

DEAR CHURCH
Part Six: The Church In Philadelphia
Pastor Rick Henderson October 28-29, 2023

REVELATION 3:7-13

Grab a bible or use your phone—this is our passage today. I can't believe it, but we are almost at the end of this series. Next week is the final installment. So many of you have shared with me the great conversations and experiences you have had in your small groups as you've circled up to engage this together. Out of all the things we've covered, I hope this is something that stands out to you.

Jesus is always **LEANING IN**.

Even when Jesus had something hard or challenging to say, he did it from this disposition. John, the guy who physically wrote this down, also wrote a biography of Jesus' life. We know it as the Gospel of John. In the very first chapter, he described Jesus as being full of grace and truth. Awesome. Everything that we've read is the simultaneous expression of grace and truth. As we read today, I want you to remember that Jesus is always leaning in. His desire is to woo each and every one of us to trust him, know him, and follow him.

John wrote it down, but this is a personal letter from Jesus to a network of house churches in the city of Philadelphia.

REVELATION 3:7-13 *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. 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. 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. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

SYMBOLISM & REFERENCES:

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|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Key of David | <input type="checkbox"/> Inhabitants of the Earth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Door: Open/Shut | <input type="checkbox"/> Crown |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Synagogue of Satan | <input type="checkbox"/> Pillar |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hour of Trial | <input type="checkbox"/> New Names |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Test | <input type="checkbox"/> New Jerusalem |

Revelation is a unique writing style called apocalyptic literature. It is jam-packed with symbolism and things that feel like coded references. If we're going to understand this passage, we must understand these symbols and references.

SYMBOLISM & REFERENCES:

- Key of David = authority over all things

Saying that Jesus held the key of David, the most important king in Israel's history, communicated the highest level of reverence and his ultimate authority.

- Door: Open/Shut = controls who enters; also ministry opportunity with guaranteed success

An open door is imagery in the New Testament that almost always means guaranteed success in spreading the gospel. Could you imagine Jesus saying to our church that no matter what we face, we are guaranteed success in accomplishing the mission he's given to us? What couldn't you face if you heard that?

- Synagogue of Satan = those who conspired with the Roman government to harm believers

This is the second time this phrase has been used. For anyone who naturally feels like this is a little anti-semitic, I can understand that impression. I don't think that's correct. But I can understand that impression. Do you remember last week, the church in Sardis was dead? They weren't real Christians. In the same way that reference wasn't anti-Christian, this reference isn't anti-Jewish.

The only people group in the Roman Empire who were exempt from worshiping Caesar as a god were the Jewish people. Because the majority of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish, some of their own people turned on them. They conspired with the Roman government and told them these Jesus followers weren't really Jewish. They wanted them to lose their exemption from worshiping Caesar as god—knowing that Christians wouldn't do it and they'd end up in prison or killed. That's evil. That's what is behind this term. It's not at all about all Jewish people. It's about a few people who schemed evil.

- Hour of Trial = divinely orchestrated hardship/judgment

There is room for good-hearted, smart people to debate and disagree on the details of this. I'm not interested in that. What everyone can agree on is that this will be a time of real adversity that God is using as part of his ultimate plan. The point is to do this.

- Test = reveal or expose allegiances and character

Test is about God finding out something about us. It's always about what our true allegiance and character are, being exposed to ourselves and others. Who is this going to happen to?

- Inhabitants of the Earth = those who do not follow Jesus

Believe it or not, this is symbolic. This is about where our citizenship is. People who are not followers of Jesus, who are not citizens of heaven, are referred to this way.

- Crown = outcomes of faithfulness and ministry

This is reward language. Did you know, that in almost every instance that the Apostle Paul uses this language, he is talking about someone who came to faith in Jesus because of his influence? This isn't a payment for being a good person. A crown is a beautiful way to describe the outcomes of faithfulness and ministry. And it's all for Jesus' glory, not us.

- Pillar = honor and strength

Jesus promised to make them a pillar in the temple. That's how he described a church that had little strength. Think about that. All the ways that every culture on this planet measures significance—Jesus does not care about. He's not impressed with what we're impressed with. And too often, we're not impressed by what impresses him. To this church that was weak, but faithful, he is making them into a trophy of strength and honor.

- New Names = new identity

For everyone who trusts in Jesus, you are made new. You are given Jesus' status of righteous, and he shares all that is his with us.

- New Jerusalem = where Jesus and his people live and reign

You know what we're doing now. I'm going to put the passage back on the screen. I'll take out all of the symbolism and references and replace it with what they intended to communicate.

(Interpretation of) REVELATION 3:7-13 *To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who is the ultimate authority over all things. What he decides to do or allow, no one can stop. What he decides not to do or not allow, no one can start. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an opportunity to spread the gospel, with guaranteed success that no one can stop. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who conspire with the government to bring you harm, 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. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the severe hardship that is going to come on the whole world to reveal all those who do not trust in or follow me. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your reward for faithfulness and work for the gospel. The one who is victorious I will honor as an example of strength and a permanent member in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them a new identity as citizens in the city of God, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also share my identity and inheritance with them. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

Over this series we've read some rough letters from Jesus to these real churches. There have been some doozies. But I love this one. I'd love for Jesus to say something like this to our church. Who wouldn't want to be a part of a church like that?! It's good. It's really good. And yet, there is still a message in here that may be unexpected.

UNEXPECTED MESSAGE:

- It's better to have no church than an unloving church.
- It's better to let a church suffer than to prevent it.

- ❑ It's possible for a church to stand up for Jesus while standing against Jesus.
- ❑ It's possible for a church to wrongly value staying together over staying faithful.
- ❑ It's possible for everyone but Jesus to be convinced that a church is alive and well.
- ❑ A church may be strongest when it's weak.

Every single one of us who are convinced of our own strength and resilience, to the point that we are doggedly self-reliant—we will eventually learn just how weak we are. But those of us who have broken up with the illusion of control and our power, those who instead trust in the power of Jesus, I promise you'll learn just what a position of strength that is.

REVELATION 3:8,12 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 one who is victorious I will make a **pillar in the temple of my God.***

How many of you have been here for multiple weeks in this series? How many of you remember me saying that a better way to think of the Bible is that it's that it's a grand, unified, true story? There are patterns and themes and woven all throughout it, from beginning to end. The better you know it, the better you can see and know those things.

If you were to hang around Pastor Caleb and me for an afternoon, you'd probably lose count of the times that we quote or make a reference to two old TV shows: Seinfeld and The Office. It's all the time, and we think we are hilarious. Keep with me; this is important. Even if you think we're obnoxious, and you can talk to our wives about that. The reason that we do this is because we know those shows so well, that anytime we experience something in life, we instantly see the connection between a scene from one of those shows and what we just experienced.

I want you to know God's word that well. This is the primary way to know Jesus. And I want you to be able to connect the dots between what you experience and what you read in Scripture. And I want you to be able to connect the dots between something you read in one part of it, with something you read in a totally different part of the Bible. I'm going to put something on the screen that I want you to write down. This is going to come straight from the text, even though it isn't explicitly stated anywhere in this text. Here it is.

WHO you have is more important than **WHAT** you have.

You might be wondering—why would I come to that conclusion after reading this set of sentences? Let me show you.

REVELATION 3:8,12 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 one who is victorious I will make a **pillar in the temple of my God.***

"I know your deeds." What does that communicate? I see you. You are not looked over, and you're not overlooked. You are not unknown. You are not forgotten. **You are seen.** Let's do some Bible Trivia. Do you know who was the very first person to give God a name? Shout it out if you know it. I'll take guesses too.

It was Hagar. Hagar was a woman. Hagar was Egyptian. She wasn't an Israelite. Hagar was a slave. Think about this with me and remember that the Bible is a grand, unified, true story. God hard-wired us to learn truth through story. What might God want to communicate to us, by crafting his story in such a way that the first person in human history who gets to give God a name was a woman, from an outside culture, and she was a slave?

From God's perspective, there is no hierarchy of value among humans. Not gender. Not ethnicity. Not socio-economic status. A person who would have been at the bottom of the social and cultural ladder was the person who was given the privilege of being the first person ever to name God. And do you know what she called him? The God who sees.

That was about his knowledge and his presence. That was about him relationally leaning in. Do you know that? Have you been gripped by that? All throughout God's story with humanity, we see people who are weak and insecure, and yet they are buoyed by God seeing them and being with them, being for them.

- Hagar
- Abraham
- Gideon
- Hannah
- David

And on and on and on the list goes. And now, it's this church in Philadelphia. Jesus sees them and is with them. It doesn't matter how little strength, power, influence, privilege, or resources they had from themselves. Jesus saw them and was with them.

WHO you have is more important than **WHAT** you have.

Let's get practical and personal for a quick minute. What's going on right now in your life that causes you to feel overlooked, ignored, maybe even alone? What is going on in your life right now that makes you feel isolated?

- Maybe there are people in your world who are ignoring you or keeping it shallow with you, and that hurts.
- Maybe you feel like you're being taken for granted when you so badly want to be appreciated.
- Maybe you feel ignored, like you don't have a voice.
- Maybe you are facing a major change in life or a loss in life.

I could list 10,000 scenarios, and every single one of them would be somehow related to uncertainty, adversity, and unwanted change. It's in those moments that we are all vulnerable to feeling like we're on our own. This is for everyone in the room. If you're on the mountaintop or if you're in the valley—would you let your heart be melted by the knowledge that Jesus sees you, he is with you, and he is for you?

Let me be clear. It doesn't matter if you're devoted or a doubter. Jesus sees you and is for you. He knows you better than you know yourself. The cross is all the proof you need that he is for you. But is he with you? Is he with everyone? No, he's not with everyone. He sees you. He is for you. He is with those who trust him, who have turned to him in faith, giving their allegiance to him.

This weak and wobbly, under-resourced church in Philadelphia knew that. How did they hold up and endure in the face of hardship? They experienced the heat of persecution from the government and from the Jewish community, which many of them came from. Some of the people who are actively hurting them are people who they used to be in community with, maybe even former friends.

What was it about them that Jesus couldn't stop himself from heaping praise and encouragement on this church? Do you know? Their hearts were melted, and their spines were strengthened by the fact that Jesus was with them. Do you know what it means that Jesus sees, loves you, and is with you? This is why when we are weak, we are made strong. They were resting in and standing in the presence, power, and love of Jesus. If you don't know him. If you don't spend time with him—there's nothing I can do to explain it. You've got to know him. Do you know him like that?

- I didn't ask if you know Bible verses. Do you know him like that?
- I didn't ask if you know theology. Do you know him like that?
- I'm not asking about anything on your religious resume. Do you know Jesus like that?

This church in Philadelphia knew Jesus like that. That's the most important part of being faithful, patient, and enduring—being with Jesus. But it's only part of it. It might be the biggest part, but it's not the only piece of the pie.

REVELATION 3:8,12 *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 one who is victorious I will make a **pillar in the temple of my God.***

If you were here for the *This Is Church* series or the 1 Peter series, I'm hoping that this language is causing you to recognize a theme. There are some dots that we should connect. In the Old Testament, the temple is a literal, physical place. In the New Testament, the temple is not literal or physical. What is it, or who is it? You are. I am. Each and every one of us, who have trusted in Jesus, are like living stones; we are being constructed into a temple. Let's read again something we've read a few times this year.

EPHESIANS 2:19-22 *Consequently, **you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.***

Because we are in Jesus, he is building us up, into unity, to be the temple of God. Remember that he says we are no longer foreigners and strangers. We are fellow citizens. Because we are all in Jesus, and because of the work Jesus is doing in us—we have a special kind of power that no hardship or pain can overcome. Do you know what that power is? It's the unity of being a new people in Jesus.

We've got people here who were born and raised in Rochester. We've got people who drive in from Hayfield. We've got people from Syria, Uganda, Australia, Cambodia, and Canada. We've got people who came from the east coast and west coast. It's no surprise at all that we would all live in the same city if that city provided opportunities for education, career, and healthcare. But there is no good reason for all of us to be in this room together right now, stitched together in unity. The cultural mash-up and mosaic of languages and faces represented in this room right now is absurd—UNLESS the Holy Spirit of God is forming us into new people AND forming us into a new people.

It's the most natural thing in the world for people to retreat into enclaves of ethnic similarity, cultural similarity, and ideological similarity. That's natural. One time Jesus said, what good is it if you only love people who love you? The worst people you know do that. What was he saying? Everybody naturally loves the people who love them and are like them. That's natural.

But it's supernatural when people, who have every reason to be divided, find unity in purpose and unity in a brand-new identity that totally and completely envelops and overcomes all that came naturally. When you see that and when you experience that—you can't deny the power of that. Let me remind you.

WHO you have is more important than **WHAT** you have.

The church in Philadelphia was a thriving, resilient church—even though they had little strength because they were truly and deeply with Jesus and each other. I'm not doing my job as a pastor if I don't try and step on a few toes. Are you ready?

Is there anything right now that you are letting talk you out of being close to Jesus? Why would you let that continue? Is there anything right now that you are letting talk you out of being close with others here, in this church family? Why would you let that continue?

REVELATION 3:8,11 *See, I have placed before you an **open door that no one can shut...** I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

This means guaranteed success. It might be hard. There are things that you'll experience that may cause you to doubt that. But hold on. Don't let anyone snatch this from your fingers. It's a lock. You can't lose. You will have success. Based on that—hold on, and let's go. Will you write this down?

Perseverance isn't **PASSIVE**.

The summer before my 10th-grade year, my dad became a pastor of a tiny church, outside of a tiny town, in Southern Georgia. This is how country it was. The name of the road where the church property was, was Buttermilk Road. This is a story for another time. I was once attacked by a goat on that road. This little church was a lot like the church we read about last week. It was a dead church. Sometimes no one would show up for service at all. One Sunday, just one couple showed up. They told my dad that typically when no one shows up, we just sit in our pew for the hour. Their rationale, they were being faithful to Jesus.

They didn't sit there and pray. They just sat in silence as though that was some sort of show of faithfulness. That's not nothing, but it's not something either. Perseverance isn't passive. It's active. Tony Evans is a pastor whom I have loved since before I had a driver's license. How can you say it better than he does?

Church is not for spectators. —Tony Evans

This church in Philadelphia, which was consumed with Jesus' love for them and a deep sense of unity with each other—they were active. In all circumstances, in the ups and the downs, they were living out the mission they'd been given.

At the end of each service we end by reading 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. I want to encourage you to read the whole thing this week. If you do, you will find the playbook for what every church is supposed to do. Here it is.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-21. *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This is what they were doing while they were enduring. They leveraged all the time they had and the meager resources they had to be about the mission of being ambassadors of Jesus. I've got good news for us. The success of the gospel message doesn't depend on us. But by the kindness and grace of Jesus, it includes us.

If Jesus said to us, I guarantee you that you'll be successful in the mission I'm giving you—is there anything that could hold us back? Is there anything that you would let hold you back?

REVELATION 3:13 *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

SERIES THESIS: KNOWING the truth doesn't change anything. **SUBMITTING** to the truth changes everything.

I love to tell people that Rochester is the most unlikely member of the fraternity of globally important cities. The world comes to our town. Millions come to our town every year. Could you imagine we believed, from our souls all the way down to our toes, that Jesus wants to use us the same way he used that church?

When our hearts are melted by his love for us, when we are bound together in unity, and when we are gripped by the urgency of the mission—can you imagine that?