

“HOLD ON TO WHAT YOU HAVE”

Revelation 3:7-13

Key Verse: 3:11

“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”

The church in Philadelphia was exemplary. Jesus had only good things to say about the church. The believers there persevered in their faithfulness. Let us think about how we can be a faithful church by hearing and accepting the words of Christ.

I. TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA (7-8)

Look at verse 7. *To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: “These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”* The ancient city of Philadelphia was located about 28 miles southeast of Sardis and 73 miles east of Smyrna. It was part of the Roman province of Lydia in western Anatolia (today’s Turkey). It was situated at an important junction of the Roman trade routes leading to Pergamum, Sardis, Tarsus and other cities. The city was founded by King Attalus II (220-138 B.C.) of Pergamum in the second century B.C. This king had a nickname “Philadelphus” which means “one who loves his brother,” because of his love for his older brother, Eumenes II. So how much did Attalus love his brother? One day, news came to Pergamum that Eumenes their king was attacked during his return trip of a visit to Rome. He was presumed to have died in the attack. Upon the bad news, Attalus became king and married his brother’s wife named Stratonice. Soon after, however, his brother returned to Pergamum, alive and well. So the two brothers ruled the kingdom together. The Romans secretly asked Attalus to betray his brother and take over the throne. But he refused, because he loved his brother. A couple of years later, Eumenes died, this time for real. So Attalus became the sole king and married his brother’s wife for the second time. This is a strange story, but one that tells of brotherly love.

The city of Philadelphia was first occupied by the Greeks who wanted to spread their language and culture to Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia. In the first century, it was called “Little Athens” because of the pagan temples and other buildings that resembled those in Athens. There was apparently a Jewish population there as well. The main product of Philadelphia was wine. There were many vineyards on its fertile soil. For that reason, the city’s chief god was Dionysus, the Greek god of wine (the Roman god of Bacchus).

Geologically, Philadelphia was on the Anatolian fault along with Sardis and other nearby cities. The city was devastated many times by strong earthquakes. The damage from the earthquake in 17 AD was so heavy that the Roman emperor Tiberius granted the city a tax exemption (in today’s terms, the city was declared a federal disaster area). The emperor also allocated funds to help rebuild the city. But people in the city lived in constant fear as the aftershocks of the massive earthquake lingered on for many years.

Many people moved out of the city because of fear. In John's time, the population of the city dwindled to 1,000. Today, it is a Turkish city called Alashehir with population of about 35,000.

We don't know for sure who established the church in Philadelphia. Tradition says that it was either Lucius, a relative of Paul, or Demetrius, a disciple of the Apostle John. Whoever it was, the church was a Christ-centered and mission-oriented church. Let us look at verses 7-8. *To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."* Except for the church in Smyrna, Jesus severely rebuked the believers in other churches in Asia Minor for their backsliding. He rebuked the church in Ephesus for forsaking their first love. He rebuked the church in Pergamum for following the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. He rebuked the church in Thyatira for tolerating Jezebel. Jesus also rebuked the church in Sardis for being a church of the zombies. But Jesus had nothing but kudos for the church in Philadelphia. He commended for their faithfulness. They kept the word of Christ. They had not denied his name. The believers were faithful to Christ. So Jesus had only encouraging words for them in the letter.

It wasn't because of their ideal human conditions that the believers in Philadelphia remained faithful to the Lord. On the contrary, they had little strength. Jesus was aware of that. They did not have money and luxury. Life was difficult. They were living in constant fear of earthquake. They had no solid ground to build their life on. They had no hope for the city. They had no real hope in this world. But by faith they found hope in God. Like many men and women of God in history, "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb 11:16). Jesus assured them that their hope would be realized. He told them that he is holy and true. He holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open (7). Jesus is the gate through which we can enter the kingdom of God. Jesus declared in John 10:9, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." Jesus is the only way to the kingdom of God (Jn 14:6). Look at verse 8 again. *"I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."* The believers in Philadelphia had little strength on their own. Still, they obeyed the word of Christ. They refused to deny the Lord's name. They refused to compromise with the world. Jesus told them that he placed before them an open door that no one could shut.

We may not live with constant fear of earthquake or tornado; we are not in California or Oklahoma. But we know that life is very fragile. Without Jesus, we are on a shaky ground. Anything can happen to us, any time. We don't know what will happen to us tomorrow. But we don't have to live in fear and anxiety. As long as we have faith in Jesus, we know one thing about our future. Whether we live here for very long or we die tomorrow, we will be with Jesus in the eternal kingdom of God. Jesus is our solid foundation. Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins. He rose from the dead on the

third day to open the door to heaven. Jesus placed before us an open door that no one can shut. May God help us to keep his word and do not deny his name to the end!

II. HOLD ON TO WHAT YOU HAVE (9-12)

What further rewards and promises did Jesus give to the Philadelphians? Look at verse 9. *“I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.”* This verse tells us that the Philadelphian believers suffered persecutions inflicted by some Jews in the city. Jesus called them “the synagogue of Satan.” Jesus called the Jews in Smyrna by the same name (2:9). They slandered Christians claiming that they were the only true Israel. Jesus said they were no descendants of Abraham, because they did not do what Abraham did (Jn 8:39). Instead, they persecuted Christians just because they believed in the Son of God. Jesus promised that time would come when these enemies would fall down at the feet of the believers and acknowledge the love of Jesus for them (9).

Look at verse 10. *“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.”* Jesus also promises that he will keep the believers from the hour of trial, a reference to the tribulation of the end times he predicted in Mark 13. We Christians suffer in this world because of our faith in Jesus. The world hates us simply because we follow Jesus. But Jesus says that he will keep us from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. Our little sufferings for the sake of Jesus’ name are nothing compared to this trial. The days of distress will be unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them (Mk 13:19-20). Let us read verse 11 together. *“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”* This is the ultimate promise. This is the ultimate hope for us. Jesus is coming soon. We don’t know exactly when. No one knows. But he is surely coming soon. So what should we do? How should live our life of faith while waiting for his coming? Like the believers in Philadelphia, we should keep Jesus’ command to endure patiently. We must hold on to what we have, that is, our faith in Christ and our mission to preach the gospel. As long as we hold on to what we have and remain faithful to the end, no one will snatch the crown from us.

What other promises did Jesus give to the faithful believers in Philadelphia and us? Look at verse 12. *“The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.”* First, Jesus will make us a pillar in the temple of his God if we endure to the end and be victorious. What does it mean to be a pillar in the temple of God? We know that pillars are important to maintain the integrity of a building. Without solid pillars, a building will collapse even with slight tremor of an earthquake. During our trip to the ancient city of Philadelphia, we saw the ruins of St. John’s church from the 6th century. The remains included six

huge columns of the church, symbolizing the importance of solid faith in times of trial. Many people in John's time left the city because of their fear of earthquake, but the believers were not shaken. The small number of believers became a good example of what it means to stand on the unshakable foundation of faith in Christ. Jesus promised to make them a pillar of temple of God. Those who are faithful to Jesus will become blessed citizens in the kingdom of God. Some people become pillars of their community by serving it sacrificially. We become a pillar of the temple of God by being faithful to the Lord!

Second, Jesus promises the believers that he will write on them the name of his God and the name of the city of his God, the New Jerusalem, and also his new name. Currently, if you wanted to send a letter to Dream, you would address the envelope, "Dream Kim Sherrill of Shippensburg, PA." But in the future, she will be known as, "Dream, a daughter of God, in the city of New Jerusalem." What does this mean? After the Soviet Union had collapsed, the name of the city Leningrad in Russia was changed to its old name St. Petersburg. The Philadelphians experienced the same. The city's name was changed to "Neocaesarea" to honor Tiberius Caesar who supported the city's rebuilding after the devastating earthquake of 17 AD. Then its name was changed to "Flavia" to honor the Roman emperor Vespasian (Titus Flavius Vespasianus) who began the Flavian dynasty in 69 AD. Later on, it was changed back to "Philadelphia." Its name was often changed according to the political wind. They had an identity crisis every time there was a regime change. But Jesus told them that he would give the eternal name of God to those who are faithful to the end. We belong to God. We are God's beloved children. No matter how terrible sins we might have committed in the past, Jesus paid for our sins with his own blood. He made the perfect sacrifice, once for all. By his grace, he has given us a new identity. We are God's children! His name is written on us! No one can change this name. Jesus says in verse 13: *"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

In today's passage, we learned that Jesus wants us to persevere to the end as the Philadelphians did. He knows we have little strength. But he has placed before us an open door that cannot be shut. He wants us to keep his words to the end. May God help us to hold on to the promises of Jesus and be victorious!