

The church in Philadelphia

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[0 : 00] 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.

I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie. Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.

[1 : 17] Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. I guess we all know the desire to be included, to be in the know, inside the circle.

And we probably all know the horror of being excluded from a particular group. One of C.S. Lewis' essays, the guy who wrote the Narnia series, he wrote lots of essays.

One of them is called the Inner Ring. He describes the experience and desire to be accepted within the inner ring of whatever group matters to us at that time.

He writes this, So maybe at school, it's the desire to be on some form of student leadership, or on the sports team in a club, or just be accepted by the call group.

[2 : 56] At work, perhaps the desire to be partner, or to be part of a particular social group within the office. Or when it comes to the other parents at the school gate, the desire of particular dinner party invites, or coffee invites, or play date invites.

And the pressure then comes because the desire to be in, and the threat of being thrown out, can make us say things we would not otherwise say, or to not say things we should say.

This desire can affect us at work, our politics, our relationships, and also our walk with the Lord Jesus. And the church in Philadelphia was facing this pressure of exclusion from the inner ring.

The persecution, the pressure is taking its toll on them. And yet they're holding up, but only just. Have a look at verse 8.

Jesus says to them, I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my words, and have not denied my name.

[4 : 19] Like the church in Smyrna, Jesus has nothing bad to say to this ancient church in Asia. This is a faithful church. They're patiently enduring persecution.

They've kept Jesus' word, but they've not got much power. They're low on energy, low on social status. Perhaps the thoughts have crept in.

I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. It's just too costly being a Christian here. Now, two things in all likelihood will get you thrown out of any ring is keeping Jesus' words by upholding the teaching of the Bible and not denying Jesus' name.

Publicly proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. Perhaps some of us are facing this cost at school, at university, or work, or within our wider families.

the pressure to deny Jesus' name. And if this isn't us right now, then there may come seasons of life when this is the case.

[5 : 27] And we may know people who are going through this kind of situation. Or perhaps you're here looking in on the Christian faith. And here we do see the cost of what a follower of Jesus goes through.

But also five encouragements from this passage that mean it's worth it. You can see the five encouragements on the back of your handout. Please don't be alarmed.

They're all pretty brief. We'll get home for lunch. It's fine. So what does Jesus say to this struggling but faithful church? He has five encouragements to strengthen them.

Firstly, Jesus holds the keys to God's kingdom. Jesus holds the keys to God's kingdom. As Michael alluded to earlier, in chapter one of Revelation, we get this amazing vision of Jesus' authority and his lordship.

He is described in chapter 118 of having the keys of death and Hades. And this picture of a key holder of authority is then picked up again in verse seven of our passage.

[6 : 38] 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.

This imagery is taken from Isaiah, chapter 22. chapter 22, Jesus holding the keys of David, referring to the temple, the house of David, which itself symbolized access to God, an ongoing relationship with their gods.

And Jesus is describing himself here as the one, then, who is in charge of that access to God and his kingdom. He's in charge of who gets to come into God's presence and who is shut out.

He holds the keys. Now, we use keys all the time, don't we? Maybe you have bundles of them in your bag and you have to root through them to find the right one.

Here are my keys to my flat with my trusty pen knife. I use these almost every day. These keys belong to me. It's a symbol that because I've got the keys, I decide who comes in to the flat and who gets access to my home, who gets access to me and my family and spends time with us.

[7 : 57] When I open the door, people can come in. When I shut the door, no one can come in. It's locked. Apart from my wife who has her own set of keys.

But you get the point. You get the point. Being a key holder is a sign of authority, of being in control. And so when it comes to access to God, Jesus is the only key holder.

He decides who has access to God's amazing, life-giving presence in his forever kingdom. And this access is so secure for Christians, for his people, that the door is locked open.

It's the most powerful doorstep ever. No one can shut it on them. Now, as we go on, it's clear that the church in Philadelphia are facing persecution from those claiming to be Jews.

And they were shut out from Jewish way of luck, the community. Probably shut out from the synagogue. Because they held to Jesus' word. And they did not deny his name.

[9 : 09] And so Jesus wants them to know that he is still in charge. He is the one who holds the keys ultimately to God's kingdom. Doors may be shut on them in this world.

But the door to God's presence is locked open. For us then, perhaps some of us are facing that pressure to deny Jesus' teaching or his lordship, or at least to tone it down a bit.

Tone down our actions or beliefs, either to get acceptance in or to stay accepted in a particular group. Perhaps being known as part of the Christian union at school or at work shuts some doors for us, relationally or professionally.

Perhaps we feel the cost to our friendships at the school gate. Jesus wants to encourage us that he is still in charge. The door to his presence is locked open for his people.

No one can shut the door in his people's face. Jesus holds the keys to God's kingdom. Jesus goes on a second encouragement.

[10 : 24] Jesus will vindicate his people. It's verse 9. In response to Jesus' lordship, this amazing vision in chapter 1, we're told in chapter 12 of Revelation that the devil, Satan, is furious and he makes war against God's people.

And these seven letters show that war in action of the tactics the devil uses to knock Christians off their guard, to get them to walk away from Jesus.

And for the church in Philadelphia, we see Satan at work in verse 9. Have a look down with me.

Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say they are Jews and are not but lie.

Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. It's likely here that the Jews who hadn't acknowledged Jesus as their coming Messiah are persecuting those who had.

And reading between the lines, the message from the Jews was that God doesn't love you. We're the people of God. We have the law of Moses. We have the Old Testament.

[11:40] You're fakes. You're not the real deal. But Jesus says this is the work of Satan. Do you see how it's described there? The synagogue of Satan.

The tactic he is using against this church in Philadelphia. The great pressure on them in this way. But Jesus reassures them that there will be a vindication, a clearing.

When Jesus stands before the world in glory, those slinging that mud will bow down before his people and acknowledge they were wrong and see that Jesus does indeed love them.

Now, if you're anything like me, when we're wronged, we often want vindication straight away. So on the road, if I'm driving or cycling and someone cuts me up, I want a direct and immediate apology.

How refreshing it would be if someone just rolled down their window and said, I'm sorry, I was in the wrong, yes, I cut you up, I was trying to kill you, I'm sorry. I want that direct and immediate apology.

[12:50] I can dream. But similarly, we often want that when it comes to people slandering us, God's people, because of our faith, when the accusations are thrown because we do keep to Jesus' words.

We often want that direct, immediate vindication, the direct, immediate apology. And Jesus says it is coming, perhaps not in this life, but definitely when Jesus comes, definitely in the next life.

how encouraging would that have been to this church in Philadelphia? They might have wondered whether they were on the right side. The Roman Empire looked so strong, they had little power. The Jewish community had excluded them as heretics. But Jesus promises publicly to vindicate them, to show the world that he does love them.

The nations will bow before God's people and know for certain that God loves them and that they are on the right side of history. So when we are wronged because of our Christian faith, we can remind ourselves this is a tactic of Satan, to get us to deny Jesus' name, to walk away from him.

[14:12] And although the vindication may not be immediate, it is coming. God's people will be shown to be on the right side of history. Jesus loves his people and that love will be revealed for all to see.

Jesus will vindicate his people. Third encouragement then, as we move on, Jesus will keep his people through trials. Have a look down at verse 10.

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world. to try those who dwell on the earth. This is a faithful church patiently enduring persecution and Jesus knows that.

And so he says he will keep them from the hour of trial. Jesus knows what his people are going through. This is a similar situation from the church in Smyrna.

Jesus knew what he was going through and he said to church in Smyrna in Revelation 2, you're going to be tested some more. I know you can handle it. But here he says to Philadelphia I know what you're going through.

[15:23] I will keep you through the trials. I'll keep you from them. He knows what they're going through. It's not immediately clear what this refers to.

It could be a coming crisis or the events immediately before Jesus return. But either way, Jesus' promise is the same. He will keep his people through the trials they face.

Jesus will hold on to them. For us then, there will be seasons of life when we do go through fierce trials, fierce persecution.

But we can take comfort that Jesus knows us. He knows what each one of us are going through and he holds on to his people. He knows what each of his people can handle.

And he has given us everything we need to trust him. Jesus will keep his people through trials. Fourth encouragement then to this faithful yet struggling church.

[16:29] Jesus is coming soon. Jesus is coming soon. The book of Revelation ends with this promise, I am coming soon. And Jesus encourages this church with it too.

in their situation. Have a look at verse 11. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have so that no one may seize your crown.

It's striking isn't it? But in this scale of eternity, the wait for Jesus won't be long. That is what he's saying. The wait for Jesus won't be long. Now we often do countdowns in horrible situations.

You're stuck in that lesson you hate, an awkward or boring meeting, when the kids are going crazy and you count down the minutes until bedtime. But we also do, well for me that was remembering it was a sixth former working at the checkout at Tesco.

The clock watching starts pretty early on. start your shift at 9, 9.03, you're looking at the clock and you know it's going to be a long, long day. We do countdowns in horrible, awkward, boring situations when times are hard.

[17 : 49] But we also do countdowns when we look forward to things. So you think Advent calendars at Christmas or counting down to that holiday, crossing the days off until that holiday or a wedding or to the start of school when you can get rid of the kids again.

in Jesus' return, the church of Philadelphia have a combination of the two. They can look forward to an end of their suffering, an end of their persecution, but also the amazing future of being with Jesus in glory.

And with this combination Jesus just tells them to hold fast what they have. Hold on to what you've got. Don't give it up. Don't give away the glory that is coming.

The wait won't be long. For us, we're not told when Jesus is coming back. We're not given a date that we can put in our diary, but we are told it's soon.

It's been 2,000 years, and yet this is still an encouragement we can hold on to. Jesus is coming soon. Whether it's a wait that ends in death for us, or if Jesus returns before we die, in a time scale of eternity, it's not long.

[19 : 11] The wait is not long. An end to persecution and suffering is coming, and an amazing future of blessing awaits. Hold on, is what Jesus says to this church.

Hold on, is what Jesus says to persecuted Christians now, throughout the world. And what he says to us here this morning, Jesus is coming soon.

And then lastly and climatically, this amazing promise, the fifth encouragement, Jesus guarantees an everlasting future in God's presence.

Each of these letters to the seven churches ends with a promise for the future, and this one is perhaps the most elaborate and mind-blowing. Have a look at verse 12.

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it. As we thought earlier, the temple symbolized being in God's presence, the direct access in a relationship with him.

[20 : 26] And so Jesus' promise that his people will be a pillar in the temple is a promise that people will be in God's presence forever, in the new city, the new temple, the new Jerusalem that is coming.

When someone has been somewhere a long time, we say they're part of the furniture. There may be you in your office, it may be you in this church, I don't know, you are part of the furniture.

Well here, God's people are part of the architecture. They're so secure in God's presence, they're described as a pillar. And as much as someone tries, no one can budge a pillar.

And it gets even more secure. Have a look at verse 12 again, halfway through. And I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and on my own new name.

The picture here is one of tagging, of branding, if you like. Now when we go on holiday, a tag is placed on our luggage with your name and the destination on it.

[21 : 43] The luggage belongs to you and it belongs in Spain, or wherever it is you're travelling to. and here we see the destination and name label that has been slapped, placed on all Christians.

The name of God, the name of Jesus himself, and the destination, the new Jerusalem, God's perfect new creation.

And when it comes to us as God's luggage, there's no baggage problems at Terminal 5. there's no lost luggage. God's people are guaranteed to arrive in that new creation.

What a great encouragement that would have been to Philadelphia. This struggling, persecuted church, persecuted Christians, shut out from the synagogue, shut out from ways of life, looking small in comparison to the Roman Empire, but Jesus will make them part of the new temple, in the new Jerusalem.

Their future is totally secure. Some of us may be where Philadelphia are at the moment.

[23 : 00] We feel we have little power, little strength, wonder whether you can keep going, and Jesus knows that. And so what's his command?

Verse 11, just hold on. hold on to these encouragements in those tough times. For some of us, the persecution may not be as fierce as it was in Philadelphia, but still face maybe the ongoing pressure to deny Jesus' words and his lordship.

Perhaps for the sake of being in that inner ring that you've got your eye on. yet Jesus gives us five reasons to persevere under that pressure, to persevere to keep his word, to not deny his name. He holds the keys to God's kingdom. He's in charge. He has complete authority. He will vindicate his people. They will see that he loves them. He will keep his people through the trials. He's coming soon. The wait won't be long. And he guarantees an everlasting future in God's presence. Just hold on.

[24 : 18] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus has been given the keys to your kingdom. He has all authority on heaven and on earth.

May we be reminded of that this week. Pray that we would hold on to him and his gospel. in times of trial. In Jesus' name.

Amen.