

All Things New: Hold Fast! Part 2
By Jason Huff
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Judges 6:11-16; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9; Revelation 3:7-13

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 3:7-13. May God add His blessings to the reading of His awesome, powerful, and infallible Word. “[Jesus says,] “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 upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Several years ago, we went to see a show by The Power Team at a local church. This ministry has actually been around for nearly 50 years, and it features athletes doing all sorts of crazy feats of strength – running through plates of ice, breaking baseball bats, breaking stacks of twenty bricks that are on fire, ripping apart phone books, you name it. And their presentation comes together around sharing the gospel with kids who’ve been impressed by all of this. What’s funny about all of this is that these guys look more like Goliath than they do David. They’ve got the big Schwarzenegger arms, the Stallone kind of swagger. It’s one thing to say that God is your strength, but it’s another when you’ve got arm muscles bigger than my head.

Strength and power make the world go round. Our current political cycle shows that many people will say pretty much anything to get power and maintain it. There are some who want to use their power to make things right, but many want power because it gives them a kind of authority. Abuse of power is common. We all have heard bits of the story of Samson, a man God appointed a judge over Israel during difficult times. God granted him incredible strength. And yet the story tells us that he didn’t use that gift terribly wisely. He didn’t take his strength very seriously until he lost it by telling his live-in girlfriend the secret behind his God-given power. We let strength and power go to our heads.

Today’s passage talks about the lack of power and how it can affect us. Yet Jesus’ letter to the church in Philadelphia commends them; it’s one of only two of the letters that doesn’t point out a weakness or flaw in the church. They have little strength, little power. Yet they are truly mighty in the Lord. We’re going to look at their situation and how it might apply to CrossWay and our daily walk with God.

So Philadelphia was a place that knew what it was to lack strength. In 17 AD, Philadelphia was struck by a massive earthquake. We have seen the damage natural disasters can do in places like the Deep South and Puerto Rico. But back in that era, without any modern machinery or hundreds of charities dedicated to cleanup, that kind of devastation took decades to rebuild. Caesar showed pity on the city and helped with a great deal of funding, enough so that the citizens designated Philadelphia an “imperial city” and even changed the city’s name briefly to honor the emperor. By the time of Revelation, the city was back on its feet, but they hadn’t forgotten their history. Some of the survivors of the earthquake could have been around to hear this letter to the church. So there’s no irony lost that the city that had struggled to rebuild for a generation now had a church in a struggle to survive.

When Jesus addresses the angel of the church, he calls himself “him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David.” When Jesus calls Himself holy and true, He is assigning Himself divinity. This repeats the ideas that got Him in so much trouble with the religious leaders during His earthly life. The only one who is truly holy through and through is God. We are made holy through Jesus, we are claimed for God, we are called by God, but we are not holy in and of ourselves. God is. Jesus is true, as He called Himself before – “the way, the truth, and the life.” Those attributes mean that Jesus is God. We don’t fully understand the Trinity, but we do recognize that the Scripture teaches it.

What does it mean that Jesus holds the key of David? The idea of the key of David only appears one other place in Scripture. It’s given to a man named Eliakim during the reign of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was one of the best kings of Judah, and Eliakim was one of Hezekiah’s advisors. God bestowed upon Eliakim the honor of carrying the key of David, which meant that he held all the authority and power of the king himself. He points the way to Jesus. Jesus holds the key of David as the One granted power and authority by the Father to grant salvation.

That’s what this door metaphor is about. Jesus says, “What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” That’s what this congregation in Philadelphia needs to hear. Jesus has opened the door of salvation to them, and no one can shut it. In spite of their lack of strength and power, the door to salvation is theirs to walk through, and no one can take it away.

The church needed to hear this because they were under attack. According to my research, the synagogue in Philadelphia was well-funded and powerful. Unlike many other cities, the Jewish authorities in Philadelphia had the resources to go after the Christians. Based on what Jesus says, they are claiming the same thing the Pharisees said during Jesus’ lifetime – they alone are the true people of God because they are the physical descendants of Abraham. They were trying to wear the believers in the city down. Yet as Jesus says, “You have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” Despite the attacks, despite those who wanted them to turn away from Christ, they stayed loyal. They didn’t allow the Jewish religious authorities to sway their beliefs. They stood firm in the faith.

Jesus makes them a couple interesting promises. First, those of the synagogue of Satan – those Jews who have condemned the Christians and denied that Jesus is the Christ, who are denying their birthright by dismissing the Messiah – they will be turned around. It sounds like they may be converted yet! The open door is not only a door for the church, it is an open door for all who would come to Jesus. Those who are Jews in Philadelphia may or not come to Jesus, but at the end of the day, at the end of all things, they will be forced to acknowledge that Jesus *does* love His church in Philadelphia and that Jesus *is* the promised One who came to save His people.

That's something for us to remember today. *Hold fast to faith in the midst of a godless culture – it will not last forever.* Some days it feels like faith is hard to hold onto as it is, and then you have friends and family who attack your faith – or sometimes, it's simply so clear that they don't have it and don't want it that it's disheartening. We hear about the Millennials abandoning church and more and more polls showing the rise of the “nones” – the people who claim no particular faith background, even if they aren't atheist or agnostic.

Yet despite what we've heard, the change isn't as bad as we might think. The media reports the decline of Christianity in the US, but a recent survey found this: 12% of the US population has stopped identifying as Christian since 2007, but regular church attendance has dropped only 4%. Our attendance levels are the same as they were in the 1930s and 1940s.

The truth is, we had a boom after the shock of World War 2, and we had another boom after the shock of 9/11. When folks are scared, they find religion, but they don't necessarily find Jesus. The folks the American church are losing are primarily those who weren't convinced and weren't coming, but still held onto the name. So the reality is, social media and the way it makes us feel anonymous has led to a small minority growing very vocal about their dismissal of anything to do with God. But the truly faithful are staying faithful.

Eventually, every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Some will do it out of joy and awe and wonder; others will do it despite their hatred of that truth. Jesus promises the church of Philadelphia that they will see the day, someday, when their enemies come to acknowledge the truth. Hopefully, by that day, some will have changed their hearts and become friends. But our call is to hold tight.

The second thing Jesus promises the church is this: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently,” Jesus says, “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.” Now this is a hard saying to interpret, because in general Jesus promises that we will go through trials and that He will be with us through them, but He will not necessarily remove us from them – they are meant to train and discipline us.

What makes the most sense here is that the church in Philadelphia will remain true. In many places, when false teachings or hardships and persecutions come, the church is decimated by people who leave out of fear or a desire for the promises of this world. Jesus is going to keep those in church faithful. They've already endured patiently, so Jesus assures them that the trials to come will not break the fellowship. They will make it.

Jesus gives them one command. He is coming soon, so “hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” The imagery of the crown of life is throughout the New Testament; it’s the image that Jesus gives each of us who believes and stays true the crown symbolizing our righteousness in Him and our place in His Kingdom. What’s funny here is that they’re told to hold on so no one will take their crowns. Because of their endurance, the church in Philadelphia has already been awarded their crowns! Jesus’ only warning is that someone try to take something that’s already theirs. Their salvation is already assured; just watch out for those who might want to take it from you.

I want to focus on the “hold on to what you have language” in light of the weakness and lack of strength of the Philadelphians. Here’s what I see: *Don’t worry about the strength you don’t have. Go in the strength you do have.* Over and over again, we see God using weak, gutless, utterly ordinary people in extraordinary ways. He does this intentionally so that His power and glory shine through.

We heard this morning about Gideon. The angel called him “mighty warrior.” This is a guy so scared of the Midianites that he’s threshing wheat in the winepress trying to keep them from knowing about it. Not only is it really hard to thresh in an enclosed space, Gideon is doing the threshing there because he’s a coward. He makes God prove Himself twice before he believes the message God has sent to him. But God says to Gideon, “Go in the strength you have. Am I not sending you?”

Paul, great mind, has these incredible visions and revelations about God, yet he has a thorn in the flesh that torments him. Probably his eyesight; we know it was bad; it could have been something else. But God told him that it’s OK. God’s power shows through Paul’s weakness. God could have taken it away, could have strengthened his body, and yet God didn’t because then God’s power shines through Paul, not in spite of Paul.

God knew the Philadelphians were weak. He didn’t say, “Go out and disciple all nations in my name.” He didn’t say, “Grow your church to a thousand people.” He said, “Hold on to what you’ve got – your faith and salvation in me.” Go in the strength you have.

This may be one of the most important things we get out of Revelation. Because we have a tendency, like most of the people the Scriptures tell us about, to disqualify ourselves from service because of our weakness, our lack of strengths. Moses tried to get out of leading the Israelites, claiming he had a speech impediment. Gideon tried to get out of leading Israel claiming God had abandoned His people. Peter says, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Yet Jesus chose him to be one of His closest friends and to lead His church in Jerusalem.

What do we excuse out of weakness? It’s easy to get hung up on the fact that we’ve got 30 people at CrossWay – no awesome band, no awesome coffee (like we mentioned last week)! But God works in weakness. Ask others to come anyway and let God provide the strength. Invite in the strength you have. You may not have the job or the retirement savings to give a \$1,000 to the church a month. Give \$10; give in the strength you have. You may not have a day to devote to service; give an hour; volunteer in the strength you have. You may be embarrassed because you only have one skill to offer; offer that skill; work in the strength you have.

When it comes to our judgment someday, when it comes to whether we'll be commended or rebuked before the throne – not saved, we aren't talking God's precious gift, but the weighing of what we've done – we will be judged on what we knew, what we had, and what we did.

In His parable of the talents, which were an ancient unit of money, the master of the household is thrilled when the first servant who was given five talents to manage made five more talents with them. He's also thrilled when the second servant who was given two talents to manage made two more talents with them. He doesn't say, "Why didn't you make 5 talents with the money I gave you?" He only expects something reasonable given what the servant was given to work with.

The only one the master condemns is the one who does absolutely nothing with the money he was given – no investments, not even a bank's interest, he just buried it in the ground. So do use whatever God's given you wisely. But do not worry about all the things you can't do. Go in the strength you have, and God will reward you.

And Jesus tells us the rewards He has for those who overcome the world. "I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it." Those who overcome are the metaphorical pillars of the temple of God. Remember that Scripture says that Christians are a temple of the Holy Spirit now. We are becoming the structure of God's own temple, where he resides. We won't leave it means that God will be with us for all eternity. God is present in His sanctuary; if we are its pillars, we will always be there in the place designed for us, enjoying His company. Once we reach God's Kingdom, we will never again be lonely for God's presence.

Final reward: "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." Today's world is full of tattoos, right? Go to the beach and you'll see people covered in them. Some of you here have a couple. But I'm not getting any tattoos yet. I'm waiting for mine.

Jesus is going to write on me, and on you, on every believer, God's name and His city's name and Jesus' name as the conquering hero of the Kingdom. That tattoo is going to mark us forever as His – belonging to Him, loved by Him, cherished by Him, belonging to the city of God, having a home there, marked as a brother or sister of Jesus, redeemed by His blood, lookin' down everyday seeing His name above every name written on me. Now that's some ink!

I don't know about you, but when I hear these promises each week, I get excited, because I know what's coming. When we get into the weird stuff in Revelation that's hard to understand, that might seem frightening about the opposition God's people are going to face, I know that these promises are going to be welcome reminders.

And yes, we are weak. We aren't the richest, the biggest, the showiest. But God hasn't made His promises to only those who have strength and power. He makes promises to those who hold on, who remain true, who go out in His name in the strength they have. May we go this week, determined that in whatever strength God gives us, we will move forward in faith. And we know the blessings that will be ours are worth the struggle ahead.