it really is."
 - Friday was only understood as "good" and Saturday "holy" when we look back from the perspective of "resurrection Sunday."
 - If you're in the despair of Friday or the silence of Saturday, you can continue to trust in the promise of Sunday despite what you see and feel.
- Death is not the final word for Jesus, it is the start of his victory march. His death is not merely the end of his humiliation but the first moments of his exaltation.
 - His crucifixion is a reminder that he has suffered for us, so he understands our suffering. His resurrection is a reminder that he is victorious, so we can trust him to lead us to victory.
- "Death's threatening menace is neutralized."

Be comforted. We can have hope as we cross that final river. Jesus has gone before us, has defeated the grave, and will one day raise our bodies from death's dominion.

- "We face death with the hope that Christ is with us and for us. Jesus has fully experienced death, as all of us will unless Jesus returns in glory first, and because of that, he's victorious over it. He's taken the full brunt of its sting and in doing so destroyed its power and dominion. He has broken down the gates of Death's stronghold. And because of what he has done, we can face our own deaths and those of our loved ones

with hope, hope in this conquering King who has bound the strong man and broken down his doors.”

- We pass through because he passed through. His resurrection guarantees ours.

Eternal Life: I am alive forevermore. Lord of eternity. He'll never die again. He *is* alive and he has the power of life.

- Every other major religious figure is dead and gone, never to live again. Jesus is alive!
- For those in Christ, death is not the end.
- And there is no living in this world: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17).

3. Jesus is Lord Over Death I have the keys of Death and Hades

Death: Death “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26).

- Death was not God's purpose, it is an enemy. The reign of Christ is not completed until death is conquered.

Descended to the Dead: Nicene Creed (“he descended to the dead” or “hell”). One of the earliest Christian creeds.

- Biblical cosmology (heavens/above, earth/here, underworld/below).
- What happens to Jesus between his crucifixion and resurrection? His body goes to the grave and his soul goes to the place of the dead (*a la* Lazarus in Lk 16).
- “By dying, Christ submitted to the laws of the underworld; by rising again he destroyed them. He did away with the everlasting character of death so as to make death a thing of time, not of eternity” (Leo the Great).

Death is Scared to Death: One version of this theology is called the “harrowing of hell” that Jesus plundered the grave. While there are lots of things wrong with the way this is often taught (Jesus doesn't go to “hell,” for example). But I still like that “harrowing” language. Harrowing technically means to plunder or steal. Christ is has plundered the those in paradise from their imprisonment by death. When we say something is “harrowing” we mean it is distressing or terrifying. “Death” is terrified of Christ.

- Therefore death doesn't scare us. “Even death holds no terror because he is the Living One who has conquered death and holds it in his power” (Mounce).
- The picture is of death as the jailor. The gates are locked. But we know the gates of hell cannot prevail against Christ (Matt 16:18).

“Jesus has already walked through the valley of the shadow of death and come out victoriously on the other side. As the God-man, he has defeated death. Jesus proclaims his victory over sin, death, and hell—not only in heaven and on the earth but also under the earth. Jesus is King everywhere, including the stronghold of the enemy.”

Keys: Jesus didn't just overcome death. He didn't just escape the prison of death. **He took the keys** (there is no place where he is not king *contra* Lion King “where the light doesn't touch”).

- He is Lord of the seen and the unseen, things above and the underworld; Heaven and Hades; our bodies and our souls; life and death. He is King over the grave.
- He has the keys to release us from death and into his everlasting kingdom.

Authority: He has the power. When I was in college I worked for this camp at Palm Beach Atlantic University. To get to the campus, the buses with kids had to drive right by this exotic car dealership. My coworker and I were just sitting on the corner directing traffic and this salesman drives up with a Lamborghini. He asks me if I want to get in! The whole time he has the remote keys in his hand. I can look but I have no power and can't take it anywhere.

- The powers of this world, even death and hell, might look powerful but Jesus has the keys. They have no real power. His purposes prevail.

“Your life is immortal until God says it's your time. No one can turn that key but Christ. A thousand devils could not drag you to the tomb or hurl you into the grave.”

- That's one reason I love these verses so much. The risen Christ himself is giving you assurance. Those things you fear most? Judgment, shame, death? They are under his control and we can trust him.
 - You can argue with him or you can trust him.

Conclusion:

- **(1) Praise:** Look at what Jesus has done, look at who he is. Revel in his strength and mercy. He is powerful and good.
 - Death isn't sovereign; Jesus is. Sin didn't triumph; Jesus did. He took our judgment and gave us his righteousness. The death of Jesus was the *death of death*. His resurrection is the guarantee of ours.
- **(2) Obedience:** If he is king of hades, king of death, king of heaven, king of all this earth and all that is under the earth, if he is king in this life and in the life that is to come **then he is king over you**. He has the right and authority to call for and receive your allegiance and obedience.
 - Whatever he tells you to do, you should do.
 - Whatever he tells you not to do, you should not do.
 - Wherever he tells you to go, you should go.
- **(3) Comfort:** If you have not trusted in Christ as your Lord, then death is an enemy to be feared. But if you surrender to Christ, then death has no power. **Take comfort.**
 - Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.
 - Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:25-26).
 - Only Christians can say “it is not death to die.”