

The Weak Church
Revelation 3:7-13
11/30/2014

One of the most crippling things that Christians face is fear and instability. A manager and a sales rep stood looking at a map on which colored pins indicated the company representative in each area. "I'm not going to fire you, Wilson," the manager said, "but I'm loosening your pin a bit just to emphasize the insecurity of your situation." There are many things that can make us insecure. Anything that attacks our stability, and the world we know will often give us feelings of insecurity. 9/11 gave many people insecurity. Earthquakes literally make us unstable! Any fear can do this, as well. Insecurity and instability were the fears of the church in Philadelphia. This might be the most modern of the letters, since the situation is so close to what we know in our very insecure world.

Philadelphia was a city known mostly for the devastating earthquake that happened in A.D. 17. It happened about 80 years before this letter was written to the Philadelphian church, and the earthquake would have been a very vivid memory, even to the second and third generations after the event. Ground zero was not actually in Philadelphia, but the aftershocks were much more severe in Philadelphia than in any other city. It changed everything for the city. They started building very differently than they had before. Pillars were made in sections, instead of just in one piece. That way, if another earthquake came along, a many-sectioned pillar would be better able to withstand the vibrations. When the earthquake happened, people would actually go outside their buildings in order to avoid any roof falling on their head. It was obviously much safer out in the open than it was inside. The city itself was so devastated by the earthquake that Rome forgave the tribute and taxes that were due from the city as a way of giving relief. This historical background plays a decisive role in understanding what Jesus is saying to the church there.

The description of Jesus, as we have seen with all the other churches, both comes from chapter 1, and is chosen specifically as the answer to the problems of that particular church. Interestingly, in chapter 1, Jesus is said to have the keys of Death and Hades. Here in chapter 3, it is modified to "the key of David." The change invokes the power of Jesus in His kingdom. David is a king, so the keys of David are kingly keys. They are the keys of the kingdom. The phrase that follows helps explain what these keys do. Jesus opens and no one can shut a door that Jesus opens. Jesus shuts, and no one can open a door that Jesus has shut. That is what keys do: they unlock and they lock. Jesus is the divine Doorkeeper.

That would be immensely comforting to people who were in the situation of the Philadelphian church. The city was weak, and the church was weak. It did not have a lot of power. They were facing opposition both from the Romans and from

the Jews. It would be easy to think that someone other than Jesus is the real doorkeeper. Maybe it was the emperor of Rome, who seemed to be all-powerful in those days, and could throw people in prison quite easily. Or maybe it was the Jews, who were opposing the Christians, and could seem to be the keepers of the kingdom of God. How comforting it would be, then, to know that these people did not hold Death, Hades, or the kingdom of God in their hands. Only King Jesus has those keys.

Jesus says that He holds before the church an open door. Think of all the things that this would mean to someone in that church! It would mean that they would never be confined to their house when an earthquake happened. They could go outside for protection. That would be the literal application of the text. Metaphorically speaking, an open door would mean opportunity to share the gospel, and it would mean that Jesus takes care of His people during their trials. Now we must be very careful here to notice that Jesus does not promise that His people will avoid all suffering. Not even verse 10 says that God's people will escape all suffering, or the last trial. The grammar of verse 10 indicates that Jesus will preserve His people in the midst of trial, and then bring them out of it. He is NOT saying that Christians will be preserved away from all physical harm and suffering. Instead, there is an open door out of the suffering. An open door also means access to God, as it clearly does mean at the beginning of the very next chapter. The open door means many things, therefore: an eventual way out of all suffering which may or may not be immediate, access to God, and a way in to the kingdom of God.

This open door does NOT mean a freedom to do whatever we jolly well want to do. In other words, it does not mean infinite opportunity for everything. The door is related to the kingdom of God, and to heaven itself.

Verse 9 tells us of the pressure that this church was facing from the Jews of the time. They are not called the synagogue of Satan simply because they were Jews. NO, they are called the synagogue of Satan because they were actively oppressing and attacking Christ's own church. As we saw in the letter to Smyrna, such people may claim to be the people of God, but they are not. Instead, they are the synagogue of Satan. They claim to be Jews, but they are not. True Jews, as Paul says in Romans, are those who are Jews inwardly, in the spirit, not in the letter. King Jesus will reverse the power situation one day. Right now, it appears that the Jews have the upper hand in denouncing Christians to the Romans. We need to remember here that Christianity was starting to be seen as a new religion by the Romans, under the influence of Jewish informers. Romans let old established religions continue when they conquered a country. But new religions were seen to be rebellious. And so the worship of the emperor was started in order to combat the new religions like Christianity. Christians were ordered to say that Caesar is Lord. And the Jews were turning in the Christians to the authorities.

However, Jesus tells the Christians there that the persecution was only for a moment. Verse 10 tells us that there is an hour of trial. It means “the time of trial” oftentimes, but it also has the connotation of being short. Compared to an eternity of being in God's presence, any time of suffering and persecution is short. For the promise is that Jesus is coming soon (verse 11). Because He is coming soon, He tells the Christians to hold fast to what they have, so that no one can seize their crown. Philadelphia held Olympic games during those days. The victors in any contest would receive the laurel wreath as a crown. Those crowns, of course, did not last very long. But the crown that Jesus offers here will last forever.

The promise that Jesus offers is that of ultimate security and stability. He promises to make the Christian who overcomes into a pillar. Now, the point of this pillar is not that the Christian will hold up the ceiling, or even hold up other Christians. This promise is about stability. Remember the background of the earthquakes. Jesus is going to make the person who overcomes into a pillar that cannot be shaken or toppled! It is not for support, but for standing firm.

Immediately after that promise is another promise: “Never shall he go out of it.” Remember that people left the building in the earthquake for safety. Now, Jesus promises, there will never be a need to flee out of the building because there will be no more earthquakes. There will one day be no more need for emergency plans, and earthquake drills.

The last part of the promise is the part about the names being written on the pillar. Solomon, if you recall, had names written on two of the pillars in his temple. Here we have something very similar. The names that will be written on the pillar include three things: the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem, and Jesus' own name. Receiving such names was not just something to call someone else. Being named means being under the authority of the person who names you. But having such great names written upon us as Jesus promises is also a sign of the great authority that we will have.

So what are the insecurities that you face in your world? What tempts you to think that someone other than King Jesus is in control? Is it American politics? Is it an outbreak of Ebola? Is it war? Terrorists? Earthquakes? Who has the keys of Death and Hades? Who has the keys of David? Who opens and no one shuts? Who shuts and no one opens? If you are a person of small strength, easily terrified, easily afraid, then these words are for you. For the One is for you is greater than anyone or anything that can possibly be against you. Do you really believe that? Then you can hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown. For, in order to do that, they would have to take it away from Jesus. And that is certainly not going to happen.

Ultimately, however, the greatest insecurity of all is not having any relationship with King Jesus. Oh, people may not *feel* that they are insecure if they don't know Jesus. But there is no greater insecurity in all the world than to be an

enemy of King Jesus. Are you an enemy of King Jesus? If you are, if you hate the very name of Jesus, then know that you are in a very precarious position. For you owe your very life and breath to someone who not only could take away that breath from your lungs, but who is also your enemy. You are utterly in the power of Jesus Christ. He holds the keys, not you or anyone else. Make your peace with God this day. For, as verse 9 says, all those who oppose Jesus will one day bow before His feet. The only question is whether you will do so willingly or unwillingly.

One commentator puts the passage in a good nutshell, and with this I close: “In the midst of insecurity from earthquakes on the one hand, and attacks on their faith on the other, Jesus promises final stability and protection forever in his presence in the heavenly city which will come one day.”