

A Vision of the Exalted Christ (Part 2)

Revelation 1:9-20

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*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher
Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

Several times in my life I have interacted with people who were truly convinced, I think wrongly, that they had had a vision, a vision of God, a vision of Jesus Christ. And I remember talking with them, and in a couple of cases they were unbelievers, in a couple of cases they were believers, and while I don't believe that they actually had a vision, what struck me was this, they were convinced that they had, and they were moved for life by that vision.

In fact, I remember talking to one man who moved his family from another place in the country here to North Texas because he was convinced that he had had a vision in which God had told him to pick up his family, to move them from the Northwest here to North Texas. It's not a bad vision to have, I guess, but I don't believe it was a vision. But my point is, he was convinced he had had one, and in response to that his life was permanently marked.

Can you imagine what it would have been like for the Apostle John to have truly seen the resurrected Christ? That certainly would have left a mark on him forever. And the wonderful news is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we get to look over his shoulder and to see what he saw and to be marked in the same way.

We're considering the first major section of the book of Revelation as we are working our way through it, slowly, and we've begun with "the things which you have seen," the setting of Jesus' prophecy. This is chapter 1. The first eight verses technically don't belong to this first section, they are really just an introduction to the book, but I've, for simplicity, included them here. And then we're looking, secondly, at a vision of the exalted Christ, beginning in chapter 1 verse 9 and running down through verse 20.

Let me remind you of this great vision by rehearsing what we have discovered so far. As we've looked at these verses, from verse 9 to verse 20, we started by looking at the setting of the vision, the physical setting. First of all, look at verse 9, "I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus." There are John's credentials, by the way, he's John the Apostle, he's their brother in Christ, but he's also a fellow

partaker in the troubles, the persecution that they're enduring in this life, and the kingdom, he looks forward to the kingdom he will be a part of. And how do you live between the nasty now and now of tribulation and the wonderful sweet by and by of the kingdom? You live in perseverance, the next word, you remain under, and you only are able to accomplish this in Jesus.

John's location is the next thing we're told there in verse 9, he was on the island called Patmos. This is a map of that area of the Aegean. Patmos is marked by the red circle there. It's an island in the Aegean Sea, about 40 miles west southwest of Miletus, which is a port for the city of Ephesus. You can see the cities there. I marked them out for you before and we'll look at them more in coming weeks.

Why was John on Patmos? He had been exiled there, and what were his crimes? Verse 9 says, "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," because of his ministry on behalf of Christ, because of the gospel and because of his bearing on the testimony that Jesus had given him to the world. He was considered a threat to the Roman Empire and we've talked about why that was true. So that's the physical setting.

We also examined the spiritual setting in verses 10 and 11. Notice what he writes, "I was in the Spirit," that is, in a trance induced state produced by the Spirit, "on the Lord's day," that is, on Sunday,

and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

That's the setting.

But once the setting is done the spotlight turns and now focuses on the person in the center, and that is Jesus Christ glorified and that's really the focus of the vision in verses 12 to 16. We looked at this last time, I'm not going to take a lot of time with it, if you weren't here, this is so foundational, so important, but let me just touch on it briefly. It begins by highlighting His unique identity. We're told He is the Son of Man, but He is also divine, so He is the God-man. We're told about His chief domain. It is within His churches. He's standing in the candlesticks,

among the candlesticks, which represent, as we saw, His churches, as explained in verse 20. That is His chief domain. His ministry, His heart, His longing, His desire is for His church, His bride.

His primary role is as high priest. That's how He's clothed there in verse 13, "in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, girded across His chest with a golden sash." This is our Lord Jesus Christ in His role as high priest interceding for His church. His present ministry appears in verses 14 to 16, and it comes out in the elements of this vision. This is not a painting to paint of Jesus Christ. This is a vision which portrays the truths about who He is. And here's what we learned last time about His present ministry. His incomparable wisdom leads the church. Verse 14 says, "His head, even His hair, were white like white wool, like snow," picturing His long experience, His great wisdom.

Secondly, His penetrating omniscience evaluates His church, "His eyes were like a flame of fire," like torches of fire that light up everything they see, like lasers that pierce into the true nature of everything. His penetrating omniscience evaluates His church. Thirdly, His personal holiness purifies His church. "His feet," verse 15, "were like burnished bronze, when it's been made to glow in a furnace." So His feet are like glowing metal, and like glowing metal, when He walks through His churches, everything His feet touches are purified.

Fourth, we learned that His authoritative word directs His church. Verse 15 goes on to say, "and His voice was like the sound of many waters." John was on an island, the island of Patmos, and no doubt this is in his mind as he hears the waves breaking relentlessly against that tiny island in the Aegean Sea. And he says, when I think of what I heard, when I think of the voice I heard, it was first, piercing like a trumpet, and then it was like the crashing of those waves, it could not be ignored, it drowned out everything else. In the same way, Christ's authoritative word directs His church.

His sovereign lordship controls His church. Verse 16 says, "In His right hand He held seven stars." We're going to talk a little more about that tonight, but these are the leaders of the church, He holds them in His right hand, He controls them, and therefore He controls His church. His devastating judgment defends His church. Verse 16 says, "and out of his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword." Not a literal sword, it means Jesus battles with His words. He

merely speaks and defeats His enemies. He defeats His enemies within the church, as we'll see in chapters 2 and 3, but He also, at the end of time, will defeat His enemies who are outside the church, at the point of the second coming, with a word.

And then finally, we discovered that His matchless glory captivates and characterizes His church. Verse 16 says, "His face was like the sun shining in its strength." Here's the glory of Jesus Christ that radiates through His church, that captures our love and our adoration and our attention. And as we, as 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, as we gaze on that glory, what happens? We begin to reflect that glory, just as Moses did when he was with Him on the mount. So this is His present ministry as the high priest in His church.

Now, tonight we come to the end of chapter 1, and we come to the results of the vision. We've seen the setting of the vision. We've seen the focus of that vision, Jesus Christ glorified, serving His church, and in verses 17 to 20 we see the results of that vision. The results begin with John's response, and we can call it, instead of John's response, man's typical response, because that's what it is.

Notice verse 17, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man." In response to the vision that he had of the glorified risen Christ, John falls at His feet. This is almost identical to what happened to John 65 years earlier at the transfiguration. In Matthew 17:6, "When the disciples heard this," when they heard the voice of God speak, when they saw the transfiguration, "they fell face down to the ground and were terrified." So this is *déjà vu* for John. He had seen Jesus in His glory at the transfiguration, and now he sees Him in His resurrected glory on the isle of Patmos. This is a typical, common response for man. Throughout Scripture, whenever a human being encounters God, he or she is overwhelmed.

This, by the way, shows you that many of those visions that people have of God aren't the real thing. Because, you know, I read one time about a man who said, you know, that Jesus showed up while he was shaving, and he and Jesus just carried on a casual chat while he was shaving. That's never what happens in the Scripture when people encounter a true vision of God; they find themselves just like John, on their face, on the ground, terrified. You see it with Joshua in Joshua 5:14. You see it with Isaiah in Isaiah 6:5. You see it with Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1:28 and 3:23. You see it with Daniel in chapter 10. You remember, when the man clothed in linen, a

preincarnate appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ shows up, Daniel is on his face. You see it in the New Testament in Matthew 17:6 at the transfiguration. You see it in Acts 26:14 as Paul describes his Damascus road experience. When he saw the Lord he soon found himself on his face.

Now this common response to God can be born of awe. It can be born of gratitude. Some people, in gratitude for God's goodness, find themselves collapsed on the ground. Sometimes it's terror. And sometimes it's worship. In fact, in Revelation people often fall down in worship. We'll see that as we work our way through this book.

But John's response here wasn't worship. How do I know that? Because, he adds, "as a dead man." It's clear he's not worshipping. He's completely overwhelmed, as if he's in a coma, or as if he were truly dead. Since the Lord immediately tells him to stop being afraid, we don't have to guess as to why he's lying there on the ground like a dead man. He is terrified. His coma-like state was created by sheer terror.

Now what's the source of John's fear? After all, he knows the Lord. This is the disciple who laid on Jesus' chest at meals, who knew Him, who was the beloved disciple, who walked with Christ through the dusty streets of Israel, who had meals with Him constantly, who bivouacked out, you know, on the desert sand. What is going on here? Well, this response naturally comes from a finite creature being in the presence of an infinite God, especially when the infinite God's glory is completely unsheltered and unveiled. It comes from being a weak frail human being, witnessing the power, majesty, and glory of God. I believe when we see our God, when we see the Lord Jesus Christ, at His coming or when He takes us to Him, we will find ourselves in exactly the same position.

This also comes from realizing you're a sinful person in the presence of a perfectly pure and holy God. Isaiah 6:5, "Woe is me," when he saw the glorified Christ there in Isaiah 6, "for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts." Daniel 10:9-10,

I heard the sound of his words; and as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground. Then behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees.

In Luke 5:8, when Simon Peter saw that Jesus had miraculously filled the nets with fish and understood who He was, “he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, ‘Get away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!’” A common response to a personal encounter with God is paralyzing fear.

Just as people always respond in the same way to God, here’s the good news, God always graciously responds to that fear with His people in the same way. And that is, we want to see the Lord’s gracious comfort, the Lord’s gracious comfort. You can trace both of these through the Scripture. When man encounters God, he’s terrorized by the majesty and the holiness and the purity of God. But the Lord always responds to His own with gracious comfort.

It begins with His reassuring touch. Verse 17, “He placed His right hand on me.” Don’t you love that? We’re talking about Christ in His glory. There He is on the island of Patmos with His apostle, the one He loved, and what does He do when He sees him paralyzed on the ground because of the greatness of who he has seen? He touches him with His right hand. This is a personal touch of comfort and assurance. I find that to be so encouraging. As the risen Lord, Jesus still tenderly cares for His own in the same way that He did during His earthly ministry. He’s the same.

Just as John had experienced the same terror at seeing the glory of Christ in the transfiguration, he experienced the same comfort from Christ. You remember, back in Matthew 17:7, after they were terrorized by the vision of the transfiguration, “Jesus came to them and touched them and said, ‘Get up, and do not be afraid.’” “‘Get up, and do not be afraid.’”

This is exactly what happened in Isaiah 6, too, you remember, Isaiah overwhelmed by his sin, overwhelmed by the vision of Christ on His throne (And that was Christ, by the way, according to John 12 he saw Christ.) and he was terrified. And what happened? He ended up being purified and commissioned, welcomed and commissioned. Cleansed, welcomed, commissioned.

There's also a lesson here in this verse, verse 17, about Christ's care, not only for His churches, you know, we tend to think about the church, and Christ does as well, as we'll see, but here we see His care for individuals within the church. As Leon Morris writes, "At one and the same time, Christ has the whole church in His hand," the seven stars and walking among the lampstands, "and He takes actions for the needs of the individual, John. Both truths are important." So we see His reassuring touch. This is our Lord.

Secondly, we see His reassuring command. Verse 17, "He placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid,'" literally, "'Stop being fearful.'" Every time believers encounter the glory of God, they're overwhelmed with fear. And every time God's immediate response to His own is to assure them of His love, of His forgiveness, and of His care. Both are true. John had heard this comforting command from Jesus, "'Don't be afraid,'" on a number of occasions during his earthly ministry. You remember in Matthew 14:27, when Jesus approached the disciples walking on the water, now there's something to make you fearful, and He says to them, "'don't be afraid.'" "'It's me; don't be afraid.'" In Matthew 17:7, as I mentioned, when they witnessed the transfiguration, He touches them and He says, "'don't be afraid,'" His reassuring command.

Then we see His reassuring character, and this is really the heart of what He says and what He does here. Christ comforts John, certainly with a touch, certainly with a command not to fear, but then He tells him why he shouldn't fear, why he shouldn't be afraid, by reminding John of who he is; John doesn't need to fear because of who Jesus Christ is. Can I just say to you, if you're new in Christ, those of you who are older in Christ, you know this already, but for those of you who are newer in Christ, one of the greatest sources of comfort you will ever find is not in your circumstances, not in hopes that your circumstances will change, but in the unchanging character of our Lord. And that's what he says here.

So Jesus says, John, you don't need to be afraid, and then He tells him why, because of who He is. First of all, He is the one true living God. He is the one true and living God. Verse 17, "He says to him, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last.'" This title begins, by the way, with the words I am, in Greek *ego eimi*, familiar words for those who know John's gospel, used six times to introduce what are called the I am sayings of John's gospel, I am the bread of life, I am, so forth.

Of course, the title I am has a rich Old Testament background. It's the personal name of God, it's Yahweh. This same expression, by the way, "I am the first and the last," occurs again in chapter 2 verse 8, we'll look at it soon. And then it occurs again at the end of the book in chapter 22 verse 13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." This title, "the first and the last," is used often of God in the Old Testament, and it compares the true God against the idols of the nations. What God says in the book of Isaiah is this, look, the gods that the people around you worship, the gods, Israel, that you are tempted to worship, they are here today and gone tomorrow. But He is eternal.

Notice, he says, Jesus says, He is the first. That is, He was God before they ever existed. He was there at the beginning. And He is the last, He will be there when their shattered remains lie in the garbage dump of history. He's the first and He's the last. Listen to how it's described in Isaiah, Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says Yahweh, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me." That's the point. I was there before they ever came into existence in the minds of men. I will be there at the end when they are a distant memory, because they don't even exist, "there is no God besides Me." Isaiah 48:12, "Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, and I am also the last."

Here's a comfort for you. As you sit here tonight, we are surrounded by people who are worshippers. You realize that of the seven billion plus people on this planet, six in seven of them are worshippers. All of them are ultimately worshippers, they are worshippers of themselves. But six in seven claim to be worshippers of someone or something. And they're idols for the most part, they are not the true God. But you and I, by God's grace, have come to know the one true and living God, the one who is the first and the last. There's comfort in that.

Verse 18 goes on to say, "and the living One." Jesus says, I am the only true God and I am "the living One." This is another common name for God in Scripture, in which He contrasts Himself with the idols of the nations that have no life. They're dead idols. They can't, you remember the mockery in Isaiah: They can't see. They can't speak. They can't hear your prayers. They can't do anything. You have to prop them up when they fall. You have to carry

them to the next place. You made them out of a piece of wood or a piece of metal. They can do nothing. But God says, I am “the living One,” unlike those idols.

That contrast is made throughout both the Old and the New Testament. It speaks of Him as being, not only eternal, I think eternal is in this idea of being “the living One,” but I think it’s more than that. I think Jesus is saying that like the Father, He possesses life in Himself. I am “the living One,” I’m the one who simply has life. I possess life in Myself. John 1:4, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.” John 14:6, “Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth,’” and listen to this, “I am the life.” He possesses life in and of Himself. These titles are here attributed to Christ, or I should say, Christ attributes them to Himself, just as they have been attributed to God, which is a powerful argument for the deity of Jesus Christ. So, He is the one true and living God.

Another part of His reassuring character is that He personally experienced death once to redeem us. Verse 18, “and I was dead.” Literally, the Greek text says, “I became dead.” It speaks of a one-time event, the living one, the one who had life in Himself, the eternal God became man. And then, 33 years later, He became dead. That’s the point. He says, I became man and I became dead. The expression points, as I said, to a single occurrence in history. It points to His death on the cross. Why did Jesus die? Well, go back to verse 5. Jesus Christ “loves us and released us from our sins by His blood,” that’s shorthand for His violent death. That’s why He died. And so, we’re reminded in this statement, he says, “I became dead.” Oh, and the reason I died was to redeem you, to redeem My people. He personally experienced death once to redeem us. There’s a great comfort. There’s a great reassurance.

The third part of His reassuring character is, He personally conquered death forever. Verse 18 goes on to say, “I was dead,” I became dead, “and behold,” that word calls attention to something that’s going to be amazing, that’s going to be wonderful, that’s going to be astounding, “behold, I am alive forevermore.” Literally, the Greek text says, “I am alive into the ages of the ages.” Don’t think of an age, think of ages of ages, and I am still alive. Jesus assured John that although as a human being He had died once, it would never happen again.

The focus here is on His continuous state of existence. It’s not primarily on the resurrection, but Christ’s indestructible life. Romans 6:9 says, “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is

never to die again; death no longer is master over Him.” He’s never going to die again. That’s what He’s saying, “I am alive forevermore,” “I’m alive into the ages of the ages.” You never have to worry about losing Me, I’m here. And Hebrews 7:16, I love this, says of our great high priest, He has “the power of an indestructible life.” There’s a comfort. The Lord we worship is indestructible. His life will never, ever come to an end, never be destroyed.

Why is that a comfort? Well think about who He’s talking to here. Our Lord is saying these words to a 95 year old man who is soon to die. He’s going to write in chapters 2 and 3 to churches who are facing imminent persecution, including even death. Can you imagine the encouragement of this statement about our Lord to them? “I am alive into the ages of the ages,” and you’re mine.

The same is true for us. If our Lord delays His return, then all of us in this room will die. It’s not like a cheerful discussion you want to have over dinner, probably. But it’s true. The mortality rate is 100%. But because of Christ, because He has conquered death forever and He is our Lord, we don’t have to fear death. He is alive forevermore. He personally conquered death, and therefore we don’t have to fear it.

Hebrews 2, in fact, look at Hebrews 2, I want you to see this. Hebrews 2:14, “Therefore, since the Children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same.” Since we are flesh and blood, Jesus became flesh and blood. Why?

that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

You know, the people on this planet live in fear of death. Why do you think that even while some people are obviously taking right and reasonable precautions to preserve their life, we’re commanded to take reasonable care for ourselves, there are people in our world who will not leave their homes out of dread and fear, of what? Of death. Jesus said, I came to end that fear. I have the power of an indestructible life.

I love the way even David puts it in Psalm 23. I was sharing this with a man in our church who is facing death in the very near future, on Thursday. Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death.” Meaning, as a shepherd leads me and leads me through dark, deep valleys to get me to the next pasture, in the same way there are dark valleys in this life, and the darkest of those is death. And as “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

You remember Jesus’ words to Martha in John 11:25, “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,’” there’s the resurrection, “and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die,” there’s the fact that you never go out of existence. The moment your body dies, you pass into the Lord’s presence. “Do you believe this?” She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Messiah, the son of God, even He who comes into the world.’” There’s our hope. He personally conquered death forever. He says, I became man, I became dead, but I am alive “into the ages of the ages.”

Another part of His reassuring character is He controls death and the grave. Verse 18 goes on to say, “and I have the keys of death and of Hades.” Now, you understand the illustration of keys, right? If you have the keys to your home, what does that imply? It’s yours. You have authority over it. You have ownership of it. You control it. You control everything within that home that those keys lock. The same thing is true with Christ. He’s saying, “I have the keys,” I have complete control over, notice what He says, “over death.”

And I’m not going to take a lot of time here, but I just got to thinking this week about Jesus’ control over death. And let me just encourage you because I think, again, we can be prone, like unbelievers, to live in some fear of death. Everybody fears the process of death. I mean Calvin said that, we just don’t fear the result. We don’t have to fear the result. Why? Because our Lord is master of It. He has the keys of death.

Listen to the ways He controls death. He has control of death’s existence. He’s the one who brought death into existence. He said, “the soul that sins, it shall die.” He said, “in the day that you eat, you will surely die.” He’s the one who brought death as a curse, “the wages of sin is death,” Romans 6:23. He initiated it, He began it, because of man’s sin. In Revelation 20:14, He’ll be the one who ends it, “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.” Revelation 21:4, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there will no longer be any death.”

First Corinthians 15 says it's the last enemy He will destroy. He will destroy it. He began it because of man's sin and He will destroy it in His time. He has power over death's power. He has control, I should say, over death's power. Hosea 13:14 speaks of that passage that's quoted again in 1 Corinthians 15, "O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?" For the believer the sting is removed. He has power over it, control over its power, and we just read Hebrews 2.

But did you ever think about this? Jesus has control over death's timing. Deuteronomy 32:39 says, "I am He, there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death." God says, I'm the one in charge of life and death. In Psalm 139:16, "in Your book were written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." Listen, you're not going to die one day sooner than God has determined that you're going to die. And you're not going to live one day longer than He's determined. It's written in His book. Now I've talked about this before, that doesn't mean you should go be reckless. God factors in our foolishness. But at the same time, understand that its timing is in His hand.

And I love the story in John 21, you remember, after the resurrection, Jesus says this to Peter, He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old," and then He goes on to describe that he's going to die. In other words, Jesus says to a younger Peter, a lot younger Peter, you're not going to die anytime soon, you're going to live a long, full life, and when you grow old, then you're going to die. In other words, Jesus determined the timing. Of course, you've got to love Peter's response, well, "what about him?" And Jesus says, that's not your story. "What if I decide he lives until I return? What is that to you? You follow Me!" In other words, you let Me decide how long you're going to live. You let Me decide when you're going to die. And you just follow Me faithfully.

I love the fact that our Lord controls even the timing of death. He controls the circumstances of death, He does for all men, including the wicked. This is one example. This is a pretty gruesome example, but I've often been struck by this. In the case of Ahab, 20 years before Ahab died, God said exactly how and where he would die. First Kings 21:23-24,

“Of Jezebel also the Lord has spoken, saying, ‘The dogs will eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel.’ The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs will eat, and the one who dies in the field the birds of heaven will eat.”

God says, I’ve decided what’s going to happen, and by the way, read the story, it happened exactly like that and it was a long time coming. So, He decided the circumstances and they were pretty gruesome circumstances.

The same thing is true, though, of the righteous, starting, of course with our Lord Himself. Have you ever thought about this? Remember, He said, “No one takes my life. I,” what? “I lay it down of Myself.” He was in control of the circumstances of His own death. The year of His death was determined by Him. It had to be in one of two years. It had to be in the year 30 or the year 33 A.D. Why? Because those were the only two years in that period of time when Passover fell on Friday, and the timing for the resurrection would work as it had been prophesied. So, He decided the year.

The day of Jesus’ death was decided by Him. It had to be on the 14th of Nissan, the day of Passover. The exact hour of Jesus’ death, He had determined. It had to be at 3 PM in the afternoon when the Passover lamb was being killed just across the way in the temple, because He was our Passover lamb. And so, at exactly three o’clock, at exactly the moment, He lays down His life, He was in complete control. He has “the keys of death,” including His own.

But the same is true for the death of Jesus’ saints. The next verse in John 21, the passage I was just talking about a moment ago, says this,

“you’re going to stretch out your hands, Peter, someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.” Now Jesus said this to Peter, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.

So Jesus is talking, in about the year 30 A.D., about a death that isn’t going to occur for 30, 35 to 37 years. And He says, it’s going to be a long time, you’re going to grow old, and let me tell you how it’s going to happen, you’re going to be crucified. Jesus was in complete control of the death of Peter and of ours.

And I love this, Jesus is in complete control of death's end when it comes in resurrection. First Thessalonians 4:16, "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." He will end the physical death of those who are His. He will bring them their redeemed souls with Him, and He will reunite their redeemed souls with glorified bodies like His own glorified body.

Here's the point I want you to get, folks. It's easy when you're in the middle, you personally or your family, is in the middle of dealing with death, your own death or the death of someone you love. It's easy to think of it as this completely sort of random, impersonal thing. It's cancer. It's whatever, you fill in the blank. What we're told in the Scripture is that for those who are in Christ, death is not random. It is not accidental. It is not out of control. Jesus has "the keys of death." It's a personal decision by our Lord. And we can trust Him with our own and with those we love. He is in complete control and, as we saw in Psalm 23, He's with you through the process.

So He controls death, but He also controls Hades. You'll notice He says He has "the keys of death and Hades." Hades simply means the place of the dead. It occurs in the New Testament 10 times. It is the Greek equivalent to the Old Testament word *Sheol*. In fact, the Septuagint almost always uses Hades to translate *Sheol*. Like *Sheol*, Hades is used in two different ways. It's used, first of all, of the place of conscious punishment where the wicked dead go. In other words, of hell. It's used that way on several occasions. On other occasions, it's more general than that. It speaks of the state of death that both believers and unbelievers enter when life is over. The way we refer to it often is, the grave.

Jesus says, "I have the keys." When He says that He has the keys of Hades, He means that He not only controls everything about death, He also controls, and is sovereign over, all that follows death. He has "the keys of death and the grave." Christian, you don't need to be afraid. You don't need to be afraid of death, and you don't need to be afraid of what comes after it, because you serve a Lord who became dead and He is alive "into the ages of the ages." And He has "the keys of death and the grave." He is in complete sovereign control.

So, we've seen man's typical response, as we look at the results of the vision. We've seen the Lord's gracious comfort. Let's look at our Lord's specific commission, our Lord's specific

commission in verse 19. It begins with the command to write, “Therefore write.” The therefore probably refers back to verse 11, where He started to say this. Because back in verse 11 Christ commanded John to write, and here He repeats that command, but He expands it. And He gets to, not only the command to write, but the content of the letter. Verse 19 goes on to say, here’s what I want you to write, “the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.”

Now, I noted this for you before, I’m not going to spend a lot of time here, but some people look at this text and see two divisions. They see “the things which are,” which they say describe both the vision all the way through the end of chapter 3, “and the things which will take place after these things,” beginning in chapter 4 verse 1 and running through the end of the book. That is possible, but not likely.

It’s better, and I showed you this before, so I’m not going to re-argue it, but it’s better to see three divisions in this text. Many commentators agree on that, and based on the parallelism of the Greek text, it’s better to see three sections here, “the things which you have seen,” describes the vision of Christ that he has just seen, beginning in chapter 1 verse 9 and running down through verse 20. Then “the things which are,” beginning in chapter 2 verse 1 and running through the end of chapter 3, where you have the description of the churches and the messages to the seven churches, and then you have “the things which will take place after these things.”

Now what’s interesting about that, if you look at that expression “after these things,” you find that it occurs at the beginning of chapter 4 in verse 1, “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice, which I heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, ‘Come up here,’” notice this, “and I will show you what must take place after these things.” So you can see how that fits very nicely with the outline that’s laid out in chapter 1 verse 19. So, He says, I want you to write, I want you to write about the vision you’ve just seen, the vision of Me, I want you to write the things which are, I want you to write about the churches and their current state, and then I want you to write about the things which will be after these things, a vision of the future that begins in chapter 4 and verse 1.

Now, verse 20 brings us to the last part of the results of the vision, and that is our Lord's important clarification. Notice verse 20, "As for the mystery." Now, the Greek word mystery here is, you've got to get English words out of your mind. I love a good mystery, watching Poirot or some of that, that's not the idea here. The Greek word for mystery, when it's used biblically, refers to that which people would never come to know on their own, and which they didn't know in the past, but has now been revealed by God. That's a mystery in biblical terms. They couldn't know on their own. They didn't know before. But now God has revealed. It's often used in the New Testament for the gospel.

But the mystery here has to do with two things John saw in his vision of Christ. Although John doesn't explain every vision, I'm sorry, every image in this vision, He made sure that John understood two of them. Why? Because they are going to factor into what He's about to say in the letters to the churches. And so it's really important for John to understand and for us to understand as well. First, John needs to understand "the seven stars in My right hand." Notice verse 20, "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches."

Now, as I pointed out before, there's a lot of debate about the meaning of this word angels here. There are three basic views of what these seven stars are. Some say they're real angels. It's angels. It says angels, why don't we just think it's angels? The chief argument for this view is that the word angel occurs 67 times, starting in chapter 4 verse 1 through the end of the book. And in those 67 times it's never used for anything but guess what? Angels. They say, well, why not here? Those who take this view argue that these angels are like guardian angels of the church, angels assigned to each church to care for it. But there's no biblical evidence for such an office. There's no biblical evidence that churches have guardian angels. In addition, each of the seven letters to the churches are addressed to the angel of a particular church. Are we saying every single church, like our church, has a guardian angel? Is that what we're saying? I'll give you another, several other arguments against this shortly. Angels is one view.

A second view is that these angels, and you've got to put on your thinking cap here, but that these angels are not really beings at all. That really, the angel simply stands for the prevailing

spirit of each church. The problem with this view is there is absolutely no biblical evidence anywhere for this use of the word angel.

The third view is that these are humans associated with each church. You say, can the word angel, *angelos*, be used for humans? And the answer is yes. Matthew 11:10, talking about John the Baptist, “This is the one about whom it is written, ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY *ANGELOS*,’” my angel, my messenger, “‘AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’” So clearly the word can be used of a human being.

So, if these are humans, these seven stars, who are they? Well, there are two ideas about this. One is they are messengers sent from each of the churches to collect this letter from John, but they’re not leaders in the church. In other words, they’re like errand boys, glorified errand boys, they’re not in leadership in any way in the church. But this option has a significant flaw, because why would the letters to the churches be addressed to the messenger boys? That doesn’t make any sense, to the messenger of the church in so and so, write.

The other view, if they’re humans, is that they are leaders in the churches. The lead pastor or elder in each of these churches, who represent all the other elders. Just as there were among the apostles, there is often in many churches, there are elders, but there is an elder, like myself, who is the chief speaking elder. That happens in many churches. It’s happened throughout history. And so, personally, this is where I think it lands. I don’t see any other way.

I don’t see that they can be angels, because angels are not leaders in the church. Holy angels don’t sin, and therefore they don’t have to repent, as these angels are called to do in several of these letters. And it makes, think about this, think about the convoluted nature of this exercise, it makes no sense for Christ to send a message to John so that John can pass that message to an angel so that an angel can pass the message to the church. So the reference here, folks, is to Christ holding the key leaders, or the leading elders, representing all of the leaders of each church, in His right hand.

What is the point? Christ is the head of His church, and He exercises that headship, that leadership, through the elders, through His leaders. Now these leaders are called stars, not because we’re stars in any sense, but because we exercise leadership, and stars were used for

guidance, right, and direction. And so, they're used in that sense. And they are in the right hand of our Lord, perhaps as a place of honor, the right hand is a place of honor, but more likely to illustrate control. They're in the hand and He controls them.

The other thing that He wanted us to understand was not only the seven stars, but the seven golden lampstands. Verse 20 says, "As for the mystery of the seven golden lampstands, the seven lamp stands are the seven churches." As I mentioned to you, these were lampstands that were ordinarily used in common homes. To light rooms at night, you would place a small clay oil lamp, or if you were in a wealthier home perhaps one of brass, that was pinched at one end with the wick sticking out, you would place that on a stand, and the stand held that light high and ensured that it lighted the room. The churches are called lampstands. I love that. It's a powerful picture of the role that local churches serve in their communities. Did you notice, we are a lampstand. We are not the light. Christ is the light. We are a stand on which the light of the world, from which the light of the world can be seen.

The lampstands were gold. I like that as well. What's the point of that? It's to let us know their value to Christ. He values His church. There were seven because, are you ready for this, there were seven churches to whom this was written. There's probably also a symbolic idea behind this number seven, typically seven in Scripture, and we're going to see it often in the book of Revelation, is a number of completeness, that may be implied, while it's seven literal churches to whom it was written, it also describes, this pictures, we see the condition of all churches in the condition of these churches.

Did you notice, you haven't noticed, because I haven't told you yet, Christ's relationship to the churches. I want to leave you with this, because when you think about what the next couple of chapters tell us, here's what we learn about Christ's relationship to His church, to this church and to other faithful biblical churches, Christ stands among His churches. He's with us. He's with all of His churches. Christ walks among His churches. Christ evaluates His churches. We're going to see this in the letters to the seven churches, Christ praises His churches. Many of them receive commendation from Christ; He says, I am grateful for this about you. Christ corrects His churches as He assesses problems. He protects His churches.

And He preserves the individual believers who make up those churches. If you read those overcomer statements at the end of each of the seven letters, that's about individuals, not churches. The overcomer, the individuals in those churches, and this isn't all of them, I just picked out a few of the ones that jumped out at me. Christ preserves individual believers through persecution and death. He preserves them from hell. He preserves them as His own forever. He preserves them for the new Jerusalem. He preserves them to reign with Him forever.

Christ is active in His church. All of the churches matter to Him. He knows what goes on in every church. He knows what goes on in this church. And He's not just concerned about the church. He's concerned about individual believers. And He watches over and preserves and protects and corrects and confronts and conforms us to His image. Because remember, we're His bride. And He has redeemed us in order, ultimately, so that we would reflect His perfect holiness. Folks, you're a part of that. If you're in Christ, this is your Lord. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for the great encouragement this passage is to us. Lord, we can't imagine what it was like for the Apostle John at 95 to be exiled away from family and friends on that small little barren island. We don't know what his conditions were there, but we know that he was away from all those he loved, except You. And Lord, we are so profoundly grateful for the care that You exercised toward him. Because it reminds us that the same is true for all of Your saints, for all of us.

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You love Your church, that You nourish it, that You care for it, that You cherish it, as Your own body. We're grateful that we don't have to fear. We don't have to fear death. We thank You that we don't have to fear, because You are the one true and living God. Because You died once to redeem us from sin, and then You were raised to an indestructible life. You will never die again. You have defeated death. You have conquered it for all those who know and love You. And You now control both death and the grave. You have the keys.

Thank You, O God, that we don't have to be afraid, whether we're 95 like John or whether we're young and healthy, or whether we fear on behalf of someone we love who is in Christ. Lord, we're grateful that we can trust You, with our life, with our death, and with our eternity.

We look forward to the day when we are in Your presence. Until then, keep us faithful. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.