



Faithful Perseverance

Seven Letters to the Churches: Revelation Series #5

Revelation 3:7-13

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Over the past several months I've been preaching through the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 to the churches in Asia Minor. John calls this book "*The revelation of Jesus Christ*" because it is both from Him and ultimately about Him. It gives a unique and heightened perspective of Jesus Christ as Sovereign King over this universe Who is coming to rule, reign and judge, making all things new.

He's giving this book to His people as a helpful perspective. It allows the churches then—and us now—to step back from the temporal perspective which focuses on this life, on what can be seen and what is currently happening. Jesus is pulling them back, reminding them that there is coming a day when He's going to make all things new. He's going to return to judge His enemies, and He's going to redeem and restore His creation and His people.

In the church age in which we now live, we as God's people are faced with two primary attacks against our faith:

- The big picture Jesus is covering in these letters is first to warn against temptations that can come from within. These temptations might be individual, given our tendency to love and go after the things of this world. He steps back and says, "Don't just live for the temporal. Remember that you live in God's big story and that your life is just a piece of that. Also remember what's coming."
- Another temptation from within is that of false teaching. Some of these churches were going down paths of heresy—believing lies about Christ and sin and sanctification and other things. Jesus is warning them to hold fast to the true message of the gospel.

So the attack from inside is both individual and within the church.

- Then He also warns of external attacks—persecutions, slander and other external trials. These letters are written to build up God's people in their hope and faith,

encouraging them to continue trusting in and living for Christ in the midst of internal temptation and external persecution.

In the first letter, written to Ephesus, His main message was that doctrine and works without love is deadly. He said, “I know your works. I know all these good things you’re doing. I know you even have right doctrine. You’re standing against false teaching.” But then He says, “I have this against you—you’ve lost your first love.” So it’s not enough just to know right things about God and do a bunch of things for Him. If there’s no affection for Him, if there’s no love for Him, then it leads to death.

Then in 2:8-11 He told Smyrna, “*Be faithful unto death.*” They were facing persecution and slander. He was saying, “Hold fast. Remain faithful, even if it means until death. Stand firm.”

We looked at the next two together—Pergamum and Thyatira. In Revelation 2:12-29, He called them to turn away from false teaching which had been creeping into the churches, and some of them were tempted to believe it. Others were being tempted to ignore it, to tolerate it within the church, and were even welcoming false teachers into the church.

So His warning is twofold: individually to turn away from false teaching, and corporately to not tolerate that kind of teaching in the church. On both fronts He’s saying, “Turn away from what is false and hold fast to truth.”

Then last week we looked at Revelation 3:1-6, where He said to Sardis, “You appear to be alive, but you are dead. You have the appearance to everyone who’s looking at you of being healthy and thriving and that ministry is going well. But in reality, you’re dead. You’re just going through motions.” So His call to them was to wake up, to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to renew and revive their faith.

Now we’re going to look at Revelation 3:7-13, the letter to Philadelphia. His main call to them is, “*Hold fast what you have.*” Jesus calls us to faithfully persevere in our faith in Him and our obedience to Him. Both of these things are in this letter. He’s calling them to hang on to their faith in Him, which leads to obedience to Him.

⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹² 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. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

That last sentence is in every one of the messages to these seven churches. These letters were sent to specific historical churches with their specific needs in mind, yet in every one there is a call for everyone who’s hearing or reading this—including us—to hear what the Spirit says to all seven churches. That plural—“churches”—indicates that all of us need to listen to this. We can’t say, “That only applies to that church.” No, all of us need to hear this. If you’re trusting in Christ and following Him, then the Holy Spirit is giving you ears to hear today.

So let’s dig in to see what in this passage builds hope for us to hold fast, to faithfully persevere in our faith in Christ and our obedience to Him. First, looking at who is involved, He says, “*To the angel of the church in Philadelphia...*” (Likely it’s Eagles fans He’s writing to.) In verse eight He says something else about this church: “*I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*” The phrase, “You have kept My Word and not denied My name,” helps fill out our understanding.

Later He says, “*Hold fast what you have.*” This is what they have: they have kept God’s Word and they haven’t denied His name. They’ve kept the truth of our Savior, the truth of the gospel—trusting in Jesus alone, coming to Him by faith alone, believing that salvation is by grace alone. They’ve kept that, indicating both their faith in Who God is and what He has done. “Kept” can also be translated “obeyed,” which means they’re obeying God’s Word as well. And they haven’t denied His name. They’re not ashamed of Christ. They’re not embarrassed to be called Christians, followers of Jesus.

We also know something else about them. Jesus says, “I know your works and that you have but a little power.” We don’t know for sure what that means, but in some way they viewed themselves—and Jesus identified them—as being weak. Maybe they were small, or maybe physically weak and struggling. Maybe it was their view of themselves compared to their city,

which was thriving and following after other gods, turning away from the true Messiah. We'll see that later on as Jesus describes the synagogue of Satan.

As they look out into their world, they feel helpless and hopeless, unable to accomplish much for God. So perhaps because of that they're feeling discouraged. They're looking at the immensity of the task ahead of them, whether it's global—how to reach this world for Christ and make disciples of all nations—or even just their city, or their neighborhoods or the relationships God's in which placed them. They look at that and think, "What can we do as a church? Are we really accomplishing much? Are we doing much for God?" What we do know is this church has kept God's Word and hasn't denied His name, but they are weak.

The way Jesus is described in this passage is helpful as well. In each of these letters He describes Himself slightly differently, often pointing back to Revelation 1, where He is described in full splendor and majesty. But these descriptions come from other places in Scripture. Jesus is described as "the holy One," "the true One" and "the One Who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."

When Jesus is described as "the holy One," it points to His deity. He is the God of this universe. He is "the true One." Perhaps the church in Philadelphia is looking at this world and feeling weak. They're seeing that the world is living for all kinds of other things or they're following other gods. Yet Jesus identified Himself as "the true One."

Then later, verse seven says He's "*the one who has the key of David.*" That's pointing us back to the Old Testament reference in Isaiah 22:22. It's a symbol of the authority of Christ, that He has the keys, that in His sovereignty whatever He opens no one else can shut, and whatever He shuts no one can open. This key of David pictures His sovereign authority over the Kingdom of God.

So even before He gets to the message to His church, the way He describes Himself builds faith, encouraging us to hold fast to what we have. We should not be tempted to give up based on what we see in the world, but we should look to Christ, the holy One, the true One, the One who has full sovereign authority over the Kingdom of God. Just because of Who He is, we trust Him.

But now I want to look at six promises Jesus then gives to this church, six truths that can build their hope and confidence so they can persevere in faithfulness and obedience to Him. The first thing He says to them is "*I know your works...*" (verse eight). Then He says, "*Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.*" So His first promise is that He has set before them an open door.

There are two truths that this could be pointing to. Both of them are true without this passage, so it's not like we can't really know what Jesus meant. Both interpretations are valid and He could be meaning either one.

First, this open door could mean He's put before them an open door of ministry, of mission. This would fit well with the description of them being "of little power." They feel helpless, like they can't accomplish much for God, but He is the One Who can open that door, and He has opened the door of opportunity and ministry for them to effectively further the mission of God—through outreach, evangelism and making disciples in the world. We see this image used that way in 1 Corinthians 16:9 and in Colossians 4:3. In both passages Paul is talking about an open door of ministry opportunity. So that's possibly what Jesus is referring to here. It might be a door that's opened to call others into God's Kingdom.

And from a slightly different angle, He could be building their confidence so they themselves will persevere in their faith, in that He's opened the door of God's Kingdom to them. That image is used in Scripture as well. In Acts 14:27, the "*door of faith*" is opened to the Gentiles, so they're entering into God's Kingdom. In John 10:7, Jesus says, "*I am the door.*" It's through Jesus alone. Whoever comes through the door of Jesus will be saved.

So this would fit well with what Jesus has just said about having the key of David, assuring this church that the door was open and they would certainly come into God's Kingdom. Both of these are faith building. Both of these are hope building, calling the Philadelphian church to hold fast to what they have.

His next promise is in verse nine: "*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.*" On the first read that verse might be a little confusing. What is the synagogue of Satan? Who is going to come and bow down before God's people?

Jump back to the letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:9). To them He says, "*I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*" So a similar thing is happening to both these churches. Some were claiming to be God's people, claiming to be descendants of Abraham, claiming to be Jews, but they had rejected the Messiah.

We see this even back in the Old Testament, where God says, "Not all of Israel is Israel." Romans 9:6 goes on to talk about that as well: "Not all descendants of Abraham are true followers of God, truly redeemed people." So here Jesus is saying the same thing, that those who are claiming to be Jews, claiming to be of the synagogue of God, claiming to be followers of God,

but they've rejected Christ so they are not truly of the synagogue of God. They are of the synagogue of Satan.

This is the kind of people Jesus is likely talking about here. And if what was happening in Philadelphia was similar to what was happening in Smyrna, then these Jews who had rejected the Messiah were slandering and persecuting the people of God who were trusting in Christ as the true Messiah. So in Revelation 3:9 Jesus is saying, "Those enemies of God, those enemies of Christ and this church—they will one day bow."

Promise number one is that there is an open door into God's Kingdom, either for others or for themselves. It's really for both.

Then the second promise is that the enemies of Christ and His church will one day bow. This will be fulfilled in two different ways.

Some of the enemies of Christ in this church, in this life, will bow the knee and come to Christ in faith, which is cause for great joy. We know we were all born enemies. We were born deserving wrath, yet while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). So there are enemies of Christ right now, like Paul who was persecuting the church, who will yet bow the knee in this lifetime.

Jesus is saying some will do that. It's not that they will bow before God's people to worship them, but in the presence of God's people His enemies will bow in faith and humility and trust in the one true God. They will have faith alone in Christ alone.

But there's another way God's enemies will bow. On the day when Christ returns in judgment, every knee—even the demons—will bow and acknowledge that there is one true God. As they receive God's wrath and judgment, they will bow. That's sobering, and it reminds us to cling to our faith in Christ and obey Him. He's pointing forward, saying the enemies of Christ in this church will one day bow.

So as the church in Philadelphia is feeling helpless and weak, unable to accomplish anything—as they're looking at those in the world who seem to be on the winning side and have the good life, wondering if they too should abandon Christ for that—Jesus is reminding them that there is coming a day when those enemies will bow.

Then the third promise is right in that same sentence, but I wanted to separate it out to focus on it a little differently. When they bow before the feet of the church, Jesus says they will learn something. They will learn that He has loved them. So promise number three is that God loves His people.

David Sunday has preached before that the truth that God loves us is sometimes one of the most difficult truths for God's people to believe. We sing, "Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe."

We know that's true. But we know it's also true that all to Him we do not give. We owe Him everything, but we don't give Him everything. We look at our sin and failures, which tempts us to doubt that God loves us. So this is another hope-building promise, that God has loved us and one day all of this world will know that.

Let's keep going. Verse ten says, "*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.*" Promise number four is that God will keep us from the hour of trial. There's an open door placed before us. The enemies of Christ and His church will one day bow. God loves His people and He will keep us from the hour of trial.

When He's talking about this hour of trial, I don't think He's only referring to the specific things they were struggling with, or their church was going through, or individually they were going through. He says this hour of trial "*is coming on the whole world.*" So it's a cosmic trial or tribulation. He goes on to describe it as something that will "*try those who dwell on the earth.*"

So it's a fuller explanation of what this tribulation is for and who's going to receive this trial. If you have a Bible with cross references, look for a little note around the phrase, "*to try those who dwell on the earth.*" It may show other verses in Revelation where that phrase is used. It's used in Revelation 6:10, 8:13, 11:10, 13:8, 13:14 and 17:8.

If you look at these references, in each case John describes "those who dwell on the earth" as being those who are not trusting in Christ, those who are receiving His wrath. These people were not following the true God and are receiving His judgment. So here there's a description of a cosmic trial that's coming on the world to judge those who are not following Christ.

People who study the Bible and look forward to the end times call this the Great Tribulation. There's going to be disagreement even in this room about how long that is, when that is and whether or not we are in it now? Are we partially in it now? Is it going to intensify?

I don't want to start arguments, but that is what I believe—that this "hour of trial" is something God's people have always been in since the ascension of Christ. We're experiencing tribulation in the church age in which we live. But there's also something different that's going to be intensified as we get closer to Christ's return.

Now, what does it mean that He's going to keep us from it? I think there are two ways this can be interpreted:

- Those who believe in a pre-tribulation rapture believe God's people are going to be removed from this earth and then this greater tribulation is going to come.
- Others believe that what this actually promises is that He's going to "keep us" through the trials, tribulations and persecutions of this world.

Let's look at one other passage: Luke 21:16-18. This is a description of the way God preserves His people through tribulation. *"You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish."*

Hear that and think about what Jesus just said. Some of you will be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. Obviously, this is a picture and not literal. He's not saying, "You'll die, but I'll protect your hair." Jesus is pointing to something bigger here. He's saying, "Even if your tribulation, your trial, your persecution leads to death, it can't touch your soul."

No matter what we face in this life—whether it's persecution or catastrophes such as earthquakes, tornadoes, storms, fire—whatever we face in this life, God will preserve His people through it. It's similar to what Jesus prayed for in the High Priestly prayer in John 17:15. He said to the Father, *"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."*

So here in Revelation, Jesus is promising His people, "Though you might face very difficult times in this life, you will be kept. I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth." Any portion of a trial that is a pouring out of God's wrath is not for His people. We will be spared from the eternal wrath of God. Though they can kill our body, they cannot kill our soul.

Jesus gives a fifth promise, "I am coming soon." Some of the other churches who heard this message in their letters heard it with fear. The "coming soon" of Jesus was going to remove their candlestick or their lampstand, or it was a coming judgment. But this church hears this with great hope—He's coming soon. They're longing for Jesus to come to make all things new.

These are His promises:

- There's an open door before God's people.
- The enemies of Christ and His church will one day bow.
- God loves His people.
- He will keep us from the hour of trial. He will cause us to persevere. He will keep our souls from harm.
- He is coming soon.

Then one last promise to which He points them forward in hope is this: we will one day have a permanent, close relationship with God. Maybe I should add the word tangible. I'm somehow trying to describe how this is different from what we have now. He's speaking of when they will be in God's presence, in His Kingdom and free from sin.

Look at what He says in verse 12: *“The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.”* The symbol of God’s presence is the temple and He is going to make us pillars, firmly planted in God’s temple, in God’s presence. We will be with Him. Then even further He says, *“Never shall he go out of it.”* So there’s permanent nearness to God.

He goes on to say, *“And I will write on him the name of my God.”* So we’re going to be firmly planted in God’s presence, and then—probably again symbolically—written on us will be the name of God, identifying us as His people. We are His, for His name is on us. We are His sons and daughters, His children. We’re in God’s family.

So He’s pointing them forward. *“Lift your eyes. Look ahead, no matter what’s facing you here in this life. Look forward, because when you conquer, you will be firmly planted as a pillar in God’s temple. You’ll be in His presence, near to Him, adopted into His family and you will have His name written on you.”*

It also says, *“The name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven.”* The name of the city of Jerusalem which comes down from heaven will be written on us as well. We’re citizens of the new heavens and the new earth. Then Jesus says, *“And my own new name...”* These names are pointing to our close relational fellowship, our nearness to God.

So in all these promises Jesus is saying to His church, *“Though you feel weak and powerless, like you’re not accomplishing much, hold fast.”* Hold fast to what you have, faithfully persevere in your faith in Christ, believing that He is Who He says He is, keeping His Word through faith in Him and obedience to Him.

There’s a door our sovereign Christ opens that no one can shut. When it looks like His enemies are winning, they will not. He’s keeping us from the hour of trial. He loves us. He’s coming soon. And when He does, He will firmly plant us in His presence. We will be His people and He will be our God. We will be His sons and daughters.

So, church of Philadelphia—and now New Covenant Bible Church—lift up your eyes to see Who He is. Let that build hope and faith in Him, and let’s trust in Him.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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