

When the promise keeper draws near, everything changes

Revelation 3:7-13

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“I promise . . . ” When you hear these words whose voice comes to mind? Maybe your spouse. Maybe your boss. Maybe a friend. Maybe your child. Did you believe them? When you hear the words “I promise” in our culture today, do you generally believe it or not?

In recent decades we can see the progression. At first one’s word was good enough. Then one’s word and a handshake was required. When that was not good enough, you had to swear on the Bible, give a deposit, an aval, or even sign a legally binding contract. And even those are doubtful these days, with all of the fine print and disclaimers. As a child I remember many children guaranteed their promise by saying, “I promise . . . Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” I never heard of a kid actually doing that when they broke a promise, but they were just trying to convince the other child how serious they were about their promise.

The words “I promise” will affect you differently depending on who says them. Is it a person who has the ability to keep their promises? Is it a person who has history of keeping their promises? Is it a person who cares for your good? Is it a person who knows what you really need?

We are now going to look at the story of a small church who really needed help and a Savior who came to promise them exactly what they needed.

The city of Philadelphia was a city in Asia Minor. It was 48 kilometers southeast of Sardis. It had been founded by Attalus, the king of Pergamum. King Attalus’ love for his brother, Eumenes, was so well known that the name of this city was modeled after the word Philadelphos, which meant “one who loves his brother”.

The city was on the imperial road and the large trade route that had separated Greece to the west and Asia to the east. It was located on the border of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia, and had at one time been given the task of ushering Greek culture and language deeper and deeper into Asia. It had worked. By this time in history the Greek language and Greek culture had become dominant in the

area. Now these Christians had a similar task, to take the good news of Jesus Christ deep into a pagan culture that knew no light.

Philadelphia was known for its rich soil of volcanic ash. It was a center for growing grapes and known for its wines. However, the same terrain that produced the volcanic ash was also known for frequent earthquakes. In A.D. 17 there had been an earthquake that had destroyed 10 cities. In Philadelphia the aftershocks went on for years. For many residents of Philadelphia, they continually lived on the edge of panic.

Strabo, the Greek geographer and historian, described it in these words:

*"Shocks were an everyday occurrence. Gaping cracks appeared in the walls of the houses. Now one part of the city was in ruins, now another. Most of the population lived outside the city in huts and feared to go on the city streets lest they should be killed by failing masonry. Those who still dared to live in the city were reckoned mad; they spent their time shoring up the shaking buildings and every now and then fleeing to the open spaces for safety. These terrible days in Philadelphia were never wholly forgotten, and people waited subconsciously for the ominous tremors of the ground, ready to flee for their lives to the open spaces."*¹

In response to the devastation that had come to this city multiple times, the emperors had been gracious and rebuilt the city. Tiberius had rebuilt it and given it the name Neocaesarea –the New City of Caesar. In the time of Vespasian the city's name had been changed to Flavius, the Emperor's family name. Eventually the name became Philadelphia once again. The citizens of Philadelphia knew what it was to receive a new name.

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."

Once again Christ starts out identifying Himself to the people by declaring His divinity. ***"The holy One"*** is a term used for God multiple times in the Old Testament. ***"To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One"*** (Isa. 40:25). ***"I am the Lord, your Holy One, the creator of Israel, your King"*** (Isa. 43:15). The word "holy" means set apart. We are to be "holy" and set apart from the world. For us it is a description, but for Christ it is His identity. Christ had taken on the form of a man and become like us to a certain extent, but in His true nature He is holiness. He is God. We are holy because He, the Holy One, dwells in us.

Christ is ***"the true one"***. In Greek there are two words for "true". The first is used in reference to a statement being true or false. The second is used when meaning "real" versus "not real". It could be similar to authentic versus counterfeit. One might be described as a "true" hero or a "true" friend. It is the ultimate standard against which all false realities are measured. Jesus used a form of this idea when describing the disciple Nathanael: ***"Here is a Jew in whom there is nothing false"*** (John 1:47). Jesus is ***"the Way, the Truth and the Life"*** (John 14:6).

¹ <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/revelation-3.html>

This phrase “**key of David**” is not one with which most of us are familiar, but It has a very interesting background. Jesus has the “key of David”. A key always brings with it authority. He who has the key has the power to open and close. To permit entrance or to deny it. Christ is He who has this ultimate authority.

We see a similar picture in Isaiah 22:22. It speaks of Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, who was a faithful steward of the king Hezekiah. It says that **“God will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”** Christ is likened to this steward. The steward had full control of who was and was not welcomed into the presence of the King. The steward also had full control of the royal treasury and who would benefit from the resources of the king.

In the same way, Christ now holds the key of David. Christ is the promised Messiah who will sit on the throne of David forever. Christ is the faithful Steward who ushers some into the presence of God, while barring the door closed to others. As we turn once again to John 14:6, **“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”**

Some will call Christians arrogant to claim that Christ is the only way to God, but there is no other One who has paid for our sins and can usher the forgiven into the presence of God. As Acts 4:12 declares, **“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”** Christ holds the key, and He will open the door to all who will repent and believe.

Christ not only determines who enters into the presence of God, He also determines who receive the resources of God. As we find in Philippians 4:19, **“My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”** This was just what the small church in Philadelphia needed to be reminded of.

This idea of an open door encourages them in respect to salvation and the continual invitation to come into the presence of God (Hebrews 4:16). It also encourages them in the area of evangelism. It is Christ who goes before us and opens the hearts of man to believe in Jesus Christ, even when the door seems closed and the soil seems hard. Just as their city had been tasked with spreading the Greek culture to the savages, now they were tasked with ushering the godless into the presence of God, and it would be Christ who would open the doors of their hearts to make it possible.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesus, **“For a wide door for effective work has opened to me”** (1 Corinthians 16:9). When he went to Troas, **“a door was opened to him by the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 2:12). Paul asked the Colossians to pray **“that God would open to us a door for the word”** (Colossians 4:3). **“When he came back to Antioch he told how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”** (Acts 14:27).

For this church of Philadelphia, which was little and weak from the world’s perspective, and maybe even in their own eyes, they desperately needed to hear that this message, made especially for them, was coming from their Messiah, their Savior and their God. They were likely the equivalent of a poor store-front church or even a house church, but they belonged to One who was Lord over all, the One who would prevail.

They were not weak because of sin, false teaching, or giving in to persecution, so it is likely a perceived weakness due to their small number, poverty, persecution and being greatly outnumbered. Christ wanted them to know that they were not alone and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, that “in their weakness He was strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

It is interesting to note in these seven churches that are listed that the ones that seem most successful by the world’s standards are the weakest, and those that have the least are the strongest. Once again we are reminded of the economy of God and how it is so different from how we see the world.

Spiritually speaking, to be helpless because of our weakness is one of the best places to be for those who want to be near to God. I know that sounds strange and backwards, but in the economy of God the best place for a child of God to be is clinging helplessly to our heavenly Father.

God speaking through the prophet Isaiah said, ***"To this man will I look. Even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembles at My Word"*** (Isaiah 66:2). Jesus calls us each to the blessedness of being poor in spirit and the strength found in weakness.

Up to this point in this letter to the church of Philadelphia we have seen the strength of Christ and the weakness of the church. Now Christ begins to declare promises over them, but why? Because the promises of God are intended to change everything for them. When the promises of God come together with faith of God’s people, they finally see the true reality of their situation. Promises only have as much certainty as the one who is making them. When God makes a promise, it is certain. It is factual. It is done. As the Christians in the church of Philadelphia heard and trusted in these promises from Christ, they would be lifted above their present circumstances and find everything that was needed to endure and to overcome.

“⁹ 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.”

The Jews often referred to themselves as the assembly or the synagogue of God, but here Jesus reveals the reality of their hearts. They were religious, but their hearts were far from God. So much so that Jesus called them a synagogue of Satan. They were a religious community, but they were now more bound to rigid law keeping and had totally missed the grace found in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. They were actually living for the devil’s priorities, the priorities of self and the priorities of the world.

This idea that they would someday bow before the followers of Christ and would see how Christ loved His followers was an echo of writings in the Old Testament where the godless would bow before God’s people.

In Isaiah 45:14 it says: ***"The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you."*** Isaiah 60:14 declares: ***"The sons of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you; and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet."*** In Zechariah 8:22-23, one sees a vision of the day when all men of all nations and languages shall turn to

Jerusalem: ***"They shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"***

It was to be a dramatic role reversal. God had called the Jews to be the people of God and a testimony to the nations, but now they had forfeited their right to this role. Now the Gentiles had been grafted into the family of God. Being a physical descendant of Abraham would no longer define who were God's people. Now it would be for all who were spiritual descendants of Abraham.

It was a promise of the day that those who were nothing more than physical descendants of Abraham would come and bow at the feet of the spiritual descendants of Abraham. As Paul wrote in Romans 2, ***"Not all Israel is Israel. Not all Jews are true Jews."*** In Galatians 3:29 we read, ***"If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."*** It was a promise that deliverance would come, in time, and all would be made right. That the present situation would be turned on its head and the followers of Christ would finally be vindicated as the people of Yahweh.

"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."

The need for patient endurance was not unique to these verses. In Acts 14:22, Paul wrote: ***"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*** In 2 Timothy 2:12, we read: ***"If we endure, we shall also reign with him."*** In Matthew 24:13, Jesus said: ***"He who endures to the end will be saved."*** They had endured patiently, and because of that Christ had for them a second promise.

Christ promises to keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world. We see this same phrase used in John 17:15, when Jesus prays to the Father, ***"I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one."*** It was a promise that He would be with them and He would be their deliverer and rescuer in their hour of trial.

"¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."

The expected coming of Christ brings solace for those who belong to Him, and brings warning to those who don't. Christ is encouraging them to prevail a little longer. Just to hold on. As they held on fast they were confirming that they were truly in the faith and would be recipient of a crown. If they were to falter or fall away in the midst of tribulation, it might confirm that they were never in the faith at all.

"¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. 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. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

For those who overcome, Jesus promises to make him a pillar in the temple of God. While to us this seems a little peculiar, to them it would have been very significant.

In the cities of Asia Minor, when a priest died, who had lived a life of faithfulness, they would honor him by erecting a new pillar in the temple and putting his name and the name of his father on the pillar. In some ways, Christ is using this same imagery and describing what will happen to those followers of Christ who overcome and remain faithful to Christ. They will be remembered eternally

in heaven for their faithfulness. They will be a steadfast pillar, an essential part, of the temple of God and on them will be written the name of their God and the name of the city of their God, the new Jerusalem. It is proof that they will be eternal citizens of heaven, living in the eternal security of heaven. Christ has come to give them courage to endure, for the future of the Kingdom of God is at hand.

In these verses it is incredible how Jesus condescends to the people of this small church. The way that He describes His provision using language that proves that he knows their struggle and desires to meet them in the midst of it. He knows the custom of the new pillar in the temple. He speaks of the security of “never having to go out of it”, contrasting it to their habit of fleeing outside every time the ground shakes and the buildings falter. He talks of a city with a new name, to citizens of Philadelphia who have experienced multiple name changes of their city.

Jesus Christ, the One through whom the universe was created, speaks to the people of this small church in a way that they know He understands. He connects with them. God has come near, Christ is truly Immanuel, God with us.

We are not alone. In the midst of the unknown. In the midst of marital struggles. In the midst of financial hardship. In the midst of mental disorders, alzheimer’s, renters who refuse to pay or move out, a non-believing spouse, the inability to have children, your longing for a mate, an insufferable boss, being enslaved to pornography or heart-broken over a prodigal child. There is no situation in which God does not understand and is not aware.

In the midst of these times, He merely calls out to us to “hold on”, and as we do He showers us with promises. They are not to be mere theological platitudes. They are meant to be game-changers for us. If we will believe Christ’s promises as certain fact, we will join with the saints of Hebrews 11, whose faith changed their thoughts, actions and even emotions. The unseen became truer than the seen and God transformed their view of the situation dramatically. We must remember that we do not fully understand our situation until we have heard God’s perspective of it.

Today this is our challenge. We often hear the promises and then forget them as we are overwhelmed by the world around us. Worldly logic says they surely cannot be true, so we choose the ways of the world, neglecting the very truths of God that will set us free and give us the strength that we need.

“Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; everyone was fulfilled” (Joshua 21:45). Every prophecy about Christ was fulfilled. ***“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory”*** (2 Corinthians 1:20).

For this Christ came. As in the church in Philadelphia, Christ has come as the faithful steward and thrown open the doors wide so that we may dwell in the presence of God and live in the midst of His resources. Today may the promises of God so minister to our lives that we walk by faith like never before.

Discussion questions:

1. Who is the most trustworthy person that you know? Why do you trust them?
2. Can you remember a time in your life that you felt that you were not wise enough or strong enough to face a situation?
3. In your own words describe the situation of the church in Philadelphia.
4. How did the promises of Christ minister to them in the midst of their situation?
5. Can you think of a time in your spiritual life that you struggled to believe?
6. Can you share a time in your life that you have trusted in God and He has been faithful?
7. Which promise(s) listed below might you need to trust and act upon?
8. What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
9. What do you think He wants you to do? How can we pray for you?