

Revelation 1:17-18

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[0 : 00] In the language that John employs as he records this experience of witnessing the vision of the exalted Jesus, we can say we have seen the voice of the one speaking to John on Patmos.

We have seen, as it is before us in the Bible, the vision of the exalted and reigning Jesus, the one like a Son of Man among the lampstands, our great high priest who knows us and loves us and intercedes for us, the one whose appearance is described like the ancient of days, eternally wise, the one whose eyes are like blazing fire, piercing into the depths of our souls, the one whose feet of bronze announce his permanence and power, the one whose voice is like the sound of rushing waters and out of whose mouth comes a sharp double-edged sword, the one who holds the seven stars, his people, his church in his right hand, the one whose face is like the sun in all its majesty and power and brilliance. How are we to respond to the one presented to us in this passage of the Bible? Well, how did John respond? Perhaps that will give us some direction as to how we might respond to this same Jesus. In verses 17 and 18 of chapter 1, we witness both the impact of the vision on John, but also the actions and the words of Jesus that follow towards John.

And what I want to do this morning is to spend a little time considering what this tells us about Jesus. And I think we can draw out five truths concerning our exalted Savior. In these two verses, we're confronted with, and we discover something of His glory. We discover something of His hand. We discover something of His identity as God, of His divinity. We're also given an insight, a hint as to His mission. And then finally also, we discover something concerning His authority.

So in these three verses, we can draw out all of these truths concerning Jesus. And as we draw them out, may God help us to respond to these truths in the manner that we ought. So let's think of these things as we turn to these verses in Revelation chapter 1. First of all, let's consider the glory of Jesus. This is maybe what is most prominent as we think about how John responds to the vision.

[3 : 13] Because there in verse 17, John shares with us his experience. He says, When I saw Him. He's looking back to this experience. He's writing it down. This is something that happened in the past. And he's writing it down. He's remembering what it was like.

And he says, When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Now let's just remind ourselves of who it is that's speaking this John. John was no stranger to Jesus. John was the beloved disciple. He had walked with Jesus. He had talked with Jesus.

He had laughed with Jesus. He had cried with Jesus. And yet he is brought in his vision, or as a result of his vision, he is brought face to face with the risen Savior. And in his own words, he fell at his feet, at the feet of Jesus, he fell at his feet as though dead.

The no longer veiled glory and majesty and resplendence of Jesus were too much for John to withstand. And he falls before the glory and majesty of his living Savior. And as he does so, the one who was both his friend and his sovereign, he follows in the footsteps of other men of God exposed to a similar encounter. The Old Testament is punctuated with accounts of those who were granted some vision or encounter with God and were told how they responded to it, what impact it had on them.

We think of Abraham. In Genesis chapter 17, when we read of Abraham meeting with God, and what are we told? Well, we are told of how God spoke to him and declared, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless. And then what happened? Abraham fell face down.

[5 : 20] Or perhaps more famously, Isaiah. The words of Isaiah, when he had a vision of God. Woe to me, I cried. I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Or then we have Ezekiel.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking. We could go on. Maybe just to mention one other character in

the Old Testament, Daniel. Maybe particularly appropriate, given how often Daniel is referred to even in these verses or in this chapter that we've been giving some thought to. In Daniel chapter 10 and verses 7 to 9, Daniel shares his experience of this vision of God. We read, gazing at this great vision, I had no strength left. My face turned deathly pale, and I was helpless.

And as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. Each of them, perhaps in different ways, a grit and cast down prostrate by the weight of the glory of the presence of the Lord. The presence of the one who is wholly other. John, a prisoner on Patmos, needed to be granted a vision of the glory and majesty of his Savior and Lord. His captors, we don't know exactly the circumstances of his imprisonment, but if indeed he was surrounded by guards of one kind or another. They no doubt mocked the one that he called Lord. And yet John knew that if they were to catch only a fleeting glimpse of his resplendent glory, they too would fall down as dead before him. In the presence of the glory and majesty of God. The glory and majesty of God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. And so, in John's response, we're given an insight into the glory of God, the glory of Jesus.

[7 : 50] But we're also given an insight or we're told something of the hand of Jesus. And particularly, it's spoken of, and this is of course the language of a vision, but it's spoken of as the right hand of Jesus. And what a hand it is. We've already noticed last Sunday morning, we noticed that this right hand was the hand that held the seven stars. We can just remind ourselves of that. In verse 16, we read, in his right hand he held the seven stars. As if you recall, and if you were able to be here last Sunday morning, you may recall that the stars, in some way, that isn't altogether clear, but in some way represent the seven churches. And of course, the seven churches represent all churches, the church of Jesus Christ. And so here, in the vision, John sees the exalted Jesus in his right hand, holding his people, holding his church. It's a picture of strength and of protection and of care and of power. This is his right hand. But here in these verses, his right hand reappears, as it were. And it reappears in a very different way.

We read there in verse 17, This hand that holds the seven stars secure in its grip is a hand that with a touch that is both strong and tender is placed on John to bring him comfort and reassurance. And a hand that is placed on John that is then accompanied by words. And what are the words that accompany this tender touch of Jesus upon John? Well, we read there, Then he placed his right hand on me and said, Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Now, these are words that are familiar to us. So often in the Bible, there are occasions when the angels of God, or indeed God himself, pronounces these words, do not be afraid. We think of Jesus also pronouncing these words to his disciples, Do not be afraid. Don't be afraid. Now, the question, of course, demands us to just consider very quickly, well, what is it that John was afraid of? There are many things that we can fear. Many occasions when it might be fitting to hear those words, don't be afraid, do not be afraid. But on this occasion, what is John afraid of? Now, of course, he is a prisoner of Rome. He and his readers are victims of persecution by the might of the Roman Empire.

And so you might imagine, well, this is what he is afraid of. He's afraid of Rome. He's afraid of the emperor. He's afraid of the threat of execution. But that's not what he's afraid of. That's not why Jesus says to him, don't be afraid. What's he afraid of? Who's he afraid of? He's afraid of Jesus. It's the vision of Jesus that has cast him to the ground. It's not the emperor. It's not the fear of death that has him prostrate. No, it is the vision of the exalted, reigning Jesus.

And Jesus himself assures him and comforts him with these words, do not be afraid. It's probably a very helpful and instructive thing for ourselves as we maybe just examine who we are and what is important to us, where we stand in matters of eternity, to ask that question.

[11 : 38] Who do you fear? What do you fear? The answer to that question will say a lot about you. Who do you fear? Who do you fear? But Jesus assures John that he has nothing to fear. Do not be afraid.

The right hand of our living deliverer is able to, at one and the same time, to hold and protect his people, to hold the seven stars and minister to one of his trembling disciples. So that hand that holds countless millions of his people, that same hand comforts one trembling, fretful, disconsolate disciple. This is a hand that still rests on those who fear and fret, on those who are cast down and disheartened. This is a hand that holds you and protects you. And this is a hand that comforts you. He holds you in his hand and he comforts you with his hand. The hand of Jesus, the right hand of Jesus.

What we find here in John's response and in Jesus' words directed to John, we find that John is awed by his glory and drawn by his grace. And all at one and the same time. Awed by his glory and then drawn by his grace.

I don't know how many of you, when you were children or indeed as adults, read the Narnia book, C.S. Lewis' series on Narnia. When I consider this vision of Jesus and the manner in which he deals so tenderly with John as he's cast down before the wonder and the brilliance of this vision, it reminds me of Aslan. Aslan, of course, who represents Jesus in that series of books. Majestic and strong and yet tender and gentle. This is what we find here. The glory of Jesus, but then this hand of Jesus, a powerful hand, a mighty hand, but a hand that tenderly comforts his people.

But as we consider these verses, there's something else, another truth about Jesus that we can draw out. And it concerns his identity and very specifically his divinity in verse 13. And of course, this was something we already saw last Sunday morning. We just remind ourselves of what we saw last Sunday morning. In verse 13, we're told that the one John saw in his vision was one like a son of man. And what we commented last Sunday was that this is language that echoes the language that we find in the book of Daniel that describes the divine Messiah, the one whose kingdom will last forever and ever. And we know who he is. This is Jesus. And yet in the words of Jesus, Jesus' own words, not simply words that are used to describe Jesus, but the words that Jesus himself uses of himself. In the words of Jesus in these verses, verses 17 and 18, one particular aspect of his self-declared identity is highlighted and proclaimed, and namely his divinity. Jesus himself declares himself to be, in the language he uses, very powerfully and very explicitly, he describes himself and declares himself to be God, to be very God of very God. Notice the language he uses there in verse 18, do not be afraid. What does he immediately go on to say? I am the first and the last. I am the first and the last. Now this is language that Jesus uses on other occasions in the course of this vision that is granted to John. And towards the end of Revelation in chapter 22 and in verse 13, and in verse 13 we read a very similar language being used by Jesus of himself. In Revelation 22 and verse 13, there we read, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

[16:18] So in this very book Jesus uses the language again. But perhaps more significantly is that this is language that echoes descriptions of God in the Old Testament. Indeed, the language of God in the Old Testament. Very particularly on two occasions, recorded in the book of Isaiah, we hear God speaking about himself. And what does he say? Well, in Isaiah 44 and verse 6 we read, this is what the Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty, I am the first and I am the last. Apart from me, there is no God. God is saying, I am the only one who can speak in these terms. I am the only one who can say I am the first and I am the last. And then a couple of chapters later on in Isaiah 48 and verse 12, God again is speaking through the prophet, listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called. I am he, I am the first and I am the last. The language that God uses speaks of his eternal nature, but it also speaks of his complete sovereignty over human history, the first and the last and everything in between governed by the one true living God. Our living, risen, exalted Savior is God himself in the person of his Son, the eternal Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us, the one who knows no beginning because he is the beginning. But then Jesus goes on in this same section to declare connected truths, related truths about himself. Then in verse 18,

I am the living one. I was dead and now look, I am alive forever and ever. I am alive forever and ever. Now this echoes the language used by God, of God, again in the Old Testament. Let's just notice on one occasion in Deuteronomy chapter 32. Deuteronomy chapter 32, and we'll read two verses there, verses 39 and 40. Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 39 and 40. We read as follows, See now that I myself am he. There is no God besides me. So it's very clear God is speaking. There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life. I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand. I lift my hand to heaven and solemnly swear, as surely as I live forever. As I live forever. The very language that Jesus uses here as he speaks to John, I am alive forever and ever. And of course, the same truth is expressed of Jesus in this same book of Revelation in chapter 4 and in verse 8. In the second half of the verse, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come. Speaking of Jesus as the one who is forever, the Lord God Almighty. So what we find in the language of Jesus, as he identifies himself to John, the identical qualities or attributes that God the Father,

God Almighty uses of himself. And so the conclusion is inescapable that our risen, exalted Savior is God, God the Son. So we see something in these two verses or three verses of the glory of Jesus, of the hand of Jesus, of the identity, the divinity of Jesus. But Jesus also makes reference to his mission, the mission or the accomplished mission of Jesus. And especially in the words that we've already touched on, but want to draw out another aspect of in verse 18, when Jesus says to John, I am the living one, I was dead, and now look, I am alive. Now there's a deep and perhaps almost unfathomable mystery in the words of Jesus. I am the living one, I was dead. You know, the juxtaposition of these two statements doesn't make any sense. I am the living one, I was dead. How can it be?

If there is one, you would have thought unchallengeable truth concerning the living one is that he is alive always. The clue is in the name. The living one doesn't do dying. He is, after all, the living one. And yet, wonder of wonders, he declares, the living one declares, I was dead. The living one died. [21 : 23] And of course, this, as we know, speaks of and points to his mission to deliver, to redeem, to save. It speaks of a mission accomplished. I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever. Jesus came to die.

The living one came to die. He came to die a sinner's death. He came to die in the place of rebels and renegades. He came to take upon himself the punishment due to sin and sinners. He came to die for you and me. The living one died. But death could not hold him down. The father raised him from the dead in inglorious vindication, declaring to powers visible and invisible that the work of salvation had been wholly and eternally secured. And so, in the words of Jesus, directed to John, prostrate before him, I am the living one. I was dead, and now look, I'm alive. He speaks of the mission that he has accomplished on behalf of sinners. But then there's a fifth aspect or truth about Jesus that I want to just notice as we draw things to a close. And that is what we might call, or we can call, the authority of Jesus. And I'm thinking especially of what Jesus says there at the very end of verse 18, when he says, and I hold the keys of death and Hades. I hold the keys of death and Hades. Let's just consider what

Jesus says there. There's two parts to that sentence, to that declaration, this reference to death and Hades, and then the relationship that Jesus stands in towards them. He holds the keys. And we'll start thinking just about death and Hades, and then what it means for Jesus to say that he holds the keys.

I think we know what death is, but perhaps the language of Hades is somewhat more unclear. What does Jesus mean when he says that he holds the keys of death and Hades? Now, in the New Testament, we come across this word, this Greek word, used in a number of different senses. They're all related.

They're not contradictory in any way, but they're different. Sometimes it's used simply as a synonym for death and its power to strike down and to entrap. Sometimes it's used to describe what we might call the place of the dead in general, of all dead. We all die and we go to Hades. It's used sometimes in that sense, the place of the dead, but to be distinguished from hell. Not hell, but the place of the dead. Sometimes it is used in the sense of the place of the wicked dead. You remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and the rich man, he was in Hades, and he is described as suffering there. Now, on this occasion, when Jesus speaks of holding the keys of death and Hades, I think here he is using the word in its general sense of death and the power of death to entrap its victims, hence the need for keys. But what Jesus says about it is that he holds the keys of death and Hades.

[24 : 52] Now, the language he uses, the imagery he uses, we're not altogether sure where we can trace it to. There is a passage in Isaiah chapter 22 where it speaks of a particular individual being granted keys to the house of David, keys that would allow to get in and to be brought out from that place.

And so the same picture is being used, but in another sense. Some suggest that Jesus here is simply borrowing a language that would have been familiar within pagan religion, where certain gods were considered to hold the keys of death, and it's plausible that he might do so. In many ways, the source of the imagery is of secondary importance. What matters is the meaning. And the meaning, I think, is clear. The keys symbolize authority. Authority over death itself. And what Jesus is declaring is that he has no place for, and there's no place for some pagan dualism, with Jesus as the Lord of life and the evil one as sovereign over death. Jesus is Lord over all. He has the keys of life and he has the keys of death. He holds the keys, his keys over death and Hades. It is in his

power to send to death, and it is in his power to rescue from death. And so Jesus here declares to John his authority. You can imagine the context in which this letter was written and the original readers who were faced with the very real prospect of violent death. And you can imagine the distress that that could cause, the comfort that would come to hear these words of Jesus, their Savior, reminding them,

I hold the keys of death and Hades. What's the very worst, the very worst the Roman Empire could do to God's people, the very worst, the very worst it could do would be to kill them. And Jesus says, no matter, I hold the keys of death and Hades. And so we see in John's response to his vision and in the manner in which Jesus then responds to John and comforts him and speaks to him, we draw out these truths concerning Jesus, his glory, his hand that powerfully holds the church and tenderly comforts his people, his identity as very God of very God, his mission to save, to die for us and to raise again triumphant over death, and his authority as the one who holds the keys of death and Hades.

Well, what will we do? What will you do with this Jesus? How will you respond to this Jesus, of which all this is true? Well, let me give you some advice. What to do and what not to do. We'll start with what not to do.

And it's very simple, and it's not very deep in many ways. It's very simple, I think, to understand. Don't mess with Jesus. You don't mess with the one described here. You don't mess with one who holds this kind of authority. You don't mess with one whose blazing eyes penetrate your very soul. You don't mess with one who holds the keys of death and Hades. You don't treat him lightly. You don't put him to one side for a more opportune moment. You don't imagine that you can live your life beyond him or in your own way.

[28 : 37] Don't mess with Jesus, but rather fall down before him in grateful and joyful worship. Feel his tender hand upon you, and listen as he speaks to you these words that he spoke to John. Don't be afraid. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for what we discover concerning your Son, our Savior, in the words that we have been giving thought to this morning. We thank you for who Jesus is. We thank you that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

We thank you that he is the eternal Son of God. We thank you that he is the one who holds all authority, authority over life and authority even over death. Heavenly Father, we thank you that we are held in his powerful right hand, that he is the one who is among his people. He is the one so close, yes, even to put his hand upon us, to comfort and to give grace and to restore and to lift up. Heavenly Father, we pray then that you would help us to know what it is in our lives, to bow down before him, to worship him, and to live our lives in his service. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.