

The church at Philadelphia * Revelation 3:7-13
February 11, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The letter to the church at Philadelphia is all about doors.

Specifically, it's about doors slammed shut and a door that can never be closed.

It's about holding on to Jesus with all of our might, even when our faith makes us a target for ridicule.

Join me in Revelation 3 and I'll show you what I mean. Revelation 3:7-13.

Now to understand what's going on in this letter, I think we actually need to start in verse 9 - ⁹I 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 (Rev 3:9 NIV).

Have you ever come in on the end of a conversation and think 'what on earth were they just talking about?' That's what going on here. There's a major backstory here that we need to know in order to understand what's going on.

So think back to the first century, 65 AD or so, to Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. It's not just the Americans who call it that – 'brotherly love' is literally what 'Phila-delphos' means – love for your brother – and it was named that after an ancient king called his brother that. The brother had twice been given the opportunity to usurp the king and refused and so in response, the king called his brother 'love for brother' and named this city after him.ⁱ

And in the 'city of brotherly love,' there's a group of Jewish people living in the city. Within Philadelphia though, they were a minority population. Philadelphia was a major centre of Greek culture and it was often called 'Little Athens'ⁱⁱ but within their little Jewish community, they were secure. They read the Old Testament together, they worship the LORD YHWH together; they are a tightknit religious community.

One day though, a Christian missionary shows up in town and begins proclaiming this 'Good News' about Jesus. Now, normally, you probably wouldn't pay much attention to him (there were always nut-job religious fanatics on the street corner) but this guy is different. He's quoting the Old Testament that you know like the back of your hand. He's showing how this Jesus guy checks off all the boxes as the Messiah that God had promised to your Jewish ancestors. And he's telling you with great conviction that this Jesus died and rose again to make you a beloved child of God.

You go to talk with the missionary and something stirs in you to believe in Jesus, to trust that He is indeed the Saviour that God has promised and you are filled with joy, knowing that this Jesus came to earth and died and rose again for you!

And so you go back to your synagogue to share the news with your closest friends and family... and you're met with stony silence. The elders look at you with thinly veiled disgust and the old ladies shake their heads and 'tsk-tsk-tsk over these fancy new ideas.

But as you're leaving that day, a handful of people come to you to hear more, and you go together to the missionary to learn more about Jesus and to grow in relationship with Him.

That goes on for a little while, you go to synagogue and then sneak off to what is quickly becoming your church.

Until one day, you arrive at synagogue and there's an elder at the door saying 'You're not welcome here. You can't come in.' The old ladies and the elders crowd in behind him saying the same thing: 'We don't want you here. Get out.' And they slam the door in your face. So much for the 'city of brotherly love.'

Imagine how heartbreaking that would be; how disorienting and discouraging it would be. These aren't strangers who are rejecting you; they are your friends and family and community with whom you grew up. It would be like arriving at the door at Langford here and having Kent Campbell and Janet Vansickle meet you at the door to say 'No, you're not welcome here. Get lost.'

Can you imagine how unsettling that would be? Your community has kicked you out and now you and your little church are alone in the world. As Jews, you're already a minority people – now you're ostracized members of a minority people. AND it just so happens that minority people who just kicked you out say that they are the true Jewish people who speak with the authority of God.

And they slammed the door in your face. That would be an earthshattering rejection.

What would you do in that situation? Hold on to Jesus? Or turn your back on Him and beg your way back into the community?

That was the question facing the church in Philadelphia when the letter from Jesus arrived. And I think that Jesus knew just what to write to a people who had had the door slammed in their face.

He wrote:

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.

Jesus knows just what to write to His faithful people. These people have been hurt by a religious community, and so He says 'I am the One who is holy and true.' These people have been kicked out of their Jewish community, so He says 'I have the key of David, ie., authority over all things Jewish' (David is the archetypal great king of Israel). And these people have had the door slammed shut in their face, and so He says 'I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.' And you know where that door leads? Into the Kingdom of God, in to the very presence of God. 'You may face rejection now,' He says, 'but in Me, you are eternally accepted.'

And He goes on in verse 8:

'I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.'

When the going got tough, these faithful people held tighter. They could have backtracked and given up on Jesus; they could have gone grovelling back to their community, but they didn't. No one on earth would have blamed them. They were a minority group of a minority group with no status or authority of their own; they had little strength of their own. But they considered the question – 'do we hold on to

Jesus or renounce His name?' – and they chose the first. They trusted that what they had in Christ was not worth giving up and it WAS worth giving up everything else for.

And Jesus knows that they have made that decision – and Jesus promises vindicate them in it. That's what verse 9 is all about:

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.ⁱⁱⁱ

Back in the 80's, there was this movie with a wrestler where he would put on these glasses and he could see aliens who were hiding in his midst – you couldn't see them without the glasses – I've never actually seen the movie – but that's what's happening here.

Jesus says 'try these on and see what's really happening.'

Because to the little Christian church in Philadelphia, it sure looks as though the faithful people of God (the Jewish people) have just kicked them out and told them to get lost.

Put on the glasses though, and you realize that these Jewish people are NOT the faithful people of God like they claim^{iv} and in fact, their actions are motivated by Satan from Jesus' point of view. In this verse, Jesus essentially says 'Those people who claimed to be the faithful people of God but rejected you? They don't speak for me. And I will show them that I have always loved you.'

Can you imagine what an encouragement that must have been to the Christians living in Philadelphia? The religious authorities had slammed the door in their face, but the highest religious authority, Jesus Himself, threw the door wide open and said 'come into the Kingdom; I've always loved you.'

And in fact, Jesus says, the worst that they could do to you is nothing compared to what's coming. Verse 10:

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.

'You may be suffering now but it's nothing compared to what's coming and I will hold you fast when it comes.' And then verse 11:

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

Jesus died and rose again to give them that crown, that eternal victory; 'Hold on tight' He says 'strengthen those weak knees and throw off the sins that hinder and entangle and run the race with perseverance.'

And then Jesus makes a promise that is really fitting, both geographically and spiritually.

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.

Geographically, Philadelphia was especially prone to earthquakes. Some fifty years before, a 'once in a generation' earthquake hit and Philadelphia was torn apart.^v Buildings were cracked, streets were torn up. And every time another earthquake began, everybody had to flee the city lest they get caught in another big one.

Jesus says 'Hold fast to me and I will make you into a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.'

Jesus is not going to make us into immovable pillars but He is going to make us stable and secure. 'You'll never have to leave again. No more fleeing for your life. In me,' Jesus says 'you are safe.'

And not only that, there's spiritual meaning here too.

Think about it. From the point of view of the Christians in Philadelphia, they have been kicked out of the house of God, door slammed in their face. For their whole lives, their religious community was 'where God was' and now they were banned from it.

But Jesus says 'that's not where God lives. God is in His temple and because you have remained faithful to me, I will make you a permanent part of His eternal home. Like a pillar, you will always be in the presence of God.'

And then with the 'name' thing, Jesus shifts metaphors and says 'I will write my name on you.' Why do you write your name on things? To show that they belong to you. That's the whole driving force of the Toy Story movies – Woody has Andy's name on his foot – he belongs to him. I have Tupperware with my grandma's name in her handwriting on it – it belonged to her. Jesus says 'I have always loved you; you belong to Me.'

And then He says – 'Pay attention!' 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev 3:7-13 NIV).

Quite the letter, isn't it? But what do we do with it? How do we live in light of all this?

Let me give you this to take home:

Jesus has opened a door that can never be shut so hold fast to Him.

How did He do that? How did He open that door? Verse 7 – He holds the key of David – He holds the keys to the Kingdom of God. That gives Him the power to sovereignly open the way into the Kingdom of God, into the very presence of God and no one can shut what He has permanently opened.

And you know what? Not only did He open the door, He IS the door, the way into the presence of God. On a hunch, I went over and looked in John 10:9 where Jesus says: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved..."

The NIV translates that word 'gate' but it's technically door. It's exactly the same word here. Jesus says 'When I died to pay for your sin and rose again, I became the doorway for you, so that you can enter into the presence of God, and no one can shut that door. Believe in Me, hold on to Me, and you will be welcomed into the presence of God forever.'

‘Even if people on earth slam the door in your face; if they reject you or look down on you or belittle you because of Me, hold on because I have opened the door to the Kingdom of God that can never be closed.’

Now, how do we apply this in our context? It’s not like Kent Campbell is showing up at the door to kick us out. It’s relatively easy for us to be Christians in this world.

And yet, we can face ‘micro-aggressions’ as believers. I remember having a boss who made fun of me for being a Christian and tried to convince me that it wasn’t worth believing. I know that some of you are facing pressure because you’re shining a light in your workplace and the world doesn’t like it. I know that when you go off to high school or university you may run into people who look down on you for following Jesus.

But listen, Jesus will always love you. Jesus HAS always loved you. He has written your name upon you. And He has opened the door for you, that by believing in Him and walking with Him, you will have a permanent place in the Kingdom of God. If the world slams the door in your face, don’t give up; don’t give it. Hold fast to Jesus, because He’s opened the door that can never be shut. Let’s pray.

ⁱ Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT), 184.

ⁱⁱ Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (NCBC), 106.

ⁱⁱⁱ We’re used to thinking about Jewishness in ethnic terms, but Jesus is talking here in spiritual terms. And in Romans 2:28-29, Paul says that being born Jewish does not make you Jewish in a spiritual sense; you need to receive the Spirit for that. It’s probably easiest for us if we read ‘faithful people of God’ into that word ‘Jews’ in verse – ‘I will make those who claim to be the faithful people of God but are not, I will make them come and fall at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.’

^{iv}28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God (Rom 2:28-29 NIV).

^v Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 156.