

As we head southeast from the city of Sardis, we come to the small city of Philadelphia. And like Smyrna in the previous chapter, the church in Philadelphia was rather small. A church under intense persecution, a church which was being shut out of the society around it. But in Smyrna, the problem had been with the city itself: the Roman religion, the emperor-worship, Romans putting Christians to death, and so forth. But here in Philadelphia, the problem was with the Jews, especially because the Jews were saying that they were the true people of God.

And so, like in Smyrna, in Philadelphia it was illegal to be a Christian. The Romans considered Christians to be a threat to society, to be troublemakers, the kind of people who would tear it all down. Because the Christians refused to participate in the religious life of the city. They refused to offer sacrifices of any kind. But it was legal, on the other hand, to be a Jew, because even though they didn't offer sacrifices to the emperor or to the gods, they could still offer a sacrifice on behalf of the empire, and the Romans thought that that was good enough. But because of that, like in Smyrna, I'm sure that there were Christians in Philadelphia who tried to seek refuge within the synagogue. They could hide there away from the Romans and still believe in Jesus, at least in secret. Yeah, it wasn't great, but it was better than nothing. It was better than being put to death.

But the main difference here was that the Jews in Philadelphia had a lot more power than the Jews in Smyrna. They were a lot more influential in the city around them. I'm not saying they had complete control by any means, but they could certainly push their weight around. They could get things done when they wanted to. And they used their influence to their full advantage. They even used it as a way of shutting out the Christians, as a way of keeping them out of the main life of the city. Because the Christian church, unfortunately, was rather small. They didn't have a lot of power. There wasn't a whole lot that they could do about it. And the Jews also used their position of influence to speak against the Christians as a way of trying to get them to fall away from Christ. "How can you say that you are God's people?" they said. "You don't have a lot of power. You don't have hardly any influence. Isn't it obvious that we are God's people? Isn't it obvious that with all of this influence that we have that God is on our side? We are clearly his people, and you are not. We clearly have God on our side, and you do not. We are clearly part of the kingdom of God, and you are not." That's what the Christians in Philadelphia had to deal with on a daily basis.

And Christians, we can also find ourselves having little power in the society around us, having no real influence or at least not seeming to have a lot of influence on the way things are going. And in an attempt to gain influence, in an attempt to find some kind of power in society, there are so many churches out there who are willing to compromise, who go along with what society is saying, maybe even say it themselves. Or at the very least they don't speak up at all, thinking that if people just ignore them that maybe they can influence society in that way. And it's not just big churches that are doing this either, although there's plenty of examples of that. But whole denominations going this way, speaking against God, and instead going along with the world. And when there are so many churches that have given in in this way, it can lead us to feel kind of powerless. What are we supposed to do in this situation? It seems like we're the only ones. It seems like we're standing alone. And worse than that, these big churches will often make it sound like they are the ones who are truly following God, that it's Christian to say these things, that it's Christian to believe these things, even though they're speaking against what God himself says. "We have God on our side. Can't you see how everyone is saying it these days? What

makes you think that you have God when you are going against so many churches? Why won't you bend the knee? Why won't you go along?" And that can leave us wondering: are we part of the kingdom of God when we stand alone against the world, even against those who claim to be a part of the Church?

But Christians, Jesus knows who are his. Jesus knows who are on God's side. And he brings a word of comfort to his little powerless church in the midst of her distress. Jesus says in verse 7 of our reading: "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.'" It's kind of like what Jesus says back in chapter 1 when he says he has the keys of death and Hades. And what he means is that having a key is to have authority. If I have the key to a door, for example, I control who can go in and out of that door. If I open the door, I let people in. If I close the door and lock it, I keep people out. Possessing a key means that I have that authority. So for Jesus to have the keys of death and Hades means that he has authority over those realms. Jesus is Lord even over the realm of death. And Jesus having the key of David means that he alone determines who belongs to David and who doesn't. Or to put it a little bit differently, Jesus determines who is part of his kingdom and who is not. If Jesus opens the door, then no man is going to be able to close it. And if Jesus closes the door, no one is going to force their way in. Because Jesus is the one who has the key. God is the one who determines who is saved and who is not. And even though God's people may be shut out on earth, no one will be able to shut them out from God. Jesus opens the door to all of those who trust in him.

And more than this, Christians, Jesus also gives victory to his church. He says in verse 9 of our reading: "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." So not only are they going to come and bow down before Jesus—although that's certainly going to happen. Every knee will bow to Jesus in the end—but they will also come and bow down before his Church. The Jews would come, and they would say that the Church is God's people. They would say that the ones they had been persecuting are the ones who truly belong to God. They would say that they had been wrong all along. They would be forced to admit the truth and to bow down before those whom they persecuted.

And this is especially important because in the Old Testament there were many promises of the nations coming and bowing down before God's people. Isaiah chapter 45, for example, says: "Thus says the Lord: 'The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, 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. They will plead with you, saying: "Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him."'" And the problem was that the Jews thought that they alone were God's people. They thought that this was referring to them, that the nations would come and bow down before them, even though they had rejected Jesus. But Jesus would make them see the truth. They would come and bow down before the nations who did believe in Jesus, the nations who had become God's people in the Church. They would be made to see the truth.

And Christians, the same is true today. Those who claim to represent God, those who claim to speak for him, even though they speak against him and deny his Word, will be made not only to bow before Jesus, but also to bow before those who hold steadfast to his Word. They will bow

down before those who have been faithful to God in all of these things, and God will give victory to his faithful Church in the end.

But until that day comes, Jesus calls for us to hold on. He says in verses 10 and 11: "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. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." Jesus is not saying that we will not suffer at all. That's not his point here. But rather that we will be kept safe in the midst of spiritual danger. It's like Jesus prays in John 17: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." Satan will lose, Christians. Though he rages against the Church, he will not win. Though he controls the synagogues and uses them to attack the Church, he will be defeated. Even though he deceives many who claim to represent God and yet speak against him, Satan will fall. And Jesus will give the crown of victory to his people who hold faithful to him to the end.

And he also makes a beautiful promise to those who do. Verse 12 says: "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." That's such a beautiful promise, Christians, for two reasons. First of all because Philadelphia was a city prone to earthquakes. It was the kind of city where they were always suffering one earthquake after another. Buildings didn't tend to stay up for very long. Everything always seemed like it was right on the edge of disaster. And so for Jesus to promise the church in Philadelphia that they would be made a pillar shows that they will be steadfast, that they will be unshakable, that they will be unmovable. They would never have to worry about being thrown down again, because they would be made strong in God forever.

But it's also a beautiful promise, Christians, because it points to the two pillars of Solomon's temple in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings chapter 7 we are told that Solomon "set up the pillars at the vestibule of the temple. He set up the pillar on the south and called its name Jachin, and he set up the pillar on the north and called its name Boaz." So these two pillars, then, which were set up by the doors of the temple in Solomon's day had names. Jachin means "he will establish." Boaz means "in him is strength." And so these two pillars, then, represented the strength and the power which God's people had in him.

And just like those pillars, those who trust in God will be given a new name. Not just any ordinary name though, but the name of God himself. The name of the Father, which is the name of my God. The name of the Son, my own new name. The name of the Holy Spirit, the name of the city which comes down from God. The name of the most holy Trinity will be written on those who hold fast to him. And God writing his name on us is his way of saying that "this one belongs to me. This one is mine, and they will never be taken out of my hand." Like Jesus says in John 10: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." We will be made pillars in God with his name written on us to show that we have strength and power in him forevermore.

So despite not having much power in this world, Christians, even in the Church, hold on. Hold on to the Word of God. Don't ever let it go. Hold on to God. Don't ever give in. God will

strengthen you through it all. Victory will be yours in the end. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has set an open door before those who trust in you, keep us steadfast in faith through all our trials, and give us the strength to hold on to you even when all the world is against us, so that we may gain the victory over all things in you; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.