

“Fear Not! I Have the Keys!”
Revelation I
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I 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, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 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^[b] on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

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. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ 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.”

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ 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.

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. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

- Revelation I, ESV

What Makes You Afraid?

I want to begin this Easter Sunday Resurrection message with a strange question for this joyful, beautiful day: What makes you afraid? When I was a young boy, I was afraid of the dark, and my dad would always leave the door of my bedroom cracked, so a little light from hallway could come in. When I got a bit older, I started watching horror

movies. My favorite were the Nightmare on Elm Street movies. I really don't recommend them, but I liked them. Pretending I wasn't scared, I would have nightmares about Freddy Kreuger chasing me and wake up in a panic. Of course, now I'm all grown up, so I'm not afraid of such childish fears anymore. No, I have adult-sized fears, many of which relate to my children, of course.

When John was given the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the church was afraid. John was the last living apostle, and he had been taken away from the church into exile on the Roman prison island of Patmos. Persecution of the church under the Roman government was increasing and people were afraid. How could the church continue with no apostles? What would she do if she had no more personal connection to the men who knew Jesus?

To a church in fear, through an apostle in exile, God gives a powerful picture of Jesus to bring peace and comfort, strength and encouragement. The message is very clear: Every bit of our peace, comfort, strength and encouragement comes from one source: Jesus Himself, in all His glory. This is, after all the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and He is undoubtedly the central focus.

I. Fear Not: Jesus is Glorious!

The Apostle John was very close to the Lord Jesus during His earthly life. He had the closest seat to Jesus at the Last Supper. He was one of the inner circle of three disciples - along with his brother, James, and Peter – who were invited up on the Mount of Transfiguration, where they saw Jesus transfigured into a splendid white radiance, and Moses and Elijah showed up and talked with Jesus. Peter later wrote about this wonderful moment in 2 Peter 1:17-18: *“For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.”*

And yet, John's close relationship with Jesus and his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration were wholly inadequate to prepare him for his experience here in Revelation I. Listen again to how he relates his experience:

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. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ 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.”

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

The voice of Jesus sounded from behind John “like a trumpet” and later John says his voice was “like the roar of many waters.” Further, John says, “from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.” Jesus speaks with clear authority and undeniable power. He speaks like no one else:

- The sound of a trumpet speaks of commanding authority. Just as a trumpet was used in battle to sound commands to move troops, so Jesus' voice is the trumpet of God's authority, commanding heaven and

earth.

- “The roar of many waters” speaks of great and unrelenting power. If you’ve ever stood on a rocky coast and listened as the waves pound against the rocks, you know the sound of this power. This was a sound John heard all day every day on the Island of Patmos, a rocky, barren island in the Mediterranean Sea.
- And then, the “sharp two-edged sword,” which represents the Word of God, is penetrating in its power to expose and to judge, even innermost thoughts of people. Hebrews 4:12-13 says, *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*

When John turns and first lays eyes on Jesus, he described Him as *“one like a son of man.”* “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite way to refer to Himself. He uses the title 12 times in John’s Gospel alone. Very often, we think of this title as an expression of Christ’s humility and humanity, but it’s actually a title of glory and honor. It comes from Daniel 7, from Daniel’s night visions:

⁹ *“As I looked,*

thrones were placed,

and the Ancient of Days took his seat;

his clothing was white as snow,

and the hair of his head like pure wool;

his throne was fiery flames;

its wheels were burning fire.

¹⁰ *A stream of fire issued*

and came out from before him;

a thousand thousands served him,

and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;

the court sat in judgment,

and the books were opened.

¹³ *“I saw in the night visions,*

and behold, with the clouds of heaven

there came one like a son of man,

and he came to the Ancient of Days

and was presented before him.

¹⁴ *And to him was given dominion*

and glory and a kingdom,

that all peoples, nations, and languages

should serve him;

*his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.*

- Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, ESV

So, the “one like a son of man” is the one who comes to the Ancient of Days and who is “given dominion and glory and a kingdom” and who rules over “all peoples, nations, and languages” forever. In Mark 14:61-63, Jesus is on trial and

“Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need?” (ESV)

The high priest tore his garment because, in his view, Jesus was committing blasphemy by claiming such glory for Himself. And yet what Jesus said to the high priest on the night of his trial, John saw. In Revelation 5, John will see Jesus approach the throne of God and receive His full kingdom authority.

So Jesus looks glorious and full of majestic authority, but then John sees something very unusual here in Revelation 1. The one like a son of man has hair that is white, like wool, like snow, and eyes like a flame of fire. These are attributes not of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 but of the Ancient of Days, and this means that whereas the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man are distinct in Daniel, here the Son of Man shares in the attributes of the Ancient of Days. In other words, Jesus is the fully divine and majestically glorious Son of Man, true God and true man, Ancient of Days and King of kings and Lord of lords.

White hair speaks of great age, while eyes of fire speak of penetrating insight, as Hebrews 4:13 said, “*no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*” You cannot hide from the penetrating gaze of King Jesus or the piercing power of His divine word!

This glorious Son of Man is also “*clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.*” These are the garments of a priest, and so He is King of kings and the Great High Priest who speaks forth the penetrating Word of God as the Supreme Prophet. Prophet, priest and king are the three offices Jesus holds forever as our Messiah:

- Prophet speaks to the divine power of His word, for He not only speaks the Word of God, but He is Himself the Word of God incarnate, the Word-made-flesh, making Him unique among all prophets.
- As our Great High Priest, He represents us before the Throne of God, making intercession for us as His wounds bear testimony to His finished, perfect sacrifice on behalf of God’s people.
- And as the Son of Man who inherits the Kingdom of God, He rules supremely over all, inheriting all and bringing all of God’s plans and purposes for His world to completion.

This glorious Son of Man, priest and prophet, who has divine wisdom, power, and authority is standing among seven golden lampstands and holding seven stars in His right hand. We’ll look more at these later, but let’s look first at what He says to John.

2. Fear Not: Jesus Has Conquered

When John sees this stunning vision of the glorified Son of Man, even though he thought he knew Jesus well, he was overwhelmed by the glory and majesty and power and he fell at His feet like a dead man. Struck down, unable to move, in the light of the majesty and authority and overwhelming glory of Christ.

The only thing that matches the awesome glory of Christ is His goodness. John says: *“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.’”* “Fear not.” It’s commonly said that the Bible tells us to “Fear Not” 365 times, one for every day of the year, and while that not technically true, it does say it a lot. It is probably the most repeated command in the Bible. I read an interesting post by a pastor who said that the Bible actually says to “Fear Not” more than 365 times, because it tells us to fear the Lord so often, and the fear of the Lord is the only fear that frees us from all other fears. When the Bible tells us to fear the Lord, it’s not saying to live in paralyzing terror of what God might do to us, rather to so reverence and honor God in our hearts and lives that we have no room to fear anyone or anything else. So when Jesus says, “Fear not” to John, He is telling him that He has come to free him from all fear. In light of Christ’s glorious power and authority, we have no reason to fear.

Every word Christ says to John is so rich and meaningful: *“‘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.’”*

“I am the first and the last” – Jesus is the beginning and the end. Earlier, verse 8 said - *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,”* says the Lord God, *“who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”* So, Jesus is fully God, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega. Yet this also speaks to who Jesus is for us, as the Author and Finisher of our faith, as Hebrews 12:2 says, or as the ESV renders it, *“the founder and perfecter of our faith.”* Jesus began our faith – He is its author – and He will finish our faith, bringing us all the way home. The same is true for the church as for each Christian individually. John was the last of the Apostles, and he was in exile and likely to die soon, but Jesus had begun His church and He would carry it on. Here we are some 2,000 years later, and the only organization in the world still going strong and getting stronger 2,000 years later is the church, because Jesus is the first and the last.

a. He Has Risen

“The Living One. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore” – Earlier, verse 5 had identified Jesus as *“the firstborn of the dead,”* and now that He is The Living One. Jesus is the first and only human being who has truly defeated death. Others had been raised back to life by God only to die again, but Jesus rose again in an eternally glorious body that will never die again, and so He is The Living One.

Many people wrongly believe that all religions are basically the same, teaching you how to live a good life and how to earn some form of eternal life by being a good person. So, Judaism and Christianity have the 10 Commandments, Buddhism has the 8-fold Path, Hinduism has karma, Islam has the 5 Pillars, etc. – so, they’re all basically the same, and have guidelines on how to be a good person and live a good life and maybe get to some form of heaven after you die. If this is what you think of Christianity, you have completely misunderstood it.

Christianity is not a guide to how you can be a good person and earn heaven by being good. Christianity is a rescue story, about One who came from heaven to rescue people from sin and death. Jesus is the hero of the story, not you or me. Some people start coming to church thinking they’ll hear practical advice on how to live a better life – how to have a happier marriage, how to raise smart and well-behaved kids, how to manage their finances, how to

control their emotions and be happier and more peaceful – basically, some form of self-help life management. But that's empty and meaningless and not at all what Jesus is all about. He is the Living One, the only One who has lived and died and is now alive forevermore, in a resurrected body.

In His resurrected body, Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them proof of who He is. They worshiped Him because they knew He was someone utterly unique and divine. They had seen people raised from the dead – Lazarus was their good friend, after all – but they had never seen anything like the risen Jesus, in a glorious undying body. Now John sees Him in a vision ascended to glory and is even more overwhelmed.

Christianity is all about how we can't save ourselves, we can't be good people, we can't make our own lives happy and perfect, and we need a Savior, and how God has sent a Savior to save us from the core of our biggest problems, sin and death. In overthrowing sin and death, Jesus defeats the root cause of all that is wrong in the world. He promises to come and live with those who trust in Him, not helping us be better people, but saving us from ourselves and giving Himself to us more and more as we live by faith in Him.

b. He Has the Keys

As the one who is The Living One and who is alive forevermore, Jesus says, "*I have the keys of Death and Hades.*"

Jesus didn't just defeat death for Himself. When He defeated death, He took the keys. He holds now the key now to death itself and to Hades, the place of the dead, the Greek equivalent of Sheol from the Old Testament, the abode of the departed dead. So, Jesus has power to both bring souls from Hades to heaven and to raise bodies from the dead to eternal, undying life. And this is what He does for believers.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism addresses clearly what happens for believers because Jesus has these keys:

Q. 37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Q. 38. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

A. At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

Notice that believers receive these benefits from Christ, because He is the One who holds the keys. So, we can all "fear not" because He holds the keys!

c. Fear Not: Jesus is with Us

The final detail I'd like to see together is the fact that the glorious Son of Man, the Living One who has the keys is standing among the seven golden lampstands and holding seven stars in His right hand. He explains the meaning of this symbolism in verse 20: "*As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*"

- a. **The Lampstands** – Revelation is written to seven churches in Asia Minor. Why these churches? Because John had served as pastor and ministered among them. Why seven? Because that's the number of divine completion. In other words, these seven churches represent all churches, or the whole church.

The glorious and victorious Son of Man, the Living One who has the keys is in the midst of His church. He is among us, and He sustains and defends us, as His church. The fire in the lampstands is the light of the Holy Spirit. And while these are described as seven lampstands, this is modeled after the lampstand in the Temple, so it is really a seven-fold lampstand, which means that the church of Jesus has real unity in Him, even as we are distinct from each other.

- b. **The Stars** – The stars are the seven angels of the seven churches. These could either be literal angels, who are charged with protecting each church, or they could be the ministers of the word in the churches. Either way, the symbolism is the same: Not only is Jesus among His churches, but He is keeping us secure in His right hand.
- c. **The Sword** – The sword that comes from His mouth is also significant here, for this is how Jesus speaks to His church and protects, judges and guides, by the Word of God, by His trumpet-like voice. So the church, to stay faithful to following Christ, needs to keep the Word of God central, for this is how Christ speaks to us and leads us.

Are You Hearing His Voice?

So, then, let's close by asking this question: Are you hearing the commanding, authoritative, penetrating, protecting voice of the Son of Man? Are you hearing the words of the Living One, the One who has the keys of Death and Hades? He is found in His church, where He keeps us and speaks. This is the place to gather and hear His voice every Lord's Day morning, as He meets with us and ministers to us by His word and His Spirit. In the unified, Christ-centered, Word-shaped worship of the church, Christ stands and speaks and ministers. And today He is telling us all, "Fear Not? I have the keys!"