

To Write the Mystery

Revelation 1:17-20

¹⁷ And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. ¹⁹ Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars which 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 which you saw are the seven churches.

Today will bring us to the end of the first chapter in the Book of Revelation. Thus far we have examined the purpose of the Book, as well as the timing of the Book. We have talked in some detail of what the Book is about, and we have also talked about what the Book is not about. I can remember an old concept, which is probably still true today, if you want to increase the numbers in your congregation hold a prophecy conference. Put an advertisement in the paper that your church is holding a prophecy conference or that you are teaching through the Book of Revelation and folks will come out of the wood work to come and hear what it is you have to say. Of course these people who are coming to learn about prophecy are very often coming for the "What is next on the prophetic calendar?" show.

Now in saying that, I want to be clear that it is not that the Book of Revelation has nothing to say to us, in fact it has very much to say to us, but the prophecies and events in the Book are not about specific events in our near future. The Book is about the revealing of Jesus Christ who is both King and Lord and the ruler over all of the nations of the earth. It is about He has made His

people to be both kings and priests and thought they will suffer persecution we can be encouraged because Jesus Christ is Lord.

Last week John saw the glorified and ascended Christ standing amongst the 7 golden lampstands. The picture as it is described in the text is awesome. But Jesus is standing amongst the 7 golden lampstands, who are His Churches and He is preparing to issue forth judgment. As the king this is His function, this is His role. Something else we see is that on His right hand are the 7 stars. I briefly spoke about this last week, but the word that is usually translated as “in” His right hand is better translated as “on”. The preposition $\epsilon\pi\iota$ in the genitive case is on and not in. Yes He is the ruler over the kings of the earth and yet it is His Church that is His representative. The Church, which is governed by fallen and yet cleansed sinners is able to speak His judgments as they are in Christ Jesus. This is an important detail that we often miss, that Christ rules the nations, and yet He does this through His Word and the sacraments which are given to His Church for these purposes.

After seeing the glorified and ascended Christ, John is naturally frightened. One of the things that is often surprising to people as they read the Bible is that Jesus, after His resurrection, is never recognized by His disciples or the people that He knew, until He reveals Himself. Mary Magdalene did not recognize Him at the garden tomb, she mistook Him for the gardener. Once He spoke her name, she recognized Him. Mary then told the disciples she had seen the Lord, and suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst, their recognition of the Lord was delayed until Jesus has shown them His hands and His side. Cleopas and the other disciple as they walked to Emmaus and spoke with the Lord did not recognize Him until He had opened their eyes. Now we have John who has previously saw the risen Christ seeing the exalted and glorified Christ and his natural reaction is one of fear. Is this a vision? Is this an angel? We should not be too surprised

that he does not immediately recognize who is there. And remember prior to this appearance John very likely thought He was alone and in the Spirit on the Lord's day prior to hearing the voice.

The last description of Christ given in the describing verses says that *"His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength."* When the Scripture speaks of His countenance, this can only be a description of His face. If you are to see someone you are able to judge mood or countenance very often by the expression of their face. The Lord's eyes have been described as fiery, but this is a description of the full glory of God shining forth on His face. It is as of the sun shining in all its strength. In the Book of Judges Chapter 5 where we read the Song of Deborah, she closes her song with these words.³¹ *"Thus let all Your enemies perish, O LORD! But let those who love Him be like the sun When it comes out in full strength."* This is an indication of the coming task. Psalm 19:4 and 5 also uses similar language which points to further description of the task of the exalted and glorified Christ:

In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,⁵ Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, And rejoices like a strong man to run its race.

Albert Barnes writes, "There could be no more striking description of the majesty and glory of the countenance than to compare it with the overpowering splendor of the sun." I would also add that it is this description tied in with its other uses in Scripture that gives a glimpse of the purpose of the conquering bridegroom.

Now there are a few places in the Bible where a mere man gets a glimpse of the glory of God. When we see this happen, the reaction is very similar. In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord. His reaction is given to us in the 5th verse:

So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."

The King James renders the statement, "I am undone." Which is fine, but many of the newer translations capture what I think is the fuller sense of the word. "I am ruined." The English Standard render the phrase, "I am lost." The message is clear, When they see the Lord it gives them a clear picture of themselves and let's just say there is a recognition of their supreme unworthiness.

As we mentioned last week when Daniel saw the Angel of the Lord in Daniel 10, he fell at his feet as though dead. When Manoah the father of Samson and his wife saw the Lord they feared for their lives. It is interesting that the name of Samson means "Sunrise." So as we can see the reaction of John to seeing the exalted Christ is not atypical. But something else we see is that the Lord responds with kindness. He does not leave John at His feet as though dead He reaches forth with His right hand and cleanses Him and tells Him to rise. He says, *"Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen.*

This is the third time in the first chapter where Jesus identifies Himself as the first and the last. But He also speaks of Himself here as the one who lives, who was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore. This is going to be emphasized again in the next verse when instructions are given as to what John is to write. But He makes a proclamation that He is the holder of the keys of Hades and of Death. In simple language this is a proclamation of ultimate authority. That being said, I briefly want to go over an errant view of authority that is sadly far too common in the church today.

After Adam was created God spoke these words to him from Genesis 1:

28Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

29And God said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. 30Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so. 31Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Some have called these words the creation mandate, others have called them the dominion mandate. But after the fall in the garden there is a teaching that this mandate was somehow lost. It is true that with the fall man had committed high treason against the creator, but where the teaching is skewed is that it is taught that somehow the authority that was given to man passed from him to Satan. The teaching is that man gave Adam authority, Satan deceived man, thus the authority that had been given to Adam passed to Satan. Nowhere in Scripture do we see Satan ever possessing the keys to death and to Hades. The problem was that man had lost his legitimate claim to authority. God has always had these keys. The issue was that man had lost access. With Christ the man accomplishing His task, however, the keys are restored to mankind. Again, this is speaking of man in Christ.

The error that the authority somehow passed to Satan is a particularly egregious error in that it of necessity affects our view of the atonement. Did Christ die on the cross to satisfy the Divine justice

of God or did he die to satisfy a claim made on Him by Satan? This is no minor error, but it is increasingly common. What people do is they take these passage where it speaks of Satan being the God of this world, and they interpret these passage to imply that Satan has some sort of legitimate claim over the world. Yet, what we must understand is when the Bible speaks of Satan being God of this world, it is speaking of those who are trapped in the dominion of darkness. Satan is the god of this world system, but at his highest rule and authority he never held the keys of Hades and of death.

When the Scripture speaks of Jesus holding these keys it means that Jesus owns death itself. That means that John can't die until it is Christ's time to take him to heaven. It also means you and I are invincible until it is time to die. In Christ you are invincible until it is God's time to take you home. The words Jesus spoke when he placed His right hand on John and told Him not to fear suddenly have great meaning, because there is truly no weapon formed against us that can prosper because We serve a God who holds the very keys of Hades and of death.

Verse 19 begins with a therefore. As always, whenever we see a therefore, we must ask what it is there for. The immediate context is that Christ, the one who lives and was dead and will be alive forevermore, instructs John to *Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this*. There is a school of thought that teaches that Revelation 1:19 is the key verse to unlocking the Book of Revelation. According to this teaching the Book of Revelation is divided into 3 sections. Section 1 is the things which have been, so the past. Section 2 is the things that are, the present, and Section 3 is the things which will take place after or the future. Generally those who interpret this way divide the Book this way.

The past is what John has just seen, when he saw the glorified Christ. The things that are is entailed in chapters 2 and 3, when he addresses each of the 7 churches. The things which are yet to come have to do with everything from Chapter 4:1 to the end of the Book. Some interpreters read this as a threefold outline of the whole book. This is fine I guess, and yet this is a pretty arbitrary, division. It also misses that the Book is not written in a strictly chronological order...this, followed by that. Revelation, just like all Biblical prophecy, weaves past, present, and future together throughout the entire book. I think understanding that we are dealing with the One Who lives and was dead, and will live forever more gives the true meaning to this passage. Afterall the Book is about the revealing of Jesus Christ.

Now that being said, if we catch the timing of the events and miss what it was He was to write about we are still insufficient to the task. He is told to write ²⁰ *The mystery of the seven stars which you saw on My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.*

The word that is translated mystery is the Greek word *μυστηριον*. It means literally something into which one must be “initiated” before it is fully known. They must be initiated or instructed. We commonly use the word to denote that which is above our comprehension or unintelligible. But this is never the meaning of the word in the New Testament. It means there some doctrine or fact which has been concealed, or which has not before been fully revealed, or which has been set forth only by figures and symbols. When the doctrine is made known, it may be as clear and plain as any other. Another use of this word mystery is when speaking of the fact that God meant to call the Gentiles, which was long concealed, at least in part, and which was not fully made known until the Saviour came, and which had been until that time “a mystery - a concealed

truth” - though when it was revealed, there was nothing incomprehensible in it.

Colossians 1:26-27 reads” ²⁶ *the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.* ²⁷ *To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory,* So it was in regard to the doctrine of election. It was a mystery until it was made known by the actual conversion of those whom God had chosen. So in regard to the incarnation of the Redeemer; the atonement; the whole plan of salvation. Over all these great points there was a veil thrown, and people did not understand them until God revealed them. When they were revealed, the mystery was removed, and men were able to see clearly the manifestation of the will of God.

Here John is to write and thus reveal the mystery of the 7 churches. He is going to be doing some unveiling. The first chapter closes with these words: *The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.* Now the question that invariably comes up here is what is meant by an angel over each of the churches?

When Jesus spoke of the seven stars as seven angels, our first question is, “Was He speaking of heavenly angels that preside over churches, or human messengers that preside over churches?” I have spoke about this in the past, but in brief remember that the Greek word *αγγελος* is translated as either messenger or angel. An angel is after all is said and done a heavenly messenger. That being said the word can refer to either a heavenly angel or to a human messenger. The question we must ask is which one is being spoken of in the text?

I believe that the context tells us that these are human messengers. In fact, I along with most commentators on this subject believe that when He is addressing the angel of the Church He is

addressing the Pastor or the Elder of the Church. Among my reasons for this has to do with the fact that in these verses the word “you” occurs in the singular tense because Jesus was addressing a single person. In speaking directly to the “messenger” of each church, He said things like this in Revelation 2:4-5:

⁴ Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

In Revelation 2:10 He is speaking to the angel of the Church in Sardis and he writes:

¹⁰ Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. He is telling them not to be afraid because many of them are going to be cast in prison for their faith, but tells them not to be afraid. This seems like a strange warning to give to a heavenly angel. But if it is a warning to actual human messengers. If it is addressed to the leaders or the pastors of these churches, I want you to consider the severity of the warnings.

Revelation 3:15-16 speaking to the angel of the Church in Laodicea it is written:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

The Lord holds these stars on His hands and they speak with His authority in His Church. An obvious question is why did he not just call them pastor or leaders in the Church? Why refer to them as stars? Some would interchange the word star with Pastor as though. We, however, should not think of star as a code for Pastor, but it is a symbol that sets one thing in relationship

to other things. We do not read it like we are reading with a decoder-ring. These statements about the stars and lampstands are not "definitions," but state different ways of looking at the angels and the churches. Thus, when Christ identifies these things with each other, He is not saying "that one is a symbol while the other is what the symbol 'really' means. He is saying that here are two things which correspond to each other, being equally real from different points of view." In other words, "we have, not an explanation of a symbolic term by a real one, but a statement that these two terms, which are equally real, are simply interchangeable.... John is not giving explanations, but equivalents. He is not concerned to tell us that 'lampstands,' which we do not understand, means 'church,' which we do understand. In the images that are presented John tells us things about the lampstands and the bride and the city and the church, the twenty-four elders and the 144,000 and the numberless multitude. In Revelation 1:1 we are told that the *Lord sent and signified this Revelation by His angel to His servant John*, Understanding how signs and symbols are used in the Bible and in particular in this Book will help us see what Christ is doing with His churches. We will see that in detail as we look at each of the 7 churches. We will also grow to understand the mystery and knowing that we will know more of what Christ has done, and what He continues to do and how His kingdom will proceed in the future, which after all is a future of the increase of the government and peace of the Messiah.