

The Call to Hold Fast

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's great to be with you again. I want to invite you to turn with me to the book of Revelation if you have your Bibles with you. The passage is also found in our bulletins.

We're hearing from God's Word today, Revelation chapter 3, and the call to hold fast that Jesus has to His church, and it's the church specifically in Philadelphia, but as this is God's holy and inspired Word, it is also His Word for us today as well.

So draw your attention to the reading of God's Word from Revelation 3, verses 7 through 13. 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.

[1 : 1 7] 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. 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. This is the Word of God. Thanks be to him. Let us pray together for our time in his Word. Lord God, Father, Son, and Spirit, we come now and we sit underneath the preaching, the proclamation of your Word, asking that you would be gracious to us, that you by your Spirit would come and pour out knowledge, pour out wisdom, pour out revelation about who Jesus is.

Lord, that you would awaken our hearts, that you would give us understanding about these things, that you would come and take the things of Jesus and make them real to our hearts.

We ask that for our little theologians in this room as well, our covenant children who are in this place. God, we ask that you would also give them understanding, that you would help them to see you as you truly are.

[2 : 4 3] Lord, to think big thoughts about you, that they would have a big God and a big Savior for them even now. We ask that you would bless the preaching and the hearing of your Word now for your church, and it's in Jesus' name that we ask this.

Amen. Amen indeed. Well, in December of 1914, Ernest Shackleton and his 27-member crew aboard the ship The Endurance entered the ice fields of the Wendell Sea navigating through dangerous packed ice.

With only 100 miles left in their journey, Shackleton made the fateful decision to stop and wait for a break in the heavy ice. The temperature dropped and the ice closed in around the ship, making it impossible to proceed.

The crew would live aboard the ship for the next 10 months. Gradually, the ship began to succumb to the crushing grip of the ice. Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship.

The crew began a march in search of safety, carrying minimal supplies and dragging three lifeboats. Eventually, reaching open water, they boarded the lifeboats and sailed off in an attempt to find land.

[4 : 04] Surviving perilous conditions, they finally landed on the deserted Elephant Island. Stranded on that island with no hope of rescue, Shackleton and four of his crew members set sail in a lifeboat in an effort to reach the island of South Georgia.

This was a whaling island. They traveled 800 miles, 800 nautical miles, through the world's worst seas.

When they arrived to the island finally, they discovered that the whaling station was on the other side of the island. And in order to rescue the remaining crew in time, Shackleton and two of his men had to cross on foot the treacherous cliffs of this island.

They were icy. They were forbidding cliffs. They were vulnerable to sudden blizzards and hurricane-force winds. The island's inhabitants, as a matter of fact, had considered the journey from one side of the island to the other on foot impossible.

Nevertheless, Shackleton and his two partners crossed in 36 hours. His diary provides an interesting perspective on the South Georgia island crossing.

[5 : 19] This is what Ernest Shackleton's journal says. Quote, In memories we were rich. We had pierced the veneer of outside things. We had suffered. We had starved.

We had triumphed. We had groveled down, yet grasped at glory, grown bigger in the bigness of the whole. We had seen God in his splendors, heard the text that nature renders.

We had reached the naked soul of men, and by endurance we conquered. And while we will likely never face the extreme physical conditions that Ernest Shackleton did, we will face extreme spiritual conditions where our fortitude, our resolve, our endurance will be tested.

The New Testament is clear on this point that it is through many tribulations that we enter the kingdom of God, Acts chapter 14. As a matter of fact, Jesus said, If they hated me, they will hate you.

If they persecuted me, he said, they will persecute you. Now this raises the obvious question as to why. Why the hatred? Why the persecution of Jesus of Nazareth?

[6 : 34] And why the subsequent hatred and persecution of his followers? Why, given the fact of how pluralistic the worship of many gods, the acceptance of many gods, and how syncretistic the combining of those gods the ancient world was?

The ancient world was pluralistic. You could worship many gods. It was syncretistic. You could combine the worship of many gods. Why in this context was the message of Jesus, the person of Jesus, so antagonistic?

Every month at our church at Westside, we have a potluck dinner called Eat Church where everyone brings what they want to share with everyone else. That's what the ancient world was like in terms of religion and worship.

Everyone brings what appeals to them and says, here, worship Caesar. Here, worship Zeus. Here, worship Artemis, Diana, and so forth. Of course, what's interesting about this is that our culture is very much the same in our day as well.

Even though ours, perhaps, is the most secular age of human history, that itself, that itself is a religious claim. And that is one of many claims that is accepted right alongside the major religions of our world.

[7 : 52] If that was the case then, and it continues to be the case now, then the question that I'm asking is, why wasn't Jesus just acknowledged as another religious teacher? Why wasn't his message acknowledged as just another religious path?

Why, in a religious potluck, wasn't Christianity just one of many casserole dishes? Why the heat? Why the persecution? The answer is found in the book of Revelation, and in particular, in Revelation chapter 3, in the word that Jesus has to his church in Philadelphia.

Verse 7. You can start there, looking with me. He says, 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, and who shuts and no one will open.

You see, right away, church, we see in this passage that Jesus doesn't claim to be just another religious teacher, or that his message is one of many that you can take or leave.

No, Jesus declares, I am the Holy One. I am the True One. He declares that I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.

[9 : 07] He proclaims that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And he reveals, he reveals by his spirit that he is the one who opens and no one is able to shut, who shuts and no one is able to open.

In other words, Jesus is exclusive. Jesus is unique. He stands alone. He stands above every other single person who has lived. It's not Jesus versus fill in the blank.

It's just Jesus. And that is something that the church in Philadelphia knew very well. little theologians. Kids, if you're taking notes, if you'd like to follow along, I have two assignments for you, kids.

One is to draw a picture of a key and a door. A key and a door, kids. And then, the question is, what makes Jesus unique and stand out from every other person who has ever lived?

What makes Jesus unique? What makes him stand out from everyone else, kids? Now, for the rest of us, I want to give you some background of the city of Philadelphia. It was founded as a missionary city in 189 B.C.

[10 : 14] What that means is that it was meant to be a gateway, a doorway to Asia Minor. It was the Greek culture in the east to further spread the Greek culture in the year 189 B.C.

It was a doorway into Asia. And this helps us understand the play on words that Jesus is using here where he says, I have a door that I open and no one is able to shut and who shuts and no one is able to open.

The church in Philadelphia would have known exactly what Jesus was referring to there. By the first century, it was one of the greatest trade routes in the Roman Empire. So the Roman Empire continued to use Philadelphia as a doorway, a doorway from Rome in the west to Asia in the east.

It was an open door linking the two vastly different cultures there in the ancient world. Following a devastating earthquake early in the first century, the city was rebuilt by the Roman Emperor Tiberius and a temple was dedicated to him there as people came to pay homage to worship Tiberius as the savior of the city.

This helps us understand why Jesus addresses them in such an extraordinary way. They are holding fast, as he says, to him amid a culture that says you must worship these other gods as well.

[11 : 32] You must worship Caesar for he is savior of the city. This helps us understand why Jesus begins to address them in the way that he does. It's very intentional on his part.

As a matter of fact, in all of these seven addresses to his church, the way that Jesus describes himself, he is speaking directly to what is going on in that city. And here in Philadelphia, he means to remind them, remind them of who he is in contrast with the claims of the culture that they're living in.

And what does Jesus remind them of in his address? First, he says that he is holy. He is holy. He is the holy one. Holy one. He is none other than God Almighty.

For John, who was an apostle, who was a Jew, for him, there was only one who was holy. As 1 Samuel 2 says, it says, there is none holy like the Lord. There is no rock like our God.

God. In John's gospel, John's gospel, he talks about in chapter 6, that the disciples, after they witnessed Jesus feeding the 5,000, they declared that he was the holy one of God.

[12 : 39] John knew who Jesus was. What is holiness? Holiness speaks of separation or distinction. Uniqueness, speaking of our Lord's separation, his uniqueness from his creation.

It's not Jesus and his creation are together. It's Jesus over his creation. Jesus is not subject to us, friends. We are subject to him.

He is not subject to the cosmos. He is over the cosmos. The cosmos is in subjection to him. He upholds it, the Bible says, by the word of his power, Hebrews chapter 1.

Jesus moves in a mysterious way to quote the old hymn. His wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and he rides upon the storm. This is who the Lord Jesus Christ is, friends.

He is the almighty one. He is the sovereign son of God who is addressing his church from a place of authority and a place of majesty. So Jesus is holy.

[13 : 41] The second thing that he says is that Jesus is true. He is the true one. Later on in the book of Revelation, John describes Jesus as being holy and true. And the word here for true means that Jesus is the authentic.

He is the genuine. He is real. And this is signifying that everything about Jesus is the real deal. Everything about him is the real deal. His divine nature, his attributes, his words, his character.

Jesus is the standard of truth. We do not measure him by our inferior standards. He is the measuring rod that assesses and judges. We do not appeal to a higher authority to validate Jesus.

Jesus is the highest authority. He is validation itself. Jesus is the very embodiment of truth. Glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth, John 1.

He is the true light which enlightens everyone. He is the true light which continues to shine in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. Now why is it significant that John's pointing this out?

[14 : 44] Why is the fact that Jesus is holy and Jesus is true, why is that significant? Little theologians, kids, why is it important for you to know that Jesus is holy and Jesus is significant or Jesus is true?

Well, in a world that is searching for significance, searching for meaning, in a world that is longing for transcendence, here is Jesus, the holy one, made flesh, walking and talking among us and to us.

Jesus, the holy one, the transcendent one, is addressing you and I in a world that is searching for and wondering if there is any truth, anything worth believing and defending, anything worth fighting and dying for.

Here is Jesus, the source in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and truth are found. In him, in him, church, we have holiness.

In him, we have truth. And these two things begin to shape the way that we view the world. They begin to shape the way that we view ourselves in the world, what we are called to.

[15 : 51] They answer the question of significance. They answer the question of meaning and purpose and value. Much like for the church in Philadelphia who are holding fast to this testimony, the question for you and I today is, are we holding fast?

Are we holding fast to this Jesus as he is revealed in scripture? To the one who is holy and true? It was just as, if not more difficult for them in the first century to hold fast to this.

They were facing open persecution. They were facing heat for their witness. What about us? Do we know him who is holy? Do we know his voice? One of the ways that we can tell that we listen to his voice is we listen because we know his voice has authority.

It carries authority. And that's the third point that Jesus reminds them of. His authority. Not only because of his character and his attributes, he is holy, he is true, but because of his authority, he holds the key of David, he says there.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 22, you heard it. We heard how God intervened at a time that he provided a steward for the house of David in Eliakim. And this was God providing this to David's household so that David's household could be preserved.

[17 : 09] It could be preserved so that the coming Messiah, the Messiah could come into the world. The Messiah who now rules and reigns over David's household. The church. That's what Jesus is alluding to when he says that I have the keys of David.

It's absolutely incredible to think of how God used that bleak moment, that bleak moment in history roughly 700 years before Jesus was born as an analogy pointing to Christ's own rule and reign over his church.

So he holds the key of David, he says, and he opens and he closes the door. Much like how the steward was in charge of who was in the household, who was accepted in the palace, and who could come before the king, so now Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia that he is the one, he is the one who opens and shuts the door.

Now this raises the question, what door is he talking about? He's about to tell us that in verse 8 and following. He says, I know your works, behold I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut.

And in the Bible when God talks about, when Jesus talks about an open door, it's talking about within the context of the advancement, the establishment of the gospel message.

[18 : 24] And that is that the church in Philadelphia had remained faithful to that despite the difficulties that they were facing. they had remained an open door where the gospel was being proclaimed. They were holding fast to Jesus.

They were not compromising to the culture around them, but they continued to proclaim. They continued to witness to the truthfulness of who Jesus was. And that was despite the difficulties that they were facing.

In verse 9, Jesus says, I know you have but little power and yet you have kept my word and you have not denied my name. Though they were little in power, they were mighty in their perseverance.

In their endurance, their faithfulness to Jesus. One thing that we can take away from this is the way that Jesus assesses his church. The way that he assesses the church, it's not the way that we typically assess churches nowadays.

Because he's not assessing them by numbers or anything external. It's by their holding fast to his word and their faithfulness to him. It's who they are and where they turn in time of crisis.

[19 : 31] That's what defines them as a church. When external difficulties are threatening the church itself, it's what defines them that they are holding fast to Jesus. They are not looking outside.

They are looking to him. Jesus sees this and he commends them for it. Now what were the external difficulties that they were facing? He says in verse 9 that there were those of the synagogue of Satan.

Those who say they are Jews but are not. They lie, Jesus says. These are sharp piercing words from Christ. Much like the church in Smyrna in Revelation chapter 2, there's another church that has no rebuke there.

There Jesus only has commendation for them. He has encouragement for them. In Smyrna, they were facing hostility from the Jewish community there as well. In Philadelphia, they are facing the same kind of persecution from those who are ethnically Jewish but Jesus says morally and spiritually they are not Jewish.

What does he say that they are? He says they're satanic. Those who oppose and act in hostility against Christ's church are acting satanically whether through deception as Jesus talks about here.

[20 : 44] They say they are Jews and are not. They lie about it or as in violence. That was in the case in Smyrna. They were violently persecuting the church there. Here in Philadelphia, they are persecuting the church through deception.

So it continues in our day as well. It may not be the synagogue of Satan that we are facing in 2021 but the same deceptive hostility is prevalent down through the ages as an attack against the church.

We should not be surprised by this. The Bible talks about, the New Testament talks about that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one, 1 John 5. The apostle Paul, of course, said in 2 Corinthians 4 that the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

The God of this age, Satan himself. And so for us, we live in a relatively free society. We don't face, as of now, the violent persecution as much as we face an attack on the truth, whether that be on the outside or as Jesus makes clear in Revelation 2 and 3, all these addresses to the churches, there's also attack that happens within the church as well, outside or inside.

The early church there was facing contamination of false teaching, sexual compromise, immorality. They were facing people bringing in the idols and ideologies of the surrounding culture.

[22 : 11] They were trying to mix all these things with Christ's teaching and authority, syncretism. They were trying to mix these things. And that is what had put the church at the first century in such a perilous position.

Five out of the seven churches that Jesus addresses, they are rebuked by him. They are warned that if they don't repent, Jesus will come in judgment on them. In Ephesus, it was their neglecting the truth that above all else, Christ calls us to embrace him, to love him, allowing that love to then in turn affect how we love one another, how we treat one another in the church.

Or in Sardis, in Sardis, Jesus said, your exterior, how you present yourself, it doesn't matter at all when inside you are dead to me. When you have forgotten what you have received and what you have heard, outwardly you may appear beautiful, but inwardly you are full of spiritual death and decay.

Jesus to that church said, wake up. The call is for you to wake up, to hear my voice, to hear my voice of truth and to repent. I am the one who knows the heart and the mind, Jesus says.

I see you, church. I know what's there. Wake up and repent. This church, he talks about strengthening what remains. Strengthening what remains. You're in the church.

[23 : 30] You hear the voice of his word. The call to respond with repentance and faith is there. Respond, O church, hear. What we gather, brothers and sisters, by examining what our Lord says to his church is that we cannot afford to be passive in our faith, nor can we be neglectful of the truth that we have received from Jesus.

Like Smyrna, we are called to be faithful, faithful even unto death. We are called, as he says here to Philadelphia, to hold fast to the truth, even when spiritual forces rage and they combat against that truth.

I want to say that as a pastor, I feel the weightiness of these calls. These calls in that not only am I called to deliver the message, but I also am charged with setting the example.

I'm called to be out front leading the way. And to be honest with you, it's a heavy task. It's a heavy task.

I know my own heart. I know my own struggles, my own failures, not only as a man, but as a husband, as a father, as a friend, as a brother, and as a pastor.

[24 : 51] And there have been times when the shame in my life has been so overwhelming, so suffocating, that all I want to do is crawl under a rock and hide, believing that the world would be a better place without me.

I go full George Bailey. And without this word, friends, without this Jesus, who is holy and true, who holds the keys to God's household, who holds the key to all of redemptive history, who opens the door, and you know who he opens the door for?

For the weary and the shame-filled like me, without this, I would be lost. All hope, all hope would be gone. But what has been so rich and so timely for me during this season of hard providence that I've been going through are these promises that Jesus has to his church for those who are undergoing trials and difficulties, being reminded that it's our Lord Jesus, brothers and sisters, who continues to promise, promise to his people, that the day is coming when disappointment, grief, and fear will be gone, that sorrow will be forgotten, that love's purest joys will be restored, when change and tears are passed and all saved and blessed we shall meet at last.

That is who Jesus is. And even to his church here in Philadelphia, he talks about acting in such a way that will be undeniable. He's going to act on their behalf.

And he talks about that in verses 9 through 10. He talks about that he's going to make those that are of the synagogue of Satan come down and bow before their feet that they will learn that I have loved you and that he will keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole earth to try those who dwell on the earth.

[26 : 51] He talks about those that are of the synagogue of Satan and this is an incredible picture because when he says that he holds open the door and no one is able to shut and he shuts and no one is able to open, Jesus is saying, friends, that he has the authority to bring even the most heinous, even the most blasphemous enemies and bring them into his house as those who now know him and know his love for his people.

What an encouragement that is for us knowing the power and the grace of Jesus. There is nothing too heinous. There is nothing too dirty.

There is nothing too shameful. There is no one too dirty or too shameful for him. Even those that he called part of Satan's domain. Christ is able to save to the uttermost no matter, no matter the sin.

And the second thing that he promises to his church in Philadelphia is that he will protect them from the hour of trial that is coming upon those who dwell on the earth. Now the thing I want to just point out to you is keeping in mind that Jesus is addressing a very specific church at this time.

I do not believe that he is talking about a period of tribulation that they themselves would not experience. That doesn't fit the context of what he's saying here. Rather, what Jesus is saying is a principle that holds true, that rings true for the church down through the ages all the way to the end of time.

[28 : 23] And that is that for those who hold fast to him during trials and tribulations, he promises to provide the strength, the supernatural strength and presence that they will need to endure that.

The world is filled with tribulation. You and I, we cannot avoid it. But Jesus provides what no one else can, spiritual endurance and ultimately the victory that comes with him.

And he says that in verse 11 and following. He says, I am coming soon. Hold fast to what you have that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, he says.

To the one who conquers, by holding fast to me, he says, there is a place for you. There is a name for you. And it's my God, Jesus says. It is a place that my God is preparing for you.

It is a name that my God has written on you. And Jesus says that I will make him, I will make him the one who endures. I will make him a member.

[29 : 24] I will make him a partaker in the city that is coming down from heaven. The city that is prepared for you. So all of that, all of that is for you, Cheyenne Mountain.

For you who hold fast even amid trials and afflictions in this life. The one who is true and faithful. The one who is holy. Who is the fulfillment of all of God's covenant promises.

He holds the door open to this day, to this very day. And Jesus does this, friends, because he ultimately took on the form of a servant for us. He was obedient to his father even unto death.

He faced trial after trial. He faced trial from Satan. He faced trial from the unbelieving world and the betrayal, the slander, the lies, the injustice that we afflict on one another.

Jesus did all this who for the joy that was set before him, he endured it all. He endured the cross. He endured the shame. He endured the rejection, the ridicule, the malice, the betrayal, the abandonment, the loneliness, the wrath of his father.

[30 : 27] He did all that knowing that for the joy that was set before him, he would bring you and I into his kingdom. And he calls, he calls you and I to follow in his footsteps by embracing and holding fast to him who promises by his word and spirit through the ministry of his church that we will overcome.

There is no one like Jesus. There is no one like him. So the call goes out to you, church, to hold fast, to hold fast.

He who has ears, let him hear what the spirit says to the church. By his endurance, we will conquer. Thanks be to him. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this word.

We thank you for this time. Jesus, we thank you that even though we in the eyes of the world as a church may have little power in your eyes, Lord, help us to be faithful.

Help us to hold fast. Help us by your spirit, Lord, to endure what we must. We ask that you would, Lord, convert us, convert us out of our worldly way of thinking.

[31 : 41] Convert us. If we, Lord, if we do not see you as you are, as the holy and true one, as the one who holds the keys, keys to heaven, keys to the kingdom of God, that no one, no one is able to shut what you have established and no one is able to open what you have shut.

You have ultimate authority, Lord Jesus, and we pray that as we come to your table now, you would remind us of how you set your authority aside from heaven to come down and to serve us in this incredible way.

Lord, help us to eat and drink in faith as we go to your table now. And it's in your name we pray. Amen.