

The Book of Life and the Keys of Death

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, November 12, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 20:12-15; Revelation 1:17-18; Revelation 3:5; Revelation 13:8; Revelation 3:12; Isaiah 25:7-8; 1 Corinthians 15:53-55; 2 Timothy 1:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:15-16
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:30:31 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Book of Life is not a ledger of good people. It is, in John's own phrasing, the book of the life of the Lamb who was slain — and life itself is not a substance God hands out at a distance, it is a person. Being written in means being joined to him; being blotted out means being cut off from the only source of life there is.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Revelation's strange imagery is not a code we lack the key to. The Bible has been teaching us how to read visions since Genesis — Pharaoh's cows were years, Nebuchadnezzar's tree was a king, and the meaning is usually stated plainly nearby.
- ◆ "I have the keys of Death and Hades" is a claim about authority. Jesus can unlock the place the dead are kept, because he went in and came back out.
- ◆ Revelation never says simply "the book of life." It says the book of life *of the Lamb who was slain*, written before the foundation of the world. Jesus' identity is bound up in the book your name is in.
- ◆ The same promise that guarantees your name is never blotted out also promises you his name — including the new name that no one knows but him.
- ◆ In the Old Testament, "the book of the living" runs in parallel with being enrolled among the righteous. There is one source of righteousness and one source of life, and they turn out to be the same person.

- ◆ “The second death” was not a riddle to John’s first readers. The Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament used the phrase, and they knew exactly what it meant.
- ◆ Only God has immortality. We are not immortals with a suspended access pass to a garden — we live forever only by feeding on his life.
- ◆ Because Christ is the only source of life, “he is the only way to God” is not a hard saying. Of course God is the only way to God.

► 1:30:31

It was baby dedication Sunday, and by the time the balloons had been handed out, the announcements made, a new worship director announced out of the blue, and a joke about a rabbit donating blood had gone badly enough to require a follow-up joke, the clock read 11:23. Matt saw it. “I see it, and it’s a little dicey, but I’m going to try to preach anyway — just really concisely. So just listen concisely.” Then the catch: “The problem with that plan is that we’re in the middle of a series on the book of Revelation, which requires nuance.”

Why bother with Revelation at all

► 1:31:06

Matt admitted he gets defensive about the series, and then made the case anyway. The book sits collecting dust for two reasons — the imagery confuses people, and the groups who use the imagery loudest are strange enough that ordinary readers back away. “A lot of people are like, you know what, I’m a normie, I’m going to read other things, like the Psalms. I’ll leave the book of Revelation to other people.” His answer: it is a beautiful picture of Christ at the center of all things, everything revolving around him, and a sustained encouragement to the church to stay faithful no matter what.

How to read a vision

► 1:32:09

Yes, there is apocalyptic imagery — which is what you would expect from an apocalypse. But Scripture trains its own readers. Pharaoh dreamed of cows coming up out of the Nile; nobody was waiting for amphibious cattle, because the cows were years of plenty and famine. The baker had three baskets on his head, and it meant three days. Nebuchadnezzar was not literally a tree. The beasts coming out of the water in Daniel were kings and kingdoms, and an angel or a prophet says so. Revelation works the same way: sometimes the meaning is spelled out for us, and sometimes we go looking for the Old Testament theme it is pulling on.

1. The one who holds the keys

► 1:33:34

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

REVELATION 1:17–18 ↗

Matt underlined one phrase: *the living one*. That is the source of everything that follows — his life-giving ministry is his own self.

► 1:34:09

Holding keys conveys authority. Hades, in Greek religion, was Zeus’s older brother and the place where the dead go; in the Greek Old Testament it translates Sheol, where the dead are. Even the patriarchs were expected to go there, because they were dead. “In other words, Jesus is saying, I have conquered death, and I can un-dead you, whoever I wish.” Not, he added, in a zombie way.

2. A name that is never blotted out

► 1:34:42

“The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.”

REVELATION 3:5 ↗

Two promises sit side by side there, and Jesus says something very close to the second one in [Luke 12:8](#) — whoever acknowledges him before men, he will acknowledge before the angels of God. If you confess Jesus, Jesus confesses you; and if you confess Jesus, you have life. So the two run together.

► 1:36:08

Then the phrase Matt wanted the room to sit with:

“...and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.”

REVELATION 13:8 ↗

“You’re not just written in the book of life,” he said. “What it means that your name is written in the book of life is that before the foundation of the world your name was written in the book of — not just generic life — the life of the Lamb who was slain.”

3. His own new name

► 1:36:37

The rider on the white horse in Revelation 19:11–12 “has a name written that no one knows but himself.” A name in this world is not a tattoo; it carries a person’s character and identity.

► 1:37:47

And then, back in the letter to Philadelphia, that secret name is promised away: Revelation 3:12 says the one who conquers will have written on him the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem — and “my own new name.” Sardis is told a name will never be erased; Philadelphia is told whose name will be given. Pergamum gets the same thing in miniature: hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name that only the one who receives it knows (Revelation 2:17).

4. The book is older than Revelation

► 1:38:55

The earliest hint comes after the golden calf, when Moses breaks off mid-sentence: “But now, if you will forgive their sin — but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.” Matt read it as a very heavy prayer: forgive them, and if you won’t, then kill me now.

The psalmist uses it as an imprecation —

“Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous” — and the couplet is the point. Hebrew poetry says a thing twice in different words, so “the book of the living” and “enrolled among the righteous” are pointing at one reality. Isaiah lays the same two things side by side: those called holy, and “everyone who has been recorded for life.” There is one source of righteousness, and it turns out there is one source of life.

► 1:41:04

Jesus explains the mechanism when the Sadducees try their trick question about the woman with seven husbands. Those raised

“cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.”

We are not raised as good people or as heroes of the faith. We are raised as his children — plugged, Matt said, into the very source of life itself by being part of the family. Malachi keeps the image going with a book of remembrance written for those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. Does God

need a book to remember? “Maybe he has an iPad. What does it matter.” It is a word picture for people who will be his.

5. The books, the Book, and the lake

► 1:43:22

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done... Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

REVELATION 20:12–15 ↗

Matt pointed at the grammar. John goes out of his way: there are books, plural, and then there is this other, singular, special book. They are not lumped together.

► 1:44:26

And the reading rules from earlier come back to do real work. How does a phenomenon get thrown into a fire? How does a *place* burn? The text itself supplies the interpretation: the lake of fire is the second death — which makes sense, Matt said, because death is the wages of sin. Just as the cow was a year and the baskets were days, the lake is death — and the beast that stands for Rome being thrown in does not mean God is torturing a monster. It means Rome comes to an end, death is swallowed up forever, and Hades is emptied completely.

6. A phrase John’s readers already knew

► 1:46:03

Here came the tangent Matt apologized for in advance and told anyway. When Jews spoke Greek, the Old Testament was translated into Greek for them. When they spoke Aramaic after the exile, it was rendered into Aramaic too — but loosely, a paraphrase, “a Eugene Peterson version of it,” closer to *The Message* than to a formal translation. And in those Aramaic paraphrases the phrase *the second death* shows up.

Jacob’s blessing in [Deuteronomy 33:6](#) reads “Let Reuben live, and not die.” One Aramaic paraphrase: may Reuben live an everlasting life and not die a second death. Another: may Reuben live in this world and not die in the second death in which the wicked die in the world to come. The same thing happens

at [Jeremiah 51:57](#), where officials who “sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake” become men who “die the second death and shall not live for the world to come.” English readers meet the phrase for the first time in Revelation, scratch their heads and move on. John’s readers heard it and recognized it instantly.

7. The death of death

► [1:49:15](#)

“And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces... It will be said on that day, ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.’”

[ISAIAH 25:7-9](#) ↗

The setting is an end-times feast where God destroys every enemy and hands life to his redeemed. In the ancient world death was pictured as an enormous face with a huge mouth, swallowing everything; Isaiah reverses it — guess who is doing the swallowing now. “This is an alpha move is what I’m saying.” And the scene does not end in analysis, it ends in a shout: *behold, this is our God, we have waited for him*. He is the central figure of a passage that depicts the death of death itself.

► [1:50:13](#)

Paul says the same thing with the apocalyptic paint stripped off. In Revelation, Matt noted, death gets drawn as a knight riding around wreaking havoc with Hades as his squire, until God picks the pair of them up and throws them in the lake of fire. Paul just states it flatly:

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Isaiah and Paul are making one claim in two registers — “God will destroy death by eating it up.” Matt pushed on through the tangle of [1 Corinthians 15:27-28](#) to its last clause, “that God may be all in all,” and came up for air: “We made it through that sentence.”

► [1:51:09](#)

“For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality... then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’”

[1 CORINTHIANS 15:53-55](#) ↗

How is death defeated? The redeemed are given immortality, and so become untouchable — and we are untouchable because we are in him. The order matters: “First of all, death has to vomit up all the

people he's already swallowed," and then Christ judges and gives life, and the ones now permanently out of death's reach are the ones who get to turn around and ask it where its victory went.

8. Only one person is immortal

► 1:52:11

"...who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10 ↗

Matt counted the verbs off on his fingers — one, abolished death; two, brought life and immortality to light; three, through the gospel. It is through this gospel ministry that Jesus abolishes death and gives immortality. Which raises the question of why immortality would need bringing to us at all. "Contrary to popular belief, we are not immortals. No one's making it out of this alive." Someone is, though:

► 1:53:26

"...he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light."

1 TIMOTHY 6:15-16 ↗

Matt let the obvious misreading hang in the air first: "Do we also have immortality, and it's basically just a decision about whether to give us access to his special garden or not?" No. He alone is the immortal one. And that is exactly why being written in his book and being given his righteousness are "all one and the same operation, because all the pieces come together in Christ the person — not just ministry he throws at you from a distance."

Putting the pieces together

► 1:54:08

Only God is immortal. If you live forever in Christ, it is because you are feeding off his life — yes, we are made in his image, but that did not make us omnipresent either. "We must feed on Christ's own

flesh and join into it in order to live forever.” To become immortal is to be plugged into the source; there is no other separate, independent supply of length of days for all time.

► 1:54:59

Which means receiving life and conquering death are not two transactions but one motion — because he is already victorious over death, life is given to us joined through his body, not at a distance, but by becoming his bride. And that is where the secret name comes back in. Receiving his name is the same thing as being written in the book of the life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Who is that Lamb? Jesus. Whose name do we receive? Jesus. “He is the predestined one, he is the chosen one. I wouldn’t be surprised if that book had his name in it.” It is a way of thinking about predestination that wraps the whole thing up in his person: not a separate righteousness we take on, but his own; not a sonship acquired somewhere else — we are adopted because we are in him, and we have taken up his relationship with the Father; not a separate ration of life sprinkled over us, but his own life that we live. So being in the book means being alive, and being blotted out means being dead, because there is no life outside of him.

► 1:57:22

Matt ended where the thread had been heading the whole time. Jesus Christ, God made flesh, who died, is “our only connecting point” — the one place the themes of life, death, God and man are mixed together, all of them converging in this risen, resurrected conqueror of death. Which makes it a matter of obvious fact for Christians to say he is the only way to God, because he is God: “Of course God is the only way to God, when you think about it. Of course God is the only source of immortality in life. He’s Mr. Life himself.” Then a prayer of about fifteen seconds, thanking God for his life and asking for help to cling to him in great faith — and, with one glance at the clock, “We did it before noon.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Revelation 1:17–18
- Revelation 3:5
- Luke 12:8
- Revelation 13:8
- Revelation 19:11–12
- Revelation 3:12
- Revelation 2:17
- Exodus 32:32
- Psalm 69:28
- Isaiah 4:2–3
- Luke 20:34–36
- Malachi 3:16
- Revelation 20:12–15
- Deuteronomy 33:6
- Jeremiah 51:57
- Isaiah 25:7–9
- 1 Corinthians 15:24–26
- 1 Corinthians 15:27–28
- 1 Corinthians 15:53–55
- 2 Timothy 1:9–10
- 1 Timothy 6:15–16

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Which parts of Revelation have you quietly left to other people, and what has that cost you?
2. Matt argued that apocalyptic imagery is meant to be read, not decoded. Where have you seen that done badly, and what did it produce?
3. Revelation 13:8 calls it the book of the life of the Lamb who was slain, written before the foundation of the world. What does that phrasing change about how you hear assurance?
4. If there is no supply of life independent of Christ — no righteousness of our own, no sonship acquired elsewhere — where are you still living as though there were?
5. What does “feeding on his life” look like in your week, concretely, starting this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibQRnReMDwc&t=5431s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.