

Revelation 3:7-13 Philadelphia

Imagine losing your home. You've lost everything in a fire or a tornado. There is nothing that can be salvaged. There is no going home.

The Christians in Philadelphia knew this feeling well. In Philadelphia's relatively short history, it was destroyed multiple times by earthquakes. Early in the 1st Century a devastating earthquake wiped out the city and for years, frequent aftershocks continued to wreak havoc on the city.

Most of the citizens of Philadelphia were forced to live outside the city. Even years later, many lived in the countryside for fear of being caught in another quake.ⁱ

When you couple their homelessness with the persecution the church faced from the Jews and government oppression, many of the believers in Philadelphia felt shut out— shut out from their homes, their city, their culture, and their careers. They didn't have the money to feed their family let alone rebuild. Instead, they are stranded outside the city gates where they lived in tents and ramshackle shelters. And yet this church didn't give up or give in. This letter is almost the complete opposite of the previous letter to Sardis. Jesus only has words of praise and encouragement. There is no rebuke.

7 Jesus introduces himself to the angel of the church with a series of descriptions. He begins by calling himself ***the holy one*** and ***the true one***. First of all, these are divine attributes of God, and Jesus applies to himself. This is claim of divinity. As the divine Son of God, Jesus sees things as they really are. His perspective isn't skewed or biased, so what he speaks to the church is truth.

You see He is holy. Holy first means separation. Jesus is above and beyond. He is something completely other. Jesus isn't just a good man, or a better man, or even the best man. He is the Son of God. Holy also means that he is pure. He is not misled by human emotions or swayed by popular opinion.

He is true. His judgments are always impartial and objective. Nothing Jesus ever says is the product of spin or fake news. Nothing he does is a reaction to the latest opinion poll. He is authentic. He is genuine. He is the real deal.

Jesus also says he is the **one who has the key of David**. When your employer gives you keys to the business, there is a measure of power and authority in that. If you have the keys, you are the gatekeeper. In chapter 1, Jesus has the keys of death and Hades. He has the power of life and death, because he died, and came back to life again. The grave no longer controls him. He controls the grave. He has the keys.

Here in chapter 3, Jesus holds the key of David? David was Israel's greatest king. God promised that a descendant of David would reign forever, and that was a prophecy of Jesus. This is a clear claim to be the Messiah. Jesus now sits on David's throne, and he holds the keys to the kingdom. He is the gatekeeper. The Jewish synagogue was trying to tell them they were shut out of the kingdom, but Jesus is the one who has the keys to the door. He **opens** the door **and no one will shut** it, not the Jews, not the emperor, not the idol worshippers, no one. On the flip side, if Jesus **shuts** the door, **no one opens** it.

8 Like all the other churches, Jesus knows this church and their situation.

I know your works Jesus says in verse 8. Jesus promises them **I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut**. They might be shut out of their synagogue. They may even be shut out of their city or their jobs, but no one can shut them out of the kingdom. Jesus has opened the door for them and nothing anyone does can shut that door on them. No one can keep you from Jesus.

Jesus knows this church deeply. He says, **I know that you have but little power**. On the surface, the Philadelphia church looks like a weak church, but Jesus sees deeper and he knows how strong they really are.

Jesus is saying, "Your city may be weak because of earthquakes, but I am going to open a door for you, that nothing will be able to close it, no matter

what shakes your church.”

Philadelphia is just scraping by on a shoestring budget. They’ve had to scrap a lot of their programs and ministries. They’re just barely surviving, and they don’t have strength to do much else. But Jesus is the one who opens the doors. Their strength is no measure of what they can accomplish.

Do you as a follower of Jesus, or do we as a church ever feel like don’t have resources or strength to do a lot. We look at budget and say, “Boy, I wish we had the money to do this or that. I wish I had those gifts. I wish I could teach like him. I wish I could sing like her. I wish I had that talent. It’s not about how strong we are, how gifted we are, what resources we have. It’s about what we will let God do for us and through us.

Jesus tells Philadelphia, ***you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*** Sometimes the best thing you can do is simply to hold on and stay true.

9 One of the groups pressuring them to deny the name of Jesus was the Jewish synagogue. As he did in the letter to Smyrna, Jesus calls them the ***synagogue of Satan.*** These are harsh words of judgment against those who were once God’s chosen people. But now Jesus says they say they are ***Jews and are not.*** The problem wasn’t that they were pretending to be Jews; they were pretending to be faithful.

Racially and religiously these people are Jews. The problem is they think it is their ethnicity and their circumcision, and their outward observance of the law that makes them God’s people. The problem is they rejected God’s promised Messiah, and on the inside they remain as sinful as ever. They are living in rebellion and disobedience against the very God they claim to serve.

Now they reject the very people, Gentiles, for whom Jesus has opened the doors to the kingdom. So, Jesus promises ***I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.*** Some see this as a reference to when Jesus comes back and we will rise with Christ, and everyone, including unbelievers, will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. Every

knee will bow and every tongue will confess. They reject Jesus as the Messiah now, but when He returns, they will have to bow their knee and confess with their mouth then that Jesus is Lord.

I agree with those, however, that see in this verse a promise of the future conversion of the Jews. The Jews may reject Jesus as their Messiah now, but a day is coming when large numbers will receive their Messiah.ⁱⁱ In this sense, their coming and bowing down is as an act of submission to the good news of Jesus. Right now, they hate the Gentiles, and believe that God does too, but one day they will recognize God's love for all people and receive it themselves. Paul is clear in Romans 11:17-32 that, for the time being, the Jews have been cut off while the Gentiles have been grafted in through faith. However, the apostle holds out hope that the Jews too can be grafted in through faith.

10 Jesus gives them another promise in verse 10. On its surface, it is a simple assurance to the faithful in Philadelphia.

Jesus promises his protection because the believers in Philadelphia **have kept my word about patient endurance**. Grammatically, this could be 'Jesus' teaching about endurance or his example of endurance. Either way, the faithful in Philadelphia have patiently endured in the face of suffering. *Patient endurance* comes from a word meaning to "remain under." They are like the fighter that has taken a beating, but remains in the ring. Despite everything that has been thrown at them, they have held on.

Because of this steadfast resolution, Jesus promises he **will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world**. There is a play on words here. Because you "keep" my word, Jesus promises "I will "keep" you." Just like last week keep means to "guard, keep watch over." Just as they carefully kept watch over his word about enduranceⁱⁱⁱ, Jesus now will keep watch over them during this coming trial.

It is impossible to say with certainty what trial Jesus is speaking of here. In the 2nd Century a time of widespread persecution would break out against the

church. Would Philadelphia be spared from this? Perhaps they would be spared a famine or another massive earthquake.

One thing we do know, this is not a promise for all Christian to be spared trials and hardships. Some have misused this verse to say such things. Trials and tribulations are a universal part of the Christian experience. Jesus promises reward and blessing for those who are persecuted on his account (Mt. 5:11-12). He assures us that we will be persecuted just as he was (Jn. 15:20). Paul writes in Acts 14:22 that “*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*” The apostle Peter urges us to “*Not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*” So this certainly is not a promise to spare the church from persecution or suffering, although we are assured nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

11 Jesus assures him that he is **coming soon**. This is not his second coming, but it likely refers to his promised protection in the hour of trial. His presence and protection will come quickly, they only need to **hold fast to what you have**. Knowing that Christ will protect and guard his church encourages us to persevere. Knowing that he vindicates his church at various times and in various ways throughout history strengthens us to continue. Knowing that he will return to fully consummate his kingdom reminds us that it is worth hanging on.

While Jesus’ coming provides positive encouragement to hold fast, there is also a danger of losing their crown. Jesus warns them to hold on **so that no one may seize your crown**. This is an image borrowed from the athletic world where athletes compete to win a crown. This is the victor’s crown. It conveys honor and prestige.

What exactly does this crown symbolize? We can go to other scriptures for answers. James 1:12 promises those who “*remain steadfast under trial...will receive the crown of life.*” The apostle Peter urges the elders of the church to be

faithful in their shepherding of God's flock, because they "*will receive the unfading crown of glory*" when Jesus returns (1 Pt. 5:4). If any of these things inform us of what is meant by the crown in Revelation 3:11, then I believe loss of eternal life is in view here.

The next question is who might take their crown? Could it be the enemies attacking the church, whether it's false teachers, idol worshippers, or the Jewish synagogue. The other choice is that Jesus himself would take their crown for not finishing the race.^{iv} Jesus is the one who bestows the crown and he would be the one to take it. If this is indeed the "crown of life" in view here, then it could not be any enemy of Christ taking it away.. Rom. 8:39 is clear that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. John 10:28 assures us no one can snatch us from his protective hand. Our crowns, in this sense, could only be taken because we give them up.^v

Ultimately, these were words of comfort meant to encourage Philadelphia. Jesus is coming, so hang in there. Don't give up. If you hold on, no one can take your crown, because I will be there to protect you.

Endurance is not automatic in the life of the believer. Perseverance is the result of a prayerful faith that holds on in the face of the fiery trials of life. There is also encouragement that we are not in this fight alone. We have the protection of our Savior. Jesus will guard and keep us.

12 - 13 As in all the letters, there is a reward for the ***one who conquers***.

Jesus promises ***I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God***. A pillar is a symbol of strength. Roman columns were an essential part of the architecture of the world of Philadelphia. The readers of this letter could remember when the pillars of their city could not stand. Earthquakes had toppled their city and had driven them from their homes.

Jesus is saying, "I will make you a pillar in my house. You may be shaken, but you will be a strong pillar that will not fall down. Jesus is talking about eternity

and the new Jerusalem that has no temple, for the whole city is a temple where God dwells with his people (21:1-27).

There's also a curious historical sidelight about this church that had but little power. This church grew to be so strong and influential that by the 4th century, it took over what had been the Roman Civic Hall. The government building became their church building. It's building that existed when the church in Philadelphia read this letter. Interestingly, all that remains of that building are the pillars, and these columns are the most impressive of all the ruins of Philadelphia. Unlike most of the other cities, there remains a community of Christians in Philadelphia (modern Alashehir) to this day.

These Christians were forced to leave their crumbling city, but as a pillar in God's temple, Jesus promises ***never shall he go out of it***. No matter what threatens us on earth, nothing will threaten the safety and security of our eternity in the city of God.

In ancient Greek and Roman architecture, it was common to put inscriptions on pillars. Jesus promises three inscriptions for these believers as pillars in the temple of God. They are three names that triple seal believers as God's own.

1. ***The name of my God*** – This marks them as God's possession.
2. ***The name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem*** – This marks them as citizens of the eternal city of God's presence. They are no longer "earth-dwellers." They are now citizens of *the city of God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven*.
3. ***My own new name*** – This is their new identity in Christ. They will not be defined by their past or by their failures, or by what's happened to them. Instead their eternity will be defined by the love and generosity of their Savior.

Like the promises made to the other churches, these future rewards apply to all believers. As a follower of Christ you have marked as his. This is who you belong to. You have been granted citizenship in city of God. This is where you belong. You are identified with Christ and you are his brother or sister. This is who you are.

ⁱ Hemer, Colin J. (2001) *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. p. 156-158

ⁱⁱ Johnson, Dennis E. (2001) *Triumph of the Lamb*. Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. p. 88

ⁱⁱⁱ Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 82

^{iv} Osborne, G. R. (2002). *Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. p. 195

^v Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 82