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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Philadelphia*

Text: Revelation 3:7-11

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I've walked through the doors of the White House TWICE and both times those doors were opened by a Redland member who worked there and both times a Bush was the president.

My first visit was in the early '90's when a Redlander named Boyd Robinson, the naval dentist who worked on the teeth of Bush #1, took my son Daniel and me on a personal tour. Daniel was just nine or ten at the time. With Boyd's influence we got a great tour. We saw the Press Room and even the oval office. We couldn't go in---Boyd just let us look through the door---but he did allow me to put one foot on the carpet. So technically I have been "in" the office of the leader of the free world.

My other visit was about ten years later when Bush #2 was in office. This time the Redlander who got us through those doors was Denise Bradley who just happened to be Laura Bush's assistant. On that visit Denise led us through some of the famous rooms---the red room and the green room and the blue room. We call it the "White" house, but inside it is very colorful.

After seeing a few rooms, Denise's phone squawked and she told us if we would like we could leave and go out on the lawn so we could watch George W. as he left the White House to board Marine One. We saw him walk across those manicured lawns stopping long enough to play with his dog for a minute and then he saluted the soldiers at the door and got on board.

After his helicopter lifted off, Denise told us to wait and watch and as we did a couple dozen guards came out of hiding carrying the biggest rifles I've ever seen. They were in trees, behind bushes---all over the place---but I never saw them. I'm thinking we all had one of those red lasers painted on our foreheads as we watched the President walk across the lawn and then step into the helicopter---in case we were to do something.

All these hidden, gun-toting guards underscore the fact that it's not easy to get through the doors of the President's home. I mean there are secret service agents everywhere guarding CLOSED doors to anyone who wants to get in, and I mean ANYONE.

As proof, this week I read of a time back in 2009 when one of the biggest and most famous men in the world—NBA star Shaquille O'Neil---tried to get through those doors. Of course, at 7-1 and 325 pounds, with his winning smile, and NBA championship rings on his fingers from years of playing for the Lakers---Shaq has what it takes to walk through pretty much any door he wants to go. Doors open for Shaquille O'Neil.

Well, Shaq was in D.C. as a guest on a sports radio show on Friday July 24th, and he put this question to the listeners: *"Check this out, I got on a nice suit, I'm in D.C. paying a visit, I jump out of a cab in front of the White House, I don't use any of my political or law enforcement connections. If I go to the gate and say, 'Hey, I'm in town, I would like to see the President,' do I get in, or do I not get in?"*

Two days later, Shaq gave it a try. He decided to see if his celebrity and President Obama's love of basketball would be enough for him to just walk in. Anyone know what happened? Well, let me put it this way. Just as Shaq blocked those who would drive past him to the hoop, the security guards at the White House gate blocked him from entry. Even Shaq couldn't get through THAT door. Later that day, he tweeted, *"The White House wouldn't let me in, whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?"*

If Shaq had only given me a call, I could have hooked him up with Boyd or Denise.

I share all this because in His letter to the sixth church of Revelation---the church in Philadelphia---Jesus talks about a door that He had opened for some special people---the believers in that church---and it was a door that no one could shut, not even the guards at the White House. Take your Bibles and turn to Revelation 3:7-11.

Revelation 3:7-11

**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.**

**8 – 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.**

**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.**

**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 upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.**

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

**12 – Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him 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 him My new name.**

**13 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

Okay, let's see if you've been listening for the past five weeks. What do we do before we get into the letter itself? We look at something that starts with a "C." RIGHT---we look at the CONTEXT. So---let's do that. Let's begin our contextual study of this sixth letter by looking at the map of these seven cities in Asia. As you can see, Philadelphia was located 28 miles southeast of Sardis and it would have been the SIXTH stop on this 1<sup>st</sup> century postal route. Let's review the route again. Where do we start? RIGHT---on the island of Patmos.

Say it with me---by memory if possible:

*"From Patmos the letters went to Ephesus, and from Ephesus to Smyrna, and from Smyrna to Pergamum, and from Pergamum to Thyatira---and from Thyatira to Sardis, and from Sardis to Philadelphia."*

Only one more stop to go! Our mailbag is getting very empty!

Now, this sixth city has a very familiar name--and it makes me wonder if you could get a cheese-steak there. All kidding aside, Philadelphia was the YOUNGEST of the seven cities. It was founded by a guy named Attalus II in 140 B.C.—less than two centuries before this letter was written---VERY young in comparison to the other cities! Now—I doubt if any of you have ever heard of Attalus II---but you have "met" his brother—a king by the name of Eumenes—the one-time king of Pergamum. Remember him? As we learned a few weeks back, he was the ruler who tried to steal the librarian from Alexandria.

Well, his big brother Attalus was also called "Philadelphos." Perhaps that was his middle name—but it is a Greek word meaning what? RIGHT – "brotherly love" or "one who loves his brother" and that is how Attalus felt about his brother Eumenes. I guess they were like Wally and the Beav because a city was named to celebrate their close relationship!

This leads me to something else we need to understand. Philadelphia wasn't an "accidental" city. I mean, it didn't just spring up haphazardly. No—it was founded for a very special purpose.

It was a PLANNED city—intentionally built where the borders of Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia met. And the reason this "border town" was set up on those specific borders was in the hope that it might be a "missionary" of Greek culture and Greek language---to the frontiers of Lydia and Phrygia. The idea was that under the influence of this city and its residents, the barbaric tribes of this region would become civilized as they adopted the Greek way of life. And the plan worked—because by 19AD the Lydians had forgotten their own language and for all intents and purposes had embraced the Greek culture.

**Remember this—from the first day its gates were open—the CITY of Philadelphia had an open DOOR of opportunity.**

Its residents had the chance to impact surrounding nations with their belief system and way of life.

Here's some more contextual information. Philadelphia was built on the edge of a plain called "*The Catakekaumene*" which means, "*The Burned Land*" and it was given this name because the area had several extinct volcanoes---volcanoes that had at one time spewed their lava all over this plain.

Of course, this had advantages and disadvantages. On the PLUS SIDE—all that volcanic ash made for very fertile soil—soil that was perfect for growing grapes—which meant wine. The fact that this soil made Philadelphia WINE COUNTRY explains why it was a center of the worship of the god of wine—Dionysius. But he wasn't the only false god worshiped there. There were so many pagan temples in Philadelphia that people called it "*Little Athens*." I mean, you could close your eyes and throw a rock in any direction and be guaranteed of hitting a pagan temple---which is one reason it was a tough place to be a follower of Jesus. In any case—the POSITIVE side of volcanic activity was fertile soil. That was the GOOD news for the residents of this planned city.

The BAD news was the fact that all those extinct volcanoes meant that Philadelphia was in an area that was prone for EARTHQUAKES. Do you remember the earthquake that flattened Sardis in 17AD? Well, it nearly destroyed Philadelphia and other cities as well---but with Philadelphia it was worse because the tremors and after-shocks went on for years. It got so bad that most of the population moved outside the city walls and would "commute" inside to go to work. They didn't spend any more time in the city than they had to because they were afraid that if an aftershock hit a wall might fall on them. I mean, these people were used to running out of the city when the trembling started.

**This is another important contextual fact for us to understand.**

Now the emperor Tiberius was just as generous with the residents of Philadelphia as he was with those of Sardis—sending them massive amounts of money to rebuild. And in gratitude the people changed the NAME of their town to "*Neocaesarea*" which means "*New Caesar*"---but that name didn't stick and eventually it reverted back to being called Philadelphia. Decades later, in gratitude to another emperor they changed the name of their town to FLAVIA. But that name didn't last either and a few years later the name was changed back to Philadelphia. My point is—this was a town with an identity crisis.

**Their name was always CHANGING—remember that as well.**

Now in this strategically-placed, earthquake-ridden, name-changing city, there was a small church—a church made up of believers who were faithful to the Great Commission. And, in spite of its small size it was indeed a GREAT church. I mean, its members had right doctrine and right living to boot. They talked the walk and walked the talk.

This is why it is the only church other than Smyrna that Jesus did not rebuke. Our Lord only had praise for this congregation! Can you imagine how the pastor of this church felt when he read those words—no condemnation—only compliments from Jesus! And hearing this letter read would have felt good to the congregants as well because they were having a hard time. They were facing persecution and physical hardship—which may be why Jesus only complimented them. I mean, no church is perfect—so I'm sure this one had its faults. But Godly criticism is always constructive. Its goal is to BUILD up—not tear down---and so maybe Jesus decided to forego any criticism because He knew it wasn't the right time---it wouldn't be received in a constructive way.

One thing that makes me think this is because in addition to His COMPLIMENTS, our Lord lovingly COMFORTS this hurting congregation. He comforts them with four promises that were obviously tailor made for their situation.

**1.) First, He says, "I will humble your ENEMIES."**

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.*"

Jesus was saying, *“I know the Jews are giving you a hard time—but hang in there—a day will dawn when some of them will see that you are following the true Messiah.”* And—you and I have seen this promise fulfilled as Jews have put their faith in Christ in our day and age. We’ve heard powerful testimonies like this through the ministry of organizations like Jews for Jesus—and I’m thinking of Larry and Debbie Dubin, whom I mentioned a couple weeks back.

Well, try and imagine how encouraging this must have been to this little church! They could cling to Jesus’ promise that their enemies would be humbled! The message of the Gospel would get through even to the Jews!

**2.) Jesus’ second word of comfort was this: “You will not go through the TRIBULATION.”**

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 upon the whole world.”*

In other words, Jesus was saying, *“I know you are having a hard time—but it is going to get worse. Not just Philadelphia—the entire world is going to suffer—but be encouraged because you won’t have to endure that time of EXTREME suffering.”*

This is a reference to the GREAT TRIBULATION—a time of trouble that Jesus says will be global in nature. Listen, the hard years you and I have lived through—years filled with 911 and giant tsunamis that kill hundreds of thousands—the sniper and pandemics and even earthquakes—a time will come when these disasters will seem like nothing—in comparison to the bad things that will happen during this truly GREAT worldwide tribulation.

Now Christians fall into three camps when it comes to understanding exactly which will come first, the rapture of the church—the day of the Lord—or this time of intense global trouble. Some think Christians will go through the tribulation and that Jesus will come after it is over to take them to Heaven. These are the POST-TRIBS. Others think Jesus will come half-way through the tribulation to take believers home. These are the MID-TRIBS. Both POST and MID-TRIBS say this text does not mean Jesus will take believers to Heaven but rather that He will protect them from the Great Tribulation.

A third group—and I am part of this group—a third group believes this text says that before the tribulation begins Jesus will rapture the church. He’ll return and take us to Heaven, so we won’t be here to face this time of world-wide trial. And—I embrace this PRE-TRIB view because in verse 10 Jesus does not say, *“I will keep you THROUGH the hour of trial”* but rather *“FROM the hour of trial.”* Another thing, in chapters one through three of Revelation the church is mentioned 19 times. But after chapter four when the Tribulation is described, the church is not mentioned. So, it would seem that believers are gone from the earth when this time of global trouble begins.

Now, this is not an essential belief in my mind—I mean our salvation doesn’t hinge on our being in the right TRIB group. Besides—it doesn’t matter if you are pre, post, or mid—this is still a marvelous promise. It’s Christ’s WORD—His PROMISE—that whenever He returns, He will protect His own because of their obedience to Him. And this would have been a precious promise to this little Philadelphian congregation.

**3.) Here’s Jesus third word of comfort. He says, “I will STRENGTHEN you.”**

Look at verse 12. *“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it.”*

Now do you remember what I said about Philadelphia being a volcanic area subject to earthquakes? Often after one of these tremors and aftershocks, all that would be left standing were these huge pillars. Even to this day when you visit the ruins of these 1<sup>st</sup> century cities the PILLARS are still there when everything else has fallen. Well, back then—and especially for the residents of Philadelphia, pillars were synonymous with strength and permanence—so, their ears would have perked up when they heard this statement. You see, Jesus was saying to them, *“A day will dawn when I’m going to give you an unshakable home—NEVER AGAIN WILL YOU LEAVE IT. In that place there will be no more running out of town—to avoid crumbling walls.”*

#### 4.) Finally, Jesus says, “I will give you a new NAME.”

Look at the last part of verse 12. *“I will write on him 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 him My new name.”*

Remember, Philadelphia had been named and re-named many times. So, Jesus says, *“I will change your name to an unchanging name, one that has and will stand forever; you will live in and be citizens of an eternal city that cannot be shaken. You’ll never have to move. You’ve never have to hide. You’ll never have to leave, board up, pack up, pick up, or rebuild again.”*

Well, can you imagine sitting in that little congregation hearing those words read to you? How wonderful it must have been for them to hear Him say, *“I know your deeds. I know what you’ve been going through! I know how hard your ministry in this town has been. But hang in there! I will protect you---and a day is dawning when everything will be made right. The pain you are enduring now is temporary but your time in Heaven is PERMANENT.”*

But Jesus doesn’t stop with compliments and comfort. He says another WONDERFUL thing to this congregation. Remember that DOOR I mentioned? Jesus says, *“I have placed before you a DOOR—that no one can shut. As HE WHO HOLDS THE KEY OF DAVID, I have set before you a DOOR—a DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY that no one can close.”*

Here’s another time where CONTEXT is important because Jesus is referring to something that happened in the city of Jerusalem centuries earlier. It’s in Isaiah 22 where God’s prophet condemns the residents of Jerusalem---because in spite of the fact that God had just delivered them from their enemies camped outside their city, they had showed Him no gratitude. Instead, they had been proud and self-sufficient trusting in their own weapons and resources. Well, after rebuking the city as a whole God turned his attention to an individual named Shebna, the chief steward of Jerusalem. You see, Shebna saw himself as indispensable. And because of his conceit and pride, he was replaced by Eliakim—who was given the MASTER KEY—not only to the city but to the palace itself. As the new chief steward, Eliakim was second only to the king. With these keys he controlled who could come and who could go—who had access to the king and who didn’t. In that sense, Eliakim was SOVEREIGN over Jerusalem and its people.

Well, with this statement Jesus was saying He was sovereign—not just over Jerusalem but over everything. Christ was claiming to be the new Eliakim---the SOVEREIGN One Who opens and closes the doors of life—and He had opened a special door of opportunity for this little church.

Three centuries before Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond---and now there had come to it another TRULY missionary opportunity, an open door for this Philadelphian church to carry the message of the love of Jesus to men who never heard it. And since it was a door that our SOVEREIGN Lord was opening—no one could close it.

Now consider this with me—WHY did God give the church at Philadelphia this opportunity? Why would God open doors for this particular church? Well, in His letter Jesus refers to three characteristics—three qualities—that I believe combine to make this a church God can use. As we look at them, I want you to think of them as the same qualities required for God to use YOU---characteristics that lead to OPEN DOORS for you and me---for Redland.

#### 1.) The first is WEAKNESS.

Look at verse 8 where Jesus says, *“I know you have LITTLE strength.”*

This was indeed a small congregation. It wasn’t a mega-church with seemingly limitless resources. No—they were weak in many ways but when it comes to God’s open doors that can be a VERY good thing. You see, to be an effective tool in God’s hands we have to realize how limited OUR strength really is so that we stay dependent on HIS unlimited strength. I mean, we don’t have to be strong or BIG or impressive or well-known to be effective for God. We just have to learn to rely on Him. That’s the kind of church—that’s the kind of Christian—that God opens doors for. As Martin Luther put it in his hymn text: *“Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.”* God uses believers and churches that

know they are weak without His indwelling strength. He empowers congregations and people that are small in man's eyes. In God's Kingdom WEAK people have an advantage that others don't. There are doors that open for them that don't for others.

This week I came across something Joni Eareckson Tada wrote after visiting with Corrie Ten Boom many years ago. Of course, Joni was and still is a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair and at the time, Corrie was very old and had been paralyzed by a stroke. She too was confined to a wheelchair.

Joni writes:

*"I relive each moment of my visit with Corrie ten Boom. I recall how our eyes met as we were fed our cucumber sandwiches. Helpless and for the most part dependent, I felt our mutual weakness. Yet I am certain neither of us had ever felt stronger. It makes me think of the Cross of Christ--a symbol of weakness and humiliation, yet at the same time, a symbol of victory and strength---for a wheelchair may confine a body that is wasting away. But no wheelchair can confine the soul---the soul that is inwardly renewed day by day. Paralyzed people can walk with the Lord. Speechless people can talk with the Almighty. Sightless people can see Jesus. Deaf people can hear the Word of God. And those like Corrie, their minds shadowy and obscure, can have the very mind of Christ."*

The lesson Joni learned that day is one that we must learn as well. In order for God to use us---if we want Him to open doors for us---we have to realize our weakness. We have to understand how absolutely dependent we are on God's indwelling power. Henry Blackaby is right when he says, *"If you feel weak, limited, or ordinary, then you are the best material through which God can work."*

And do you remember what God told Paul in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:9: ***"My grace is sufficient for you. FOR MY POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS."*** The secret of great spiritual power is to be aware of our weakness and our need for God's strength---for it is just at the moment that we confess our failings, that we are most fully conscious of both our NEED for God's help---and also of God's willingness to give us the strength we need to do His will---strength we will need if we go through those doors of opportunity---doors that lead to tasks we simply cannot do on our own.

Let me stop and ask, *"Do you know how WEAK you really are? Have you ever learned how MUCH you need God's strength?"* Here's another question, *"Have you ever experienced the jaw-dropping JOY of God empowering you to do something you'd never be able to do on your own?"*

Well, remember the example of this church—remember that we need to be WEAK to experience God's strength---the kind of strength needed to go through doors.

## **2.) Okay this church was weak—and second they were WORDy—which is a way of saying they obeyed God's written Word.**

I believe this is what Jesus is referring to in verse 8 when He says, ***"You have kept My WORD."***

The members of this WEAK church clung to God's written Word for strength and guidance. They studied it together with a passion. They could say with the Psalmist ***"Oh, how I love Your law! I meditate on it all day long. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on Your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey Your precepts. How sweet are Your Words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path"*** (Psalm 119:97ff)

The fact is—God opens doors for believers who respect the authority of Scripture---people who live according to the teachings of this Book of books—GOD'S BOOK---even though that means standing out in an ungodly world—which leads me ask, *"Are you WORDy—or WORLDly—in your approach to life?"*

Do live by God's Word?" Let me put it this way, there will be doors closed to you—if you keep this book closed!

So, this church was WEAK, and WORDY---but there is one more thing that opened doors for them.

### 3.) They Wavered not.

Look at verse 8 again where Jesus says, ***“I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My Word—AND HAVE NOT DENIED MY NAME.”***

This was a church whose members refused to give up on their faith in Jesus Christ—no matter what:

- the ridicule from the Jews,
- the peer pressure of a city filled with idol worshipers,
- the opposition or even the possible persecution they faced.

None of that could not make them waver in their belief. They WAVED not---they were faithful to the end. Nothing could make them stop STANDING up for Jesus!

You know centuries later when the Muslims flooded across Asia Minor—when every other town had fallen—Philadelphia stood strong. For centuries it was a free Greek Christian city amidst a pagan people. And it stayed this way until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I mean, with the single exception of Smyrna, the other churches of Revelation eventually ended in ruins---but Philadelphia stood holding aloft the banner of the Christian faith for twenty centuries. They wavered not.

During the 1996 Summer Olympics, the battle for the gold medal in gymnastics came down to one event: the vault. The Russians had the edge and nothing less than a near-perfect performance could win the gold for the U.S. The USA gymnast who made the first two attempts fell. So it was up to the final team USA gymnast---Kerri Strug---a young girl with her left ankle already wrapped from an earlier injury. Let’s watch a video of what happened.

#### VIDEO

Later when reporters asked Kerri why she made the second attempt in spite of her injuries she said, *“I knew if I didn’t do the vault, we weren’t going to win the gold and all the hard work the whole team had put in would be for nothing.”* Well, that kind of determination is what Jesus was talking about here in verse 11, when He said, ***“Hold on to what you have. Stand fast so that no one will take your crown. I know you have not WAVED. You have not denied My Name. Well, keep on doing that. Keep holding on!”*** He was telling us that there is no place for quitting in His kingdom. We must stand fast until He comes---and that’s what this little church was doing.

So, this congregation in Philadelphia shows us three qualities that combine to make us the kind of church—the kind of Christian—that God uses—the kind of believer God opens doors for.

Let me just ask—has God opened a door of opportunity open for you? If your response is: *“Well, no---I don’t have any opportunities. No doors have been opened for me.”* Then my question to you is *“Why not? Which ‘W’ are you lacking?”* Is it Weakness? Are you trying to do it all on your own instead of waiting for God’s power? Maybe its Worldliness. You’re letting our culture call the shots in your life. Your standards of work and marriage and parenting and spending are more reflective of the world than the WORD. Or—maybe it is just that you are Wavering instead of Wavering-Not. Listen, we can’t expect God to give us opportunities if we don’t rely on Him, His Word and His Name.

LET US PRAY