

"Philadelphia: Hold Fast"

This is the sixth of the seven letters to the churches that begin the book of Revelation. In each letter there is a particular theme or focus. Each of those themes resurface through out the rest of Revelation because these are the issues followers of Jesus have to deal with throughout history and especially during the apocalyptic traumas that are going to increase at the end of history. In this passage, **Revelation 3:7-13**, the message is about *patient endurance* it's about *holding fast* when tempted to give up.

I have been wondering this week how often in life and in history good people have been tempted to quit caring or trying. I was thinking about all this in light of Advent. Think of the song *O Holy Night*, and the line in it about the birth of Jesus that says: "*the weary world rejoices*": The birth of Jesus took place in a world that was weary, volatile, scary, and difficult. What stands out is that in spite of the weary world some people were not just getting by. They were holding on to faith. People like Mary and Joseph, and Elizabeth and Zechariah in **Luke 1** and later in **Luke 2** Simeon and Anna. In a time when there were plenty of reasons to quit caring and trying and believing these people held on. That's what Jesus tells us to do in this passage. He says we need to hold on to faith and good works and patient endurance and ultimately hold fast to him no matter what. So *how* do we do that? At the end of this message we need to ask ourselves *where* we need to hold fast, maybe we should be musing on that throughout this message but let's start with how we do that. The passage teaches us three things.

First,

I. TO HOLD FAST WE NEED TO KNOW WHO JESUS IS.

Verse 7 says, "*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.*"

Who is Jesus?

A. Jesus is the holy one, the true one.

Revelation is telling us that Jesus is God and Savior. The true Holy One. The word *true* is significant. The Christian's in the city of Philadelphia were in a situation many Christians have faced and all

Christians will face at the end of history. The society around them denied the truth that they were believing. Sometimes when you are being battered by opposition and skepticism and it starts to take its toll on you, you have to come back to this: What do I believe about Jesus?

All through this passage it is the awesome, sovereign power of Jesus that gives you strength to hold on in life. He says: *I am the one who opens and no one can shut, I have set before you an open door, I will make your enemies bow down and learn that I have loved you, I will keep you, I am coming soon, I will make you a pillar, I will write on you the name of God and the city of God and my own name.* You cannot turn the Christian life into a set of techniques for living a better life that doesn't require much faith- authentic Christianity is a life of faith. You cannot hold fast unless you believe the truth about who Jesus is.

Jesus is the holy one the true one and ...

B. Jesus has the key of David.

What does that mean? Have you ever noticed the emphasis on David in the story of Christmas? You hear it in the famous **Isaiah 9:6-7** prophecy, *The Prince of Peace will be given the throne of his father David and of his kingdom there will be no end.* When God promised, through the prophets, to send a Savior for the world, part of the promise was that the Savior would be a descendent of Israel's most famous king - David. That's why in the Christmas story in **Luke 2** the angels say: *"Today, in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior who is Christ the Lord".* ***To say Jesus has the key of David is to say he is the true Savior promised in Scripture and he controls who enters God's kingdom and who gets shut out.***

One of the things we have to learn to do in life to hold on, is to apply the big truths about Jesus to all our everyday struggles. That's what's happening here. In some of the churches in Revelation the Christians faced opposition from the pagan world and the Roman Government but in Philadelphia opposition came from the Jewish community. Many early Christians worshipped at the synagogue. They saw themselves as believing in the Jewish Scriptures and worshipping a Jewish Messiah. But the Jewish authorities began to shut the doors to them. You can relate to this if you have every felt marginalized, excluded, or shut out of something when you wanted in. It would have hurt in many ways, being part of the synagogue gave you connection in the community and protection from the Roman government. But Jesus says; *I have the key to the only door that matters - believe it.*

It's natural to ask, how do we know that he is the holy one, the true one who has the key? This statement about the key of David helps with that because it ties our faith into a larger story and into an historical record of Biblical promises and prophecies. With the mention of David Revelation reminds us of the huge underpinnings, of history and prophecy and evidence for our faith in Jesus.

This week I read the story of Nabeel Qureshi, a devout Muslim who became a committed Christian. He has written a book titled: *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. In an interview he said that growing up with Christian friends it seemed to him that most Christians he knew were Christians in name only. What finally began to change his perspectives was one friend who was serious about his faith and could defend it. His friend lived his Christian life and gave him evidence for faith in Jesus. He said: *"When I contrasted the evidence for Christianity against the evidence for Islam I knew that intellectually there was no comparison."* I haven't read the book yet. I don't know all of the evidence shared with him but this is part of the evidence for the claims of Christ. He doesn't just show up as a guru or a rabbi with a new message. He shows up in fulfillment of an interconnected series of ancient promises and prophecies that God would send a Savior who would be from the house of David. He meets the requirements fulfills the promises and prophecies and in *that* context lives a miraculous life, dies to pay for our sins and then rises from the dead. There is incredible evidence for who Jesus is. He is the holy one, the true one. He has the key.

To hold fast you need to know who Jesus is and second...

II. TO HOLD FAST YOU NEED TO KNOW WHAT JESUS VALUES.

A. Jesus values faithfulness.

Halfway through **verse 8** he says, *I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name*. Even in the Christian culture, for the most part, we don't really value or appreciate anything that seems weak or small. Jesus does. He's different like that. This church at Philadelphia was a small struggling community of imperfect and unimpressive Christians. They weren't writing popular blogs, making movies, blowing up on Youtube, or hosting conferences. They were not a movement. They were a church with little power. But he says nothing negative about them or to them because he values faithfulness. We should deeply repent of the foolishness and shallowness of a Frankenstein Christian faith that tries

to follow Jesus while worshipping bigness. Is it size or influence that Jesus singles out in Scripture? No. It is faithfulness to Him. *You have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

I talked to someone this week who commenting on something that had happened said: "I feel so small". Listen we are all incredibly small in comparison to Almighty God. You can't get big enough to impress him. However he is impressed with the widow's mite and the broken alabaster jar of perfume. Do you know those stories? Stories of little people doing small things that revealed great faithfulness to him. What matters about you is not how well you are known, or how influential you are, but how faithful.

Jesus values faithfulness and...

B. Jesus values patience.

In **verse 10** Jesus says, *you have kept my word about patient endurance.* Do you see how upside down our values are? We value power and immediate gratification - that's a problem! He stresses their opposites, faithfulness in weakness and patient endurance.

This is telling us how to hold fast by teaching us what holding fast means: *patient endurance*. In the Scriptures this is not just endurance. It's not just the resignation that says, whatever it is let it come I'll put up with it. It is the persistence to keep on doing good work in spite of disappointment, and opposition. It not just that we face antagonism and endure it but that nothing in it deters us or diverts us from following Jesus and doing what is right. It is what you see in Jesus.

One of my favorite preachers a Scottish preacher from the 1800s named Alexander Maclaren in a sermon on this passage wrote about Jesus and patient endurance. He said,

His life, to use a secular word, was the most 'heroic' ever lived. Before him was the thing to be done and between him and it were massed such battalions of antagonism and evil as never were mustered in opposition to any other saintly soul upon earth. And through all he went persistently with his 'face like a flint,' of set purpose to do the work for which he came into the world.

He goes on and then describes the patient endurance of Jesus as...

... that magnificent, unparalleled, and perfectly quiet unostentatious invincibility of will and heroism of settled resolve with which He pressed toward the mark, though the mark was a cross.
(Revelation, p. 262)

That is what Jesus embodied and that is what he values.

We need to know who Jesus is and what Jesus values. And

III. TO HOLD FAST WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT JESUS PROMISES.

There are three promises...

A. He promises a profound reversal of earthly circumstances.

That's the point of **verses 8 & 9**. Jesus says I have set before you an open door that no one can close. I will make your enemies bow down before you and learn that *I have loved you*. You may have enemies who would shut the door on you but if you have Christ as your Savior he opens the door that no one can shut and demonstrates a love that no one can deny, so hold fast.

Listen to what he said in **Luke 6:22-23** "*Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.* Jesus, the holy one, the true one, who has the key, is explaining something that can change your life. If you only live for the now and believe in the now, you will get some results in the now but you will have made a bad bargain. The now isn't all there is. The Bible is all about the promise that this great reversal is coming when the meek will inherit the earth and momentary light affliction won't be worth comparing to the eternal weight of glory. The only way to hold fast, to persevere in life, is to live *this* moment in light of *that* reversal. Life puts you in places and Jesus leads you right into situations in which you have to choose faith in *that*.

He promises the great reversal of earthly circumstances and

B. He promises his own protection in the toughest trials.

In **verse 10** He says, *I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.* There is only one other place in the Bible where this same wording is used. It is in **John 17:14-15** where Jesus is praying about his followers and he

says this: "*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*" Revelation doesn't show us Christians who are kept from the experience of the hour of trial but from the spiritual danger in the hour of trial. Whatever the hour of trial involves followers of Jesus can know that no one can snatch us out of his hands (John 10:28-29) and nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:39). We will talk more about the tribulation when we get to chapters 5 and 6. As we continue in Revelation what we are going to see is that Christ fulfills this promise by controlling what his people are exposed to, bringing them through the trials they face and preserving their faith in him through it all. (Revelation 6:9-11,7:1ff, 12:6).

The third thing is ...

C. He promises to establish us forever in the presence of God.

In **verse 12** Jesus says, *The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it.* Commentators point out that part of the history of Philadelphia was that it had suffered several serious earthquakes that left a mark on the psyche of the city. Against that background a pillar is picture of permanence. Sometimes inscriptions were written on the bases of the pillars of important structures. Jesus talks about three inscriptions. I will write on him the name of my God; my followers belong to God. And the name of the city of my God: my followers are citizens of the city of God: a completely different and eternal order of existence. And I will write on them my own new name: my followers are conspicuously mine.

Conclusion

The people to whom this was written never had to confront the final anti-Christ or that traumatic last season of history. But they had to hold fast in their day and with their issues. Like them, this call to keep the word of Christ to not deny his name, to keep his word about patient endurance and to hold fast - this all needs to be brought into where you are actually being tested now. What's your biggest test today? That's where you need to hold fast. What would make a difference in that test? What is it that if you fully believed it would make the difference? How about fully believing who Jesus is, and what he values, and what he has promised?

Throughout this passage the promises are linked up with holding fast. *Hold fast so that no one seizes your crown. The one who conquers I will make him a pillar.* We are saved by the grace of God. There is no question or lack of clarity about that when we look at the whole Bible. Jesus died and rose again to pay for our sins because we cannot save ourselves. We are saved only through faith in him. But when faith is real and grace comes into our lives it changes us and motivates us if that doesn't happen it just isn't real.

In the book of Revelation everything is presented in extremes to confront us and call us to clear choices that make all the difference. You are either in or out. You either line up with the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit or with the Beast the False Prophet and the Great Whore. If Jesus is your Savior and you worship him then he promises that he will keep you strong and bring you through to the new heavens and the new earth. But Revelation stresses your responsibility to work out your salvation. It calls you to put faith to work in practice, to demonstrate your faith by holding fast.

Here's the conclusion: **Verse 13**, *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

Amen