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Revelation #10

### The Church of “Little Power” Revelation 3:7-13

One could make a strong case that the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia are the most important of the seven, for in neither of them do we find a single word of complaint. They both receive *unqualified praise and approval*. These, then, are truly churches of which Christ heartily approves.

What makes this all the more remarkable is the statement by Jesus in Revelation 3:8 that the church in Philadelphia has “but little power” (ESV). This isn’t a rebuke. It’s a *commendation*! Let me clarify that. Jesus isn’t saying that having “little power” is inherently and always good. He’s simply saying that having “little power” *isn’t* inherently and always bad.

In spite of your lack of size and influence, says Jesus, you faithfully kept my word and, in the face of persecution and perhaps even martyrdom, refused to deny my name. People threatened you. The culture mocked you. The Jewish community slandered you (cf. v. 9). The temptation to jump ship must have been intense. Yet you stood firm. *Your lack of resources, money, and manpower proved no obstacle to your accomplishing great things for the kingdom of God!*

It’s reassuring to know that *size is no measure of success*. In other words, *there is no sin in being big, but neither is there in being small*. There are temptations in both circumstances. Those with “little power” can become bitter and resentful of those who outwardly prosper. Those with “great power” can become arrogant and condescending toward those of less stature. The “mini-church” may be tempted to think they’ve missed the mark or failed to articulate a vision that is pleasing to God. The “mega-church” may point to their sizeable offerings and overflowing crowds as indicative of divine approval. They could both be wrong.

We don’t know if the Christians in Philadelphia were despondent or mired in self-doubt. But the fact that Jesus applauds their efforts in spite of their modest dimensions would suggest they needed this word of encouragement. Our Lord’s declaration of what he has and will continue to do on their behalf (see vv. 8-11) is worthy of our close consideration. But first we need to look at his description of himself in v. 7.

*Who is this Jesus who Speaks?*

*Who is this one* who speaks such uplifting words to this tiny congregation? He is “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” (v. 7). I can’t be dogmatic on this point, but I strongly suspect that at the heart of their having “kept his word” and having “refused to deny his name” is their holding forth of Jesus as

he has described himself to them. In other words, notwithstanding the vile threats and taunts they endured on a daily basis, these believers proclaimed Jesus as the holy one, the true one, the one who has the key of David!

The Philadelphian believers did more than simply *not* deny the name of Jesus. They loudly and proudly proclaimed him as ***“the Holy One”***! Their boast was not in their property or multiplicity of programs but in ***the Holy One of Israel***. This title is likely derived either from Isaiah 40:25, where Yahweh asks, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says ***the Holy One***,” or from Isaiah 43:15 where he again proclaims, “I am the Lord, ***your Holy One***, the Creator of Israel, your King” (see also Job 6:10; Ezek. 39:7; Hosea 11:9; Hab. 1:12; 3:3). According to Isaiah 57:15, ***his very name “is Holy”***!

There is none with whom he can be compared or against whom he fails to measure up. He is altogether unique, transcendently other, truly in a class by himself! And note well: this glorious, almost indescribable, attribute of God is *here predicated of Jesus!* Holiness is that in virtue of which God alone is God alone. Holiness is *moral majesty*.

Some churches that have “but little power” doubt the legitimacy of their existence. They wonder if their sacrifice is worth the effort. Perhaps the kingdom would be better off without them. If the Philadelphians were inclined to think in this way, I suspect they renewed their strength and re-ignited their passion by reflecting on the beauty of divine holiness. “He, our Lord, is the Holy One! How can we not keep his word and proclaim his name, for he is Holy, he is ours, and we are his!”

Second, he is called ***“the true one”***. To the Greek mind this would mean “genuine,” or what is real and thus corresponds to reality. To the Hebrew mind it means “faithful” and “trustworthy,” deserving of our confidence, dependable, reliable, consistent and steadfast (see Ps. 146:5-6; Ex. 34:6; Deut. 7:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; Num. 23:19; Lam. 3:22-23). No one ever trusted our God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, in vain!

Third, he is the one ***“who has the key of David.”*** This is an allusion to Isaiah 22:22 and the role of Eliakim, steward of the household, who was given authority to control who was either admitted to or excluded from the king’s presence. This position was quite prominent, perhaps only secondary to the king himself. The point is that Jesus alone has the key to the Davidic or messianic kingdom and that he alone has the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem.

Fourth, and finally, he is the one ***“who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.”*** When he opens to his followers the door of the kingdom, no one can shut them out; and when he shuts the door on those who oppose his cause, none can reverse the decision.

***Jesus loves the “mini-church”!*** He says it explicitly in Revelation 3:9. The greatness of a church is not measured by its membership roll or budgetary prowess, but by ***the size of the***

*Savior* whom it faithfully honors and passionately praises and confidently trusts. The “big” church is any church that boasts in a big God, attendance and acreage notwithstanding. Were the Philadelphians envied by any? Probably not. Yet they had no lack, at least in what mattered. Keeping Christ’s word and not denying his name is easy for those who know him well. When he is small and unknown, he becomes dispensable, deniable, and easily dismissed for the sake of some grand vision of church growth. ***A “mega-church” without a “mega-Christ” is of little benefit to anyone. A “mini-church” with a “mega-Christ” makes them big in the eyes of him whose opinion is the only one that matters.***

*Whatever God Promises, He Fulfills*

I’ve mentioned before that one of my spiritual mentors was often heard to say, “Whatever God requires he provides; whomever God chooses, he changes; and whatever God starts, he finishes.” I’d like to add a fourth: “Whatever God promises, he fulfills.” That’s incredibly reassuring, especially for those who struggle with doubt and uncertainty and the fear that one day, notwithstanding the promises in his Word, God will pull the rug out. Life has taught us, often painfully, that if something appears to be too good to be true, it probably is. Why should it be any different with God? Will he really deliver on what he has declared? Can I trust him?

I think those questions echo ever more loudly in our heads when times are tough. It’s a lot easier to believe God when there’s money in the bank and our loved ones are healthy and people like us. Maybe that’s one reason Jesus spoke so pointedly to the Christians in Philadelphia. Life was anything but easy for the church in that city. The fact that Jesus applauds their perseverance (v. 10a) and faithfulness in keeping his word (v. 8) and commends them for not denying his name (v. 8), more than suggests that they were faced with a relentless temptation to quit. The opposition they faced from the Jewish community only made things worse (v. 9).

They may well have asked themselves, “Could all this mean that Jesus has abandoned us? Are his promises vain and empty? How can we know he’s still on our side?” Jesus speaks directly to such fears with three powerful promises. It is the first one, in Revelation 3:8a, that has caught my attention. Perhaps it’s because at first glance it seems so insignificant. I have to confess that for a long time I took no notice of it. Not anymore! ***“Behold,”*** said Jesus, ***“I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.”***

What is the “open door”? Is it great opportunity for missionary activity (cf. 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). That’s certainly a possibility. But the preceding verse (3:7) spoke of a messianic kingdom, access to which is under the absolute control of Christ. He is the one who possesses the key and can open and shut at his own will. Here in v. 8 he reminds the Christians at Philadelphia who may have been excommunicated from the local synagogue that he has placed before them an open door into the eternal kingdom and no one can shut them out.

This is a powerfully encouraging word of assurance to all Christians who face similar threats or assaults from both human and demonic powers. It’s short but sweet, simple but profound, and

speaks gloriously to the point of one of our greatest needs: to be reassured by our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, that we are forever his and that no amount of hardship in this life can undermine our salvation, that no depth of pain or deprivation can interrupt, disrupt, or counteract his divine determination to bring us safely into our eternal reward.

Think about what this statement says concerning our Lord's determination concerning you and your relationship to him. His mind is made up. His will is resolute and unchangeable. His goal is clear and the means to its accomplishment are undertaken with an immutable and omnipotent commitment. There is a sense, then, in which we might reverently speak of his *holy and righteous stubbornness* when it comes to the welfare of his people. He simply won't allow anyone to slam shut the door that he has opened.

Not all the persecution in the world can reverse his decree. Not all the hatred and animosity of the enemy can tempt him to change his mind. Not all the posturing and strutting of a secular and unbelieving culture can induce him to close the door on those to whom he has decided to open it. Not all the threats, slander, resistance or any other attempt on the part of the people around us to undermine our relationship with Christ will succeed.

"No one is able to shut" this door into eternal relationship and intimacy with Jesus, this entrance into eternal joy and life in his presence. No one. Not your worst enemy. Not even those who mock you for your faith. Not Islamic terrorists or economic collapse or a terminal illness. Nothing. Not the collective power of an entire world, not the combined energy of all demonic beings, neither Satan nor any other created being can overturn the decree of Christ who says: These are my people and shall remain so forever.

Often we fear that Satan has the power or freedom to counteract Christ's saving work, or that he can orchestrate a scenario that will lead to our ultimate demise. Or perhaps he can put a stumbling block in our path that will ensnare or entangle us in such a way that not even God himself can extricate us or deliver us from his nefarious strategy. Ah, but who is this God? Is he not the one "who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude 24)?

I'm also reminded of what Paul said in Romans 8:31, a precious passage indeed: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" His purpose isn't to deny that we have enemies. Our enemies are numerous and powerful and relentless in their assault against the saints. His point, rather, is that they will always fail! Yes, they will continue to attack and accuse and adopt an adversarial posture. They can inflict injury, bring disappointment, shatter dreams, and disrupt relationships. But they can never close the door that Christ has opened!

Or to use the language of Paul again from Romans 8, they shall never "separate us from the love of Christ" (8:35). Their weapons may include "tribulation," "distress," "persecution," "famine," "nakedness," "danger," and "sword" (8:35). They may even kill us, treating us "as sheep to be slaughtered" (8:36). But in all these things, yes, in all these horrific experiences, "we are more

than conquerors through him who loved us” (8:37), through him who opened the door and allows no one to shut!

This glorious truth of God’s sovereignty in our salvation, far from precluding the need for personal holiness, empowers and undergirds it. We **must** persevere in our commitment to him, and we **shall** persevere because of his commitment to us. There is in the heart of our Lord, as I said, a *holy stubbornness*. He will not be deterred. His purpose will come to pass. His promise will be fulfilled. No one can close the door he has opened. Entrance into the bliss of eternal joy is assured to those who know Jesus.

As I said, whatever God promises, God fulfills. This marvelous truth puts legs beneath our Lord’s declaration that the door he has opened for us no one can shut (v. 8). But there’s yet more in his promise to the faithful in Philadelphia and therefore more in his promise to you and me:

“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**” (Rev. 3:9).

We’ve already encountered the presence of those who “lie” about being Jewish (see Rev. 2:8-9). What is especially noteworthy here is how our Lord describes his vindication of those who’ve remained faithful in the face of persecution. Literally, Jesus says he will “give” these false Jews of “the synagogue of Satan” to the church at Philadelphia, i.e., he will cause them to bow down at their feet and to know that Jesus has loved them.

Does this imply that these Jewish opponents will become Christians? Some say Yes and contend that the “open door” of v. 8 pertains specifically to evangelistic opportunity and success among the Jewish population of the city. Appeal is also made to the word translated “bow down” (*proskuneō*), used elsewhere on several occasions in Revelation of voluntary worship. However, if they were to be saved, it would be strange for them to bow down *in worship* at the feet of fellow-Christians. Here, to “bow down” is simply the traditional (oriental) expression of respect and honor.

It may be that recognition on their part that Jesus loves the church is the occasion (indeed, the stimulus) for their conversion, much in line with Paul’s thought in Romans 11 where he describes the Jews being provoked to jealousy upon seeing Gentiles savingly grafted into the olive tree. It must be admitted, however, that “**make them to come**” is odd language for conversion. Furthermore, the point of their being “made” to prostrate themselves before Christians is so that they might acknowledge the love Jesus has for the church. But if they are no less converted, i.e., no less Christian, than the church, they too would be the objects of Jesus’ saving love. But is not his point to demonstrate to the persecutors of the church that God’s love is precisely for those seemingly insignificant and weak believers in Philadelphia (irrespective of ethnic identity)?

Perhaps, then, John has in mind *either* (1) some event (or process) by which these Jews are compelled to acknowledge that the Philadelphian believers are the beloved people of God and that such status is not the result of ethnic heritage or national affiliation but rather faith in Jesus, *or* (2) the final judgment day at which “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord” (Phil. 2:10-11).

The most intriguing feature of this passage is that it appears to be an allusion to several OT texts in which it is prophesied that **Gentiles** will come and bow down before **Israel** in the last days. For example, “The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 60:14). In Isaiah 45:14 we read how Gentile peoples will “come over to you [Israel] and will be yours; they will walk behind you, they will come over in chains and will bow down to you.” Once again, “with their faces to the ground they [the Gentiles] shall bow down to you [Israel], and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame” (Isaiah 49:23). The *irony* here is so thick you could cut it with a knife! In all these OT texts it is the **Gentiles** who grovel before **Israel**, whereas in Revelation 3:9 it is the **Jews** who will bow at the feet of this predominantly **Gentile Christian church**.

The irony intensifies when we note that in Isaiah 60:14 it is the Gentiles who will call the Israelites “the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.” But now, in 3:12, the tables are turned: it is the CHURCH that is described in such glorious terms. There we read that the overcomers before whom these Jews prostrate themselves are given the name of “*the city of my God, the new Jerusalem*”!

We should also note that the words they will “know that I have loved you” may be an allusion to Isaiah 43:4 (“Because you [Israel] are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you . . .”). Again this reinforces the notion that **Jesus saw in the church the fulfillment of these OT prophetic promises**. In other words, the fulfillment of these prophecies in Isaiah “will be the reverse of what the Philadelphian Jews expect: *they* will have to ‘bow down before *your* feet’, and acknowledge ‘that I have loved *you*’. Let the Christians take heart, for it is on them that the Lord has set his favour” (Michael Wilcock, 54).

Beyond the theological (and eschatological) implications of what this says about the Church as the true Israel of God is *the profoundly encouraging boost it gives to the oppressed heart seeking to stand firm in faith for Jesus*. These believers in Philadelphia were no doubt hearing the taunts of their oppressors, similar to what David often lamented in the Psalms: “O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God” (Psalm 3:1-2). Or again, in Psalm 71:11, the psalmist refers to his enemies as declaring, “God has forsaken him; pursue and seize him, for there is none to deliver him.”

The pagan world looked with disdain on the church in Philadelphia and concluded that people who suffered in this way must be unloved by their God, if not entirely abandoned by him.

Perhaps you've heard similar words: "What kind of God is it who permits his children to endure such pain and oppression? He obviously doesn't love you very much. You matter little to him. Otherwise he'd heal you. If his love were genuine, he'd spare you such distress. Where is he when you need him most? If he cared, he would long ago have delivered you from people like us."

There's no guarantee that vindication will come in this life. We may die with such blasphemous words echoing in our ears. But the affection of our great God will not forever remain hidden from view. Jesus assures us that a day is coming when the world will know, all too painfully, that we are loved with an immutable and infinitely intense passion. All ridicule will be redressed, every scoff will be silenced, each sneer wiped from their faces. Then there will be an indescribable display of divine delight and loud celebration as Jesus will say (shout? sing?), for all to hear, and show, for all to see, that he truly loves his own!

### *Jesus, the Keeping King*

If you've ever wondered whether it mattered much to Jesus that you've kept the faith and maintained your commitment to him, this promise to the church of Philadelphia should put your fears to rest. Such resolute commitment to stay the course, spiritually speaking, may not get your name in the church bulletin or result in an invitation to appear on the 700 Club, but it matters pre-eminently to Jesus! The world may mock you for it, laugh, and consider you a fool to sacrifice so much of a monetary and personal nature simply for the sake of retaining your public and private commitment to Jesus, but this is no small matter.

If you doubt what I'm saying, look closely at our Lord's words in Revelation 3:10-11. "***Because you have kept my word about patient endurance,***" said Jesus to the church in Philadelphia, "***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***" (3:10-11). *Patient endurance* (ESV) is no small feat, especially given our proclivity for impatience, self-preservation, and our desire for personal peace and comfort. Add to this the longing to be liked and the love of money, and you can begin to grasp the significance of our Lord's promise to the faithful.

As you probably know, people often appeal to this text in support of the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. Personally, I don't believe Jesus had any such thing in mind. A few observations should make this clear.

**First**, the notion that any Christian is assured of special protection from trials, tribulations, and persecution is unbiblical. We've seen repeatedly in these seven letters that suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel is something all believers must embrace (see Rev. 2:2-3; 2:9-10; 2:13; 3:8-10). According to Paul, it is "through many tribulations (*thlipsis*; the same word used in Rev. 1:9; 7:14) we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus declared that "in the world you will have tribulation (*thlipsis*)" (John 16:33). Again, we are to "rejoice in our sufferings

(*thlipsis*)” (Rom. 5:3; see also John 15:19-20; Acts 5:40-41; 1 Cor. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 4:7-12; 11:24-25; 2 Tim. 3:12).

**Second**, the trial or tribulation that is coming is designed for the judgment of *unbelievers*, not Christians. “Those who dwell on the earth” (v. 9) or “earth-dwellers” is a stock phrase in Revelation that *always* refers to pagan persecutors of the church (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8,12,14; 14:6; 17:2,8). They are the ones who suffer the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of Revelation which *characterize the entire church age*, from the first coming of Christ to his second.

**Third**, the promise, then, is for *spiritual* protection in the midst of physical tribulation. Jesus is assuring his people that he will provide sufficient sustenance to preserve them in their faith, no matter what they face. The promise here is similar to what we find in Revelation 7:1-3,13-14 where the people of God are “sealed” lest they suffer spiritual harm from “the great tribulation (*thlipsis*)” (v. 14; cf. also Rev. 11:1-2; 12:6,14-17). Clearly, believers endure and emerge from tribulation spiritually secure. As Beale notes, “they are not preserved from trial by removal from it, but their faith is preserved through trial because they have been sealed by God” (292).

**Fourth**, pre-tribulationists have typically insisted that the only way God’s people can be spiritually protected from the outpouring of divine wrath is by being physically removed from the earth. But this is clearly not the case, as John 17:15 makes clear (as also does the presence of the Israelites in Egypt during the time of the ten plagues). In this passage we find the only other place in the NT where the precise phrase “kept from” (*tereō ek*) is used. There Jesus prays to the Father: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you *keep them from* the evil one.”

It’s important to note in this text that “keep from” is actually *contrasted* with the notion of physical removal. Jesus prays not that the Father “take them out of the world” (i.e., physically remove them), *but* that the Father “keep them from” Satan’s effort to destroy their spiritual life. Thus, when we turn to Revelation 3:10 we see that it is from the wrath of God poured out on “earth-dwellers” (unbelievers) that he promises to “keep” them. In the face of certain opposition and oppression from Satan, the Beast, and unbelievers, this is a glorious promise indeed.

**Fifth**, we must never forget that it is precisely in remaining faithful unto death that our greatest victory is achieved (not in being “raptured” to safety; cf. Rev. 2:10). Believers conquer Satan and the Beast “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death*” (Rev. 12:11).

But *what*, precisely, is “*the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world,*” and *when* will it occur?

Of one thing I’m certain: the promise of protection must be of practical benefit and reassurance for the people of the church in Philadelphia *in the first century*. Thus, contrary to what is argued



by some, this “hour of trial” can’t be restricted to (although it may be inclusive of) a time of tribulation at the end of the present age.

If you are inclined to insist on a strictly futurist interpretation of the “hour of trial”, ask yourself whether it seems odd (dare I say, impossible) that Jesus would promise ***one church in Asia Minor in the first century that they were to be protected from an event that not one single individual in that church would ever see, indeed, an event that allegedly would not transpire for at least another 1,900 years!*** How could this “hour of trial” be an event centuries after the Philadelphian Christians lived, especially since their protection from it is the very specific reward *to them* of their very specific, and historically identifiable, resistance to persecution and steadfast faithfulness in proclaiming the word of God? ***They*** are promised protection because ***they*** “kept the word” of Christ’s perseverance.

I’m persuaded that Jesus is referring to that “tribulation” (*thlipsis*) which has already begun for Christians (including the Philadelphians) and will continue throughout the present age. In writing to the churches, John identifies himself as their “brother and partner in the tribulation [*thlipsis*] and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). In other words, ***“the hour of trial” is likely a reference to the entire, inter-advent church age***, during which there will always be suffering and tribulation for those who stand firm in their witness for Christ. ***Thus we are in the “hour of trial” right now and will continue to be until Jesus returns.***

This isn’t to deny that there will emerge an especially intensified and horrific period of tribulation in connection with the return of Christ at the end of history (regardless of how long you conceive it to be). But Jesus must have in mind an experience that was impending or already present for the Philadelphian believers in the first century and for all believers in subsequent centuries of the church’s existence.

Jesus concludes with both a word of assurance and an exhortation: “I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (Rev. 3:11). Is this “coming” the Second Advent at the close of history or a first-century disciplinary visitation? Possibly the former, but assuredly not the latter. After all, given the obedience of the Philadelphian church, there was no need for a “coming” of Jesus to judge or chastise (as was the case with Ephesus in 2:5, Pergamum in 2:16, and Sardis in 3:3).

However, there may be another option. The “coming” referred to in v. 11 is the heightened or intensified presence of Christ that will protect these believers when they pass through suffering and tribulation. In other words, this may be a spiritual coming to provide comfort and the power to persevere, a drawing near to their hearts to energize them in their commitment. His “coming” or approach to them is not spatial, but spiritual and sanctifying, in which he intensifies his sustaining influence in their souls. If he can “come” to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis to discipline, he can certainly “come” to the church at Philadelphia to strengthen and bless.

And if he can “come” to the church at Philadelphia in the first century, he can also “come” to Bridgeway today!