I Hold the Keys of Death and Hades

1: 17-20

DIG: How does John react to the vision and the voice of Christ? Why do you think John reacted as he did? Why does Yeshua touch him? Why is that significant? Why do you think Jesus told John not to be afraid? What was John told to do? How would the titles of Messiah be assuring to the believers receiving this letter? Who are the seven stars? What is Hades? How can one divide up the book of Revelation based upon 1:19?

REFLECT: How would you react if you saw what John saw? Do you think you would be afraid? Are you afraid today? Do you know and adore the awesome, glorious, powerful Jesus seen in the Scriptures, or have you adopted a culturally appropriate, mild-mannered, user-friendly Yeshua after your own imagination? How should John’s portrayal of Jesus affect my attitude in prayer? Am I to flippant or casual when I approach Him? Read Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10. According to them, what is the one thing that is essential for deepening our understanding of obedience to God’s Word? Ask yourself, “Do I have the kind of respect and reverence necessary to have true wisdom and understanding?”

The vision of the risen Lord was overwhelming to John, even if he had been the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 20:2). John - the evangelist, theologian, elder, apostle, and select member of Messiah’s inner circle - was instantly reduced to a trembling sinner lying powerless before the King of kings and Lord of lords. In short, the vision terrified him.

Like the prophets of old when they came into the presence of God, John fell at His feet as though dead (Joshua 5:14; Judges 13:20; Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 8:17). Yet in the midst of John’s heart-stopping terror, the unsurpassed Son of God stooped down, reached out with His nail-pierced hand, and comforted His old friend. Jesus had done the same thing so long ago at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:7). And once again, Christ placed His right hand on John and comforted him. His touch is always comforting and assuring. Helping the elderly apostle to his feet, He told John: Do not be afraid (1:17a). Similar words of assurance were given to those overwhelmed by God’s presence throughout the Bible (Genesis 15:1, 26:24; Psalm 25:1-22; Isaiah 41:10; Matthew 14:27, 17:7, 28:10).
The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The LORD is with me; He is my Helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies (Psalm 118:6-7).

The comfort Yeshua offered was based upon who He is and the authority He possesses. First, He identified Himself as I AM, the covenant name of ADONAI. Next, the LORD revealed Himself as the I AM to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Then Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders of His day: Before Abraham was born, I AM. The fact that He claimed to be God was not lost on His detractors because they picked up stones to stone Him, punishment for blasphemy (John 8:58).

Secondly, Jesus identified Himself as the First and the Last, a title used of ADONAI in the TaNaKh (Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, 48:12). When other gods have come and gone, only He remains. The LORD existed before them and He will continue to exist eternally, long after they have been forgotten. Jesus’ application of that title to Himself is another powerful proof of His deity.

Thirdly, Messiah claimed that He was the Living One. He proclaimed: I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! This would provide tremendous assurance to those persecuted First Century believers who were facing an unspeakable death in the Roman Coliseum. The Greek text literally reads, I became dead. The Living One, who could never die, became a man and died. As Peter explains it, Christ was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit (First Peter 3:18). He died in His humanness without ceasing to live as God.30 In His death and resurrection, Yeshua the Messiah wrestled away from Satan any authority the devil may have had over death (Hebrews 2:14-15).31

As the eternal I AM, the First and the Last, the Living One, Yeshua alone has the keys of death and Hades (1:17b-18), that is, authority over death and the place of the dead (Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14; John 5:21; First Corinthians 15:54-57; Hebrews 2:14), not the Roman Emperor. Keys were a symbol of authority in Jewish thought (Matthew 16:19). Both the believer’s death and resurrection are in His hands. Following the revelation of Christ in glory, John was again commanded to write.

Like a reporter in the midst of a historic event, John began frantically recording the vision of Jesus still impressed on his mind. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later (1:19). This appears to be the divine outline of Revelation. John was told to write about the vision of the Messiah that he had just seen in Chapter 1. Then he was to write the present message, the now history, of Christ to seven churches in Chapters 2 and 3. Finally, the main purpose of the book being prophetic, what
will take place later. John was to introduce the events preceding, culminating, and following the Second Coming in Chapters 4 to 22. This constitutes a divine outline of the book.

Yeshua helped John and all of us by interpreting two symbols from that vision: the stars and the lampstands. He said: The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (1:20). With one exception (12:1), wherever the word star is used symbolically in the Bible, it is always a symbol of an angel. Therefore, the mystery of the seven stars is revealed to be the angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden lampstands were the churches themselves. This fact is hardly surprising in view of the innumerable company of angels (Hebrews 12:22) and their assignment as ministering angels to those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14). Angels are present in the assemblies during their services (1 Corinthians 11:10) and are intensely interested in their protection (1 Cor 4:9; Ephesians 3:10; 1 Timothy 3:16 5:21; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 1:12). Admittedly, the idea of an angel protecting each body of believers is one that stretches our thinking. Nonetheless, it seems to be the teaching of God's word here. Before revealing the tremendous prophetic scenes of chapters 4-22, Christ first gave a personal message to each of the seven churches with obvious practical applications to believers of every age (2:1 to 3:22).

But first we need to look at two principles that we can take from John's breath-taking experience on Patmos. First, to better our understanding of who the Messiah really is, the sooner we'll respond in submission and obedience. John said: When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead (1:17a). We sometimes hear people talk about meeting Messiah face-to-face, giving Him a big hug and hanging out with Him. Jesus is viewed as their pal. But John didn't see it that way after his brief glimpse of Messiah's unveiled glory: he was on his face worshiping the risen Lord. Second, the greater our willingness to submit to Christ, the deeper His revealed truths will be to us. No, you won't receive divine visions in the future. No, Yeshua Himself will not give you a message for your pastor or messianic rabbi. John's deep understanding of the Lord, led him to a complete submission to His authority. In turn, this led to a deepening understanding of Yeshua and His plans for the future. As we open God's Word and encounter Jesus, our attitudes of humility and submission will lead us into a deeper relationship with Him.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding: in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).