

## **“Hold Fast What You Have” (Revelation 3:7–13)**

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What comes to mind when you think of Philadelphia? Perhaps you think of food, like cheesesteaks. Or maybe you think of movies, like *Rocky* or *Philadelphia*. Or perhaps you think of history, of Benjamin Franklin and the Liberty Bell and the Declaration of Independence. But do you know why Philadelphia is named Philadelphia?

That area of Pennsylvania was home to Native Americans, specifically the Lenape people. Then Dutch settlers arrived in the early seventeenth century, and the Lenape suffered due to new diseases like smallpox, which the Europeans brought to America. They also suffered because of some violent conflict with the Europeans. Later in that century, William Penn founded the city and established Pennsylvania as an English colony. He named the city Philadelphia after the city named in the book of Revelation. The name basically means “love of brother,” or “brotherly love.” *Philos* is one of the Greek words for love, and *adelphos* means brother. Penn named the city that name because he hoped that Philadelphia would be a place where people loved one another. As a Quaker, he was familiar with religious persecution, and he wanted to create a city where people of different faiths would be safe. Penn also made a treaty with the Lenape, and I suppose he wanted to indicate that they would be loved, too.

Who wouldn’t want to live in a place where everyone loved each other? That sounds like a place too good to be true. Ironically, Philadelphia has not always been known for being a loving place. And the same was true of the original Philadelphia, that city in the Greco-Roman world mentioned in the book of Revelation. As we’ll see, the church there faced some persecution. Yet they were truly loved—they were loved by God, and that’s what matters.

This morning, we’re returning to our study of Revelation. We’ll look at Revelation 3:7–13. This is the sixth message that Jesus gives to a church in Asian Minor, a Roman province located in the western part of modern-day Turkey. These messages were meant for those churches at the end of the first century. But they’re for all churches of all times, and we would be wise to pay attention to what Jesus says here.

We’ll begin by reading the entire passage, and then we’ll go back and think about what it says. Here is Revelation 3:7–13:

<sup>7</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

<sup>8</sup>“I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup> Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup> Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. <sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. <sup>12</sup> The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. <sup>13</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Each of these messages begins with a description of Jesus. Here, he is called “the holy one, the true one.” That language is used of God in Revelation 6:10. Jesus is the Son of God. He is divine. In fact, the title “Holy One” is used several times in the book of Isaiah to refer to God (Isa. 1:4; 31:1; 37:23; 40:25; 41:14, 16; etc.). Jesus is the God of the Old Testament. More specifically, he is the Son of God, who, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit are the one true God. Jesus is pure, righteous, altogether different from an ordinary human being, and Jesus is true; he doesn’t lie.

Jesus also has “the key of David.” That’s a reference back to Isaiah 22:22. There, it referred to a man named Eliakim, who was the manager for King Hezekiah’s household. What it means is that Jesus has the key to the kingdom of David, which really is shorthand for the kingdom of God. If anyone wants to inherit the promises that God made to Israel in the Old Testament, including the promises made to David, one must go to Jesus, because he alone has the key to that kingdom. If you want to be blessed by God, be counted among his people, receive forgiveness of sin, and dwell safely with him forever, you have to go to Jesus. And if Jesus has opened that door to you, then no one can shut it. However, if you refuse Jesus, he will shut that door, and no one will be able to open it. The only path to God is Jesus, and if Jesus is to open that door for you, you must acknowledge him as Savior and Lord, as the Truth (John 14:6) and the Holy One of Israel.

Jesus then addresses the church. In verse 8 he says that he knows their works. He knows what they have done. Because Jesus has opened the door to them, they have been able to worship

Jesus and withstand pressure. This is just a little over sixty years after Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave. Christianity had not been around long, and it wasn't a very powerful force in the Roman Empire. When I say powerful, I mean that from a worldly perspective. The church didn't hold sway over other institutions. It didn't have political power, economic power, cultural power. In the Roman Empire, there would have been great pressure to worship the false gods and goddesses. At this time, Christians didn't have religious freedom. While Judaism was tolerated, Christianity was not. And there were occasions when Christians were strongly persecuted. Yet this church remained firm in the faith. They kept Jesus' word. They didn't deny his name. They didn't compromise their faith, even though they had little power.

The church in Philadelphia is only one of two churches among the seven in Revelation that receives only positive words from Jesus. The other was the church in Smyrna. If we want to be commended by Jesus, we should emulate these churches. This church didn't have power, but it was faithful. That's something that the church in America needs to consider. It's something that the church in the West needs to think about. We are losing power. We don't have much influence in government. We have far less influence among media outlets and in the entertainment industry. We don't have much influence in higher education or in primary and secondary education. We just don't have that much cultural influence at all. Yet we must be faithful. Jesus never promised us that we would be powerful in the world's eyes. But we do have power: We have the Holy Spirit, God among us and in us. We also have God's word. God is with us, and therefore no one can truly be against us.

But so many Christians in America seem to think we should use the levers of power to influence culture. I think that's misguided for two reasons: One, we don't have that power, and it doesn't look like we'll get it back any time soon. There are no levers to pull that will turn the cultural tide. Two, and far more importantly, Christianity doesn't spread through merely human power. Christian influence is spread through persuasion and through love. Christians must reason with people, explain what God has revealed in the Bible, and they must love all people, including their enemies. We are supposed to rely on God's power, not the power of a political party or a politician or the power of money. This church in Philadelphia didn't have earthly power, but it was faithful. It had the only power that really matters: divine power.

But there was a problem in that city. They were Jewish people who were not Christians, and they likely tried to get these Christians in trouble with the Roman Empire. So, they are called

a “synagogue of Satan” in verse 9. This same language was used in the message to the church at Smyrna, which we saw in chapter 2. As I explained there, this language is not anti-Semitic. Almost all of the first Christians were Jews. Jesus was a Jew! So, Jesus doesn’t use this language to criticize all Jews, or to criticize them for a certain ethnicity. But he is criticizing some particular Jews because they say they are Jews and yet they lie: they truly aren’t part of the real Israel. I have no doubt that they were biologically Jewish. But what Jesus means is that they weren’t part of the true Israel of God.

Consider what we’ve seen so far. Jesus is the Holy One of Israel. He is Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. And he is true: he never lies. But these so-called Jews do lie. They lie not only about their standing with God, but they also lie about Jesus. They don’t believe that he is the Messiah, the promised King who would come to Israel and reign forever. They certainly didn’t believe that he was the Son of God. But he is the promised son of David. He is the one who holds the keys to David’s kingdom. In other words, these Jews thought they were part of God’s kingdom by birth. But that’s not how things work. To be part of God’s kingdom, one must come to Jesus. One must be born again of the Holy Spirit (John 3).

There are many passages in the Bible that speak to this reality. In Romans 2:28–29, the apostle Paul, a Jewish man, said that to be Jewish, one must be changed by the Holy Spirit. Being Jewish is not a matter of physical circumcision, removing a bit of flesh. Being Jewish is a matter of removing our old nature, which rebels against God. The only way to change our hearts is through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit changes our hearts and brings us to Jesus. You can’t truly have faith in Jesus without the Holy Spirit working inside of you, and you can’t have that change of heart that comes from the Holy Spirit without trusting in Jesus.

Another way to think of all this is that Jesus is the true Israel. Israel was supposed to be God’s people, a royal priesthood. But Israel, like the rest of humanity, failed. It sinned against God just as the Gentiles did, just as Adam and Eve did. What was needed was someone who would fulfill the role of Israel, someone who would perfectly represent God and obey him by loving God and loving others. Jesus fulfilled that role. And everyone united to Jesus by faith becomes part of that true Israel, what the apostle Paul calls the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

So, Jesus tells this church that there are people who are giving them a hard time now, but these people will one day see that they were wrong. They will bow down before these Christians,

and they will see that these Christians were loved by God. The language of people coming to bow down before the ones they oppressed comes from Isaiah 60:14:

The sons of those who afflicted you  
shall come bending low to you,  
and all who despised you  
shall bow down at your feet;  
they shall call you the City of the LORD,  
the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

The people who oppressed Christians will be made low, while Christians will be exalted. This will happen when Jesus comes back to earth, at some point in the future. This is the great reversal that is promised throughout the Bible. God will bring down the powerful and proud who are opposed to Jesus, and he will raise up the poor and the humble who trust in Jesus (1 Sam. 2:1–10; Luke 1:52). Of course, those who will be exalted will have trusted in Jesus, and those who will be brought low will have rejected Jesus. The issue isn't whether someone had money or not, or whether someone was in power or not.

But this idea of the persecutors and oppressors being brought low is a powerful one. It's one that even non-Christians hope for. For example, there's a song by a singer-songwriter named Brandi Carlile, "The Joke," that talks about people who bully and oppress, and how the tables will be turned on them one day. The refrain of the song is:

Let 'em laugh while they can.  
Let 'em spin, let 'em scatter in the wind.  
I have been to the movies, I've seen how it ends,  
And the joke's on them.

That's really a hope that one day there will be justice. Of course, so often we don't see justice in this world. The bad guys may lose in the movies, but they seem to win a lot in real life. Yet God promises that there will be justice. All will come before the throne of Jesus to be judged by him. All our sins will be exposed. Jesus has all the evidence of our failure to love God and love others. He knows our every thought and desire. And the evidence shows that all of us are guilty. Jesus is true; he has a perfect moral character, so he will make the right judgment. The only way to be cleared of our guilt is for that sin to be put on someone else and punished.

That is what Jesus came to do. Though he is the true Israel, the perfect human being, he was treated as a criminal. He died on the cross for many reasons: he was hated by the religious leaders of the day, he was betrayed by one of his followers, Romans killed him to save political

face, and Satan, the devil, wanted to stop him. But ultimately Jesus died because it was God's plan. Jesus took the sins of all who will ever trust him and he put those sins on himself. He endured the penalty that we deserve for our sin, which is death and God's wrath. He endured hell on earth so that all who trust in him won't experience hell. And Jesus rose from the grave, triumphing over sin and death. All who trust in him will suffer in this life, but they will be exalted like Jesus. They will rise from the grave with bodies that can never die. By becoming a human being, living the perfect life, and dying and atoning death, Jesus opened heaven's door.

That day of exaltation is in the future, however. For now, Christians do suffer. And that's what Jesus acknowledges in verse 10. He says that because this church kept his word, specifically his word about patient endurance, he will keep them from the trial that is coming on the whole world. Jesus' word about patient endurance may be the words that he shared with his disciples, that following him is hard, and that they will experience tribulation (John 16:33). Jesus never promised us an easy road. He never promised that we wouldn't experience trials. But he promised us that he would be with us in the midst of our trials, and that even though we die, we will be raised to eternal life.

Some people think that Jesus' words here about being kept from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world mean that Christians will be removed from the earth before a so-called "great tribulation" occurs. I don't think the Bible teaches that at all. And I don't think that's what is meant here. Remember, this church that Jesus addresses was on the earth almost two thousand years ago. If they were to be kept from a trial that was going to occur thousands of years later, well, then so were non-Christians. Everyone who lived before the end of this age would be kept from that trial. But that doesn't make sense. I think it's more likely that Jesus is referring to the trials and tribulations that occur throughout this age. In their case, persecution was about to increase in the Roman Empire. And there are times of persecution in different places throughout the world. Yet Jesus is with his people.

The language of "kept from" is reminiscent of what Jesus prays for in John 17:15. On the night before Jesus died on the cross, he prayed for his followers. And among the things Jesus prayed for was this: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." Jesus asked the Father not to take Christians out of the world, but to protect them from Satan. Christians will experience pain and suffering. Remember that Jesus told the

church in Smyrna to be faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10). But even should we die for our faith, we will be safe. Even death won't shut the door on us if we're in Christ.

Jesus knew that life might be hard for this church, but he tells them to hang in there, to endure whatever trials they were experiencing. In verse 11, he tells them that he is coming soon. Now, that's relative. He wasn't coming soon from our perspective. But time is different for God. For him, a thousand years are like a day. I think what Jesus meant was, "This age isn't going to last forever. I know it's hard now, but things will change." In the meantime, Christians need to "hold fast what [they] have." In the midst of pressures from the outside world, and pressures from our own sinful desires that still wage war in our hearts, we need to hold fast to Jesus and hold fast to his word. If we do so, we will receive the crown of life, the prize given to victors.

In verse 12, Jesus says what will happen to those who hold fast. Whoever conquers by clinging to Jesus, even in the midst of persecution, will become a pillar in God's temple. They will be part of God's kingdom. They will be part of God's house. And they will be secure. That would mean a lot for these people who were persecuted. It would mean a lot for the people of Philadelphia, because that city was harmed by a large earthquake in AD 17. The city's pillars crumbled then, and the pillars of our lives may seem to crumble now, but the pillars of God's temple are secure.

Jesus also says they will have God's name written on them. That means that they will be identified as God's (Rev. 14:1; 22:4). It's like God writing "mine" on his people. They will also be associated with the new Jerusalem, the city of God that will one day come down from heaven and fill the earth (Rev. 21:1-2). And they will have Jesus' name written on them. They will forever be his people and he will forever be their God.

What does all of this mean for us? If you're a Christian, you may not be powerful, you may not be well loved in this life, and you may endure great hardships. But none of this means that God loves you any less. You are loved by God. He puts his name on you and claims you. He says, "You're mine." If you are a Christian, it is because Jesus has opened the door for you to God's kingdom and no one can shut that door. Politicians can't shut that door. The rich and powerful can't shut that door. Not even death or the devil can shut that door.

But if you're truly a Christian, you will hold fast what you have. You will hold fast to Jesus and follow him. You will hold fast to the Bible. You won't let the pressures of this world tear you away from Jesus and his word. You will patiently endure. You will be faithful. The

measure of success in the Christian life is not power. The measure of success is faithfulness, and our faith is demonstrated in our works. That doesn't mean we earn God's favor through our works. But if we have received God's favor, our lives will change. We will do the works that Jesus calls us to do.

To those who are not yet Christians, I say this: The church may not seem very impressive now. It may not seem powerful. And you may be drawn to power. The power in our culture resides in government, in large corporations like Apple and Google, in Hollywood, and in the halls of academia. But that power is limited, and the pages of history show that such power changes hands. That power doesn't last. The Roman Empire was extremely powerful. But it is no more. Those who have had great power and who have rejected Jesus will be in for a surprise. To paraphrase that song I mentioned earlier, I've been to the Bible, and I've seen how it ends, and the joke's on them.

But the joke doesn't have to be on you. If you're not a Christian now, you can enter into this kingdom of God. You can be exalted. You can have all of your sins, all your debts owed to God, wiped out. You can live forever in a perfect world. You can know your Maker and have a right relationship with him. But know this: Jesus is the only who can open that door. He is the only one with the key. If you want Jesus to open that door, you must acknowledge that you have rebelled against God. God made us to love him supremely. He made us to know him, and to live for him. But we don't want that. We want God's blessings, but we don't want God. If you acknowledge that you have sinned against God, if you acknowledge that Jesus is the Holy One, the God-man, the world's only Savior, and if you ask for him to forgive you, he will. You can be forgiven for the worst things that you have thought, said, and done. There is no sin too great for Jesus to remove from your life. I urge you to turn to Jesus, confess your sins to him, and start following him. And I would love to help you in any way I can.

An hour of trial has come upon the world, and it will continue and perhaps increase until that great day when we all stand before Jesus. Jesus promises safety to all who come to him. If he has opened the door for you, no one can shut it. But if you refuse Jesus now, and if you end your life in that condition, Jesus will shut that door, and no one will be able to open it.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”