

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #103: THE KEY RING OF CHRIST

By John Temples

NOTE: Yes, this is a strange subject for an Insights article--possibly my strangest yet. But here's the background on it: I've mentioned before that some 25 of my 50-plus years of preaching were with churches of Christ out West--in Idaho, Oregon, and Utah. Since almost all of those congregations were small and mission support was tenuous, I owned and operated a part-time locksmith business during that time, achieving the national rating of Certified Master Locksmith (CML). I have to say, being a locksmith opened a lot of doors for me (pun intended). I got to meet and discuss the Bible with many people I would not otherwise have interacted with (such as the local chief of police in one Utah town--I rekeyed his entire office). So I'm interested in keys, and yes! Keys are a Bible subject.

Most people have a key ring. On it, they will have their house key, their car key, perhaps a mailbox key, and various other keys (including several IWWTKIF¹ keys). These keys symbolize authority to open, shut, or control various devices and entities.

Well, the Lord Jesus also has a key ring! I find in Scripture at least four keys He has on His ring:

- The keys to the kingdom
- The keys of Death and Hades
- The key of David

These are all figurative or symbolic keys, of course, pointing to the Lord's authority over these spiritual states, to grant entry or refuse entry. A study of these "keys" would be interesting and instructive.

¹ I Wonder What That Key Is For....

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

These are mentioned in two passages, the first of which is Matthew 16:13-19:

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you *the keys of the kingdom of heaven*, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

It is this passage that gave rise to the idea a lot of people have that Peter is the gatekeeper of heaven. However, in the other passage (Matthew 18:18), Jesus addressed all the apostles and gave them the same promise He gave Peter: “Assuredly, I say to you [plural], whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Many people think that the Lord was giving Peter and the other apostles authority to make church laws and pronounce people’s sins retained or remitted. But that is not the case. We never see the apostles originating church policy on their own or claiming the power to forgive sins; rather, we see them teaching only what they were authorized to teach by Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Here is the truth about these “keys to the kingdom”: Jesus was giving the apostles the power to open or shut the kingdom (the church) to men by preaching the terms of admission to it. These terms were established by Christ in the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:18-20: “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Peter and the other apostles used those “keys” for the first time on the day of Pentecost when they preached the first gospel sermon and told the Jews in Jerusalem to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). That “door to the kingdom” remains unlocked and open to all who will come (Revelation 22:17), and will remain open until the Lord returns.

THE KEYS OF DEATH AND HADES

We read of these keys in Revelation 1:18, where Jesus tells John, “I am He who lives and was dead; and behold, I am alive forevermore. *And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.*” These are symbolic keys, signifying the Lord’s power over life, death, and the grave.

These are two separate keys. When we die, our bodies go into the earth and our spirits enter Hades, the realm of the dead. So Death has the power to imprison our bodies and Hades has power to imprison our spirits. But Jesus, because He has these keys, can release our bodies from the grave and our spirits from Hades.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said the “gates of Hades” would not prevent the establishment of His kingdom. “Gates” is plural, meaning more than one. How many gates does Hades have? Two. There is one way in, death; and one way out, resurrection.

Before the resurrection of Christ, death was an irreversible state (except for temporary resurrections like that of Lazarus). However, Christ did what no other individual was able to do: He left Hades permanently by the power of God (Romans 1:4). In doing so, He took the sting and power of death away from the devil. Paul spoke of this in Colossians 2:15: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”

So we no longer need to fear death. Even though we will experience it, Satan no longer has the power to hold our spirits in Hades forever. Adam Clarke said: “Christ can both save and destroy, can kill and make alive. Death is still under His dominion, and He can recall the dead whensoever He pleases. He is the resurrection and the life.”

Some would ask, how and when did Christ obtain the keys to Death and Hades? There is a popular theory that says that between Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, He went to Hades and wrestled the keys from Satan. Is this true? I think not. I don't believe Satan has ever possessed the keys to Death and Hades. He only has power over people as God allows. He has never had the power to determine who will go to heaven and who will go to hell, or the duration of their stay. As far as Hades is concerned, Satan is not the warden; he is one of the inmates. You don't give the keys to the jail to the inmates!

So Jesus has the keys to Death and Hades, and the One who has the keys is the One who has the authority!

THE KEY OF DAVID

This key is mentioned in Revelation 3:7, which says, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, *He who has the key of David*, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens."

The key of David is a reference to the power David had to rule over God's Old Testament people, Israel. Christ possesses the key of David in the sense that He is King over God's spiritual Israel, the church.

This expression "the key of David," is taken from Isaiah 22:22. Isaiah says there was a government official in Judah named Shebna. Apparently, Shebna was the palace steward or chief of staff, having the power to determine who had access to the king. He was not a faithful servant, but was using his position for personal gain. Therefore, God informed Shebna through the prophet Isaiah that he was going to be removed from his office, and that his "key"--his authority--would be given to another, Eliakim:

"Thus says the Lord God of hosts: 'Go, proceed to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the house, and say: What have you here, and whom have you here, that you have hewn a sepulcher here, as he who hews himself a sepulcher on high, who carves a tomb for himself in a rock? Indeed, the Lord will throw you away violently, O mighty man, and will surely seize you. He will surely turn violently and toss you like a ball into a large country; there you shall die, and there your glorious

chariots shall be the shame of your master's house. So I will drive you out of your office, and from your position he will pull you down. Then it shall be in that day, that I will call My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah; I will clothe him with your robe and strengthen him with your belt; I will commit your responsibility into his hand. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. *The key of the house of David* I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open.”

The man Eliakim mentioned in this account therefore became a type of Christ--the One who had the power to grant access to the King, to God the Father. That is what the text in Revelation is about--"These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David."

Remarkably, the Bible speaks of Christ as being the Son of David and the Lord of David (Matthew 22:41-46), as well as possessing the throne of David (Acts 2:29-35), the sure mercies of David (Acts 13:34), and the key of David (Revelation 3:7).

ARE THERE ANY OTHER KEYS ON CHRIST'S KEY RING?

Possibly one: the key to the bottomless pit or the abyss. Two times in Revelation (9:1 and 20:1), an angel is said to possess the key to the bottomless pit. It is not directly stated who gave the angel this key, but Christ would be the logical choice. In Revelation 9, the angel uses this key to release evil from the abyss; in chapter 20, he uses it to restrain evil, to bind Satan for a thousand years. The meaning of these passages is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be a fascinating study for you to make.²

SO WHAT KEYS DOES THE LORD JESUS HAVE ON HIS KEY RING?

The keys of the kingdom of heaven--symbolic of authority to reveal the terms by which men may enter the kingdom or be barred from it. These keys Jesus entrusted to the apostles. They exercise this authority through the New Testament.

² There is a fuller explanation of these passages in my commentary on Revelation, *Pictures From Patmos*, which is available for download as a Kindle book from Amazon.

The keys of Death and Hades. Jesus has power over the living and the dead. One day, the Lord will use those keys to release our bodies from the bondage of the grave and our spirits from bondage in Hades.

The key of David. Jesus now sits on David's throne, spiritually speaking, and rules over His kingdom as David ruled over the kingdom of Israel. This key represents the power to grant or refuse access to the Father. Christ will one day use that key on our behalf when, as 2 Peter 1:11 says, "...an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

These are truly valuable keys! --John Temples