

To the Church in Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

Introduction

There is a passage in the Bible that has challenged my pride while also encouraging me when I feel completely inadequate. By the world's standards of intelligence or success, I probably shouldn't be serving as a pastor, teaching, or writing. Growing up, my parents were told that I probably wouldn't go to college because I wasn't considered smart enough. I spent much of junior high and high school in learning-disabled classes, and until my senior year I barely passed most of my courses. Yet after I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ, I began to understand something that changed everything: what ultimately matters is not what the world thinks we are capable of doing, but what God says through His Word.

During my junior year of high school, I read something in 1 Corinthians 1 that has stayed with me ever since: **"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"** (1 Cor. 1:18). Then, a few verses later Paul says something that has continued to humble and encourage me ever since:

"Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:26–29)

Those words changed the way I saw my life. I began to realize that what ultimately matters is not what the world thinks we are capable of doing, but what God chooses to do through us.

Not long after reading those words, I attended a Billy Graham crusade in Philadelphia in 1992, where I sensed God's call to ministry. By God's grace, I was eventually able to attend what is now Cairn University. It took me seven years to finish a four-year degree, but I later went to seminary and entered ministry.

So what is my point? I am who I am today because I have a Savior who opens doors no one can shut and shuts doors no one can open. That is exactly what Jesus tells the church in Philadelphia. He can use the weak. He can use the foolish. He can use people the world has written off. All He asks is that we keep His word and do not deny His name.

The city of Philadelphia was founded sometime between 197 and 138 B.C., most likely by King Eumenes II of Pergamum or his brother Attalus II. Its name means *"brotherly love,"* a title connected to the loyalty Attalus showed toward his brother, earning him the

nickname Philadelphus—“the brother-lover.” Philadelphia itself was not a large city—perhaps ten to fifteen thousand people—but it sat at an important crossroads leading into Phrygia, giving it influence beyond its size.

The city was filled with temples and altars to many gods, and the fertile volcanic soil surrounding it made vineyards central to its economy and to the worship of Dionysus. Another defining feature of Philadelphia was instability. The city sat in an earthquake-prone region, and tremors were frequent. Ancient writers describe how people often fled outside the city walls when the ground began to shake, unsure whether their homes would still be standing when the tremors stopped. It is to this small, pressured, and often unstable church that Jesus now speaks.

Trust Jesus Because He Is the Righteous Branch of David (v. 7)

Each of the seven letters begins with a statement about who Jesus is that connects to the vision of Christ in Revelation 1. Here in this letter John does the same thing—but he also reminds us why Jesus has the authority to say what He says. In case you have forgotten, let me remind you who Jesus is:

1. He is the Alpha and the Omega (1:8, 17).
2. He is the faithful witness (1:5).
3. He is the firstborn of the dead (1:5).
4. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5).
5. He is the one who loves us and freed us from our sins by His blood (1:5).
6. He is the one who made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father (1:6).
7. He is the one who is coming with the clouds (1:7).
8. He is the one who is, who was, and who is to come—the Almighty (1:8).

John then describes the glorified Christ standing among His churches:

9. He is the Almighty (1:8).
10. He is the Son of Man and the Son of God (1:13).
11. He is our great and perfect High Priest (1:13).
12. His hair is white like wool because He is all-wise and all-knowing (1:14).
13. His eyes are a flame of fire because He is all-seeing (1:14).
14. His feet are burnished bronze because He is omnipotent (1:15).
15. His voice is like the roar of waters because He is the agent of creation (1:15).
16. He holds the seven stars in His right hand because He is the head of the Church (1:16).

And then Jesus Himself speaks:

17. He is the First and the Last (1:17).
18. He is the Living One (1:18).
19. He died and is alive forevermore (1:18).
20. He holds the keys of Death and Hades (1:18).

He embodies all of these characteristics because He is the One spoken of in Jeremiah 23:5–6:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

If that is not clear enough, let me say it plainly: Jesus is Yahweh. And because He is fully God while also fully man, He is our righteousness.

Because He is God, Jesus is both the Holy One and the True One. To call Jesus the Holy One is to declare His deity. Isaiah writes, **“To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One... Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?”** (Isa. 40:25–26). The title reminds us that Jesus possesses the same holiness and divine authority as the God of Israel.

Jesus is also called the True One, meaning He shares the same nature and essence as the Father. In Revelation 6:10 the martyrs cry out to God as **“holy and true,”** the same description given here to Christ. These titles remind us that Jesus is not merely a teacher or prophet—He is God.

Because Jesus is the Holy One and the True One, He holds the key of David. That means He alone has authority over the kingdom of heaven. He alone determines who enters and who does not. The key does not belong to Muhammad, Buddha, or the founder of any other religion—it belongs to Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus said, **“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved”** (John 10:9). As Paul declares, **“There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Tim. 2:5). Because He holds the key of David, He opens what no one can shut, and shuts what no one can open.

Trust Jesus Because He Is Sovereign Over Every Door (v. 8)

It should not surprise us that Jesus knows the works of this church. What might surprise some people—especially in a culture where bigger is assumed to be better—is that the church in Philadelphia had “little power.” Yet despite their size and influence, Jesus says to them, **“Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.”**

Now pause for a moment and consider what Jesus says about this church. The believers in Philadelphia did not have a large budget. They had no stage lights, no impressive programs. All they had was Jesus and His Word. But is that not the story of the entire Bible? There was nothing impressive about Noah when God called him to build the ark. There was nothing outwardly remarkable about Abraham when God chose him to become the father of a great nation. There was nothing intimidating about David when he stood before Goliath with a sling and a few smooth stones. When the prophet Samuel went to Jesse’s house to anoint the next king of Israel,

God reminded him of something we often forget: **“For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart”** (1 Sam. 16:7).

One of the great missionary stories of church history is that of **Henry Martyn**. Martyn was a brilliant scholar at St. John’s College, Cambridge, graduating at the top of his class in mathematics and positioned for a prestigious academic career. Yet he was physically frail and had an unusual appearance. Despite this, he fell deeply in love with a woman named Lydia Grenfell, who saw past his outward appearance.

But Martyn soon became convinced that God was calling him to take the gospel to India—the one place Lydia had said she would never go. Faced with the choice between the woman he loved and the path God had placed before him, Martyn chose obedience. At twenty-four he left England for India, where he translated the New Testament into Hindustani and Persian. The hardships of that work took a toll on his health, and at thirty-one he died while traveling through Turkey.

Yet in those few short years God used Martyn in remarkable ways. His life reminds us that when Jesus opens a door, He can use a person however He chooses. The question is not whether the path will be easy, but whether we will trust Him enough to walk through the door He opens.

Henry Martyn once said, “The spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we become.”¹

Trust Jesus Because He Loves His People (v. 9)

In his commentary on Revelation, Daniel Akin said of this verse: “Our Lord has a general love for all but a particular love for His children.”² How true that is. These Christians, like those in Smyrna, faced opposition not only from the pagan world but also from certain Jews who opposed the church and the gospel. These individuals likely took pride in being truly Jewish because of their biological connection to Abraham, believing that their heritage and religious affiliation were enough to please God. Yet what they did not realize was that they were just as spiritually dead as the Roman pagans who worshiped Caesar as lord.

But there is coming a day when all will bow before Jesus—either in loving reverence or in bitter subjugation. Revelation reminds us of this reality: **“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him”** (Rev. 1:7). The apostle Paul says the same thing in Epistle to the Philippians: **“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Phil. 2:9–11).

¹ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 92.

² *Ibid*, 94.

On that day it will become painfully clear to those who rejected Christ and opposed His people who it is that is truly loved by the One who matters. All of heaven will rejoice in the truth of First Epistle of John 3:1: **“Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!”** (BSB).

The world may misunderstand the church today, but one day it will be undeniable: **those who have been redeemed by Christ are the people He loves.**

Trust Jesus Because He Will Protect You (v. 10)

Of all the verses in this passage, the second half of verse 10 has generated much debate. The first half, however, is clear: **“Because you have kept my word about patient endurance...”** Jesus had already taught that suffering and persecution would mark the Christian life. He said, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13). He also said, **“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”** (John 16:33). That is why the author of Hebrews urges believers to **“fix our eyes on Jesus... who for the joy set before Him endured the cross”** (Heb. 12:2).

The Christians in Philadelphia were known for this perseverance. They held firmly to Christ’s word and refused to deny His name. But what has generated discussion is Jesus’ promise: **“I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.”**

The “hour of trial” refers to a period of time when God will judge those who dwell on the earth. The phrase translated “that is coming” reflects a Greek expression meaning “about to come” or “destined to come,” emphasizing that the coming hour of trial is certain and approaching. I will address the nature and timing of that tribulation when we reach Revelation 6 later in this series. Some believe this promise means believers will be removed (or raptured) from the world beforehand. While I respect that view, I believe Revelation points to something different: that Christians will remain in the world during that time but will be protected by God. Besides, if the “hour of trial” was an event in the distant future, why would Jesus promise only one of the seven churches that existed in the first century in Asia that they would be exclusively protected from such an event?

Revelation shows believers being sealed and protected during the tribulation (Rev. 7), measured and accounted for by God (Rev. 11), and nourished and protected even during intense persecution (Rev. 12). Most importantly, this fits Jesus’ own prayer before the cross: **“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one”** (John 17:15).

In other words, Jesus does not promise that His people will avoid every trial. What He promises is something better: **His protection and His presence in the midst of it.**

Trust Jesus Because He Will Keep You (vv. 11–12)

Jesus encourages these believers with the promise that He is coming soon. The point is that they are to live each day with the expectation that Christ could return at any time. Jesus is not distant from His church. He knows their works (v. 8), and at the very beginning of the book of Revelation He is pictured walking among the lampstands, present with His people (1:12–13). Therefore they are to **hold fast** to what they already have—namely Jesus Himself.

The command to “**hold fast**” reminds us that the Christian life is one of perseverance. Jesus warns them to remain faithful so that no one will seize their crown. The call is not to escape hardship, nor is it a threat that a believer will lose his salvation, but to cling to Christ and His Word until the day He returns so that you do not lose your reward in heaven for faithful obedience on earth.

Verse 12 holds a remarkable promise. Notice what Jesus says He will do. He promises: “**I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God...**” and “**I will write on him the name of my God...**” and “**the name of the city of my God...**” But that is not all—Jesus says He will write **His own name** upon those who belong to Him.

The emphasis is not on what believers accomplish, but on what Jesus promises to do for those who overcome. He promises permanence—“**Never shall he go out of it.**” In a city like Philadelphia, where earthquakes often forced people to flee their homes, Jesus promises something unshakable. Those who belong to Him will stand forever in His presence, marked with the name of “**my God.**”

The message to the church in Philadelphia is simple: Trust Jesus.

Trust Him because He is the Holy and True One. Trust Him because He opens doors no one can shut. Trust Him because He loves His people, protects them in trials, and promises to keep them forever.

So what is the point? It is simple: **Jesus loves you too much to let you go.**