

## Letter to a Faithful Church

Revelation 3:7-13

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC Combined Service on January 26, 2025

### Introduction

- ❖ Brothers and sisters, it's our joy, this morning, to reflect on five decades of God's faithfulness – *to* and *through* Houston Chinese Church. **Fifty years ago to this day, on January 26, 1975, HCC held its first worship service.** So it's only fitting to gather the entire church, on this day, to commemorate our founding and to celebrate as one Family.
  - All of us have been blessed by this church. Some of us have a long history with HCC. While others have been worshipping here more recently. But regardless of how long you've been here. **I'm sure you have your own stories of how God has done great things through HCC.** How he saved souls. Changed lives. Strengthened marriages. Raised up families. Reconciled relationships. Made disciples. Planted churches. And proclaimed his Name where it was not already named.
    - **All of this through the ministry and members of HCC.** Many who were only with us for a season. But many who are still here. **Just think of all the spiritual fruit that has been sown and reaped over the course of 50 seasons!** All through the faithful labor and loving sacrifice of so many brothers and sisters in Christ.
  
- ❖ As one who started attending HCC at age 12. Who heard the gospel and learned all the stories of Scripture in the youth ministry. Who has served here on staff for a total of 18 years. I think I have a good perspective on the church. **Which is why I feel confident to say we're a faithful church.** We're not a perfect church. We still have ways to grow. There are still shortcomings in our ministries and areas of improvement. **But, overall, we have been – and still are – a faithful church.** Faithful to Christ. Faithful to proclaim his gospel. Faithful to teach his Word. Faithful to love one another and make disciples in his name.
  - HCC is a faithful church. **And while it's good to reflect on our legacy of gospel fidelity. It's important to shift our focus to the future.** To the vision that God has placed before us. **To extend our legacy of faithfulness over the next fifty years.**
  
- ❖ Which is why I chose, for this morning's text, a letter to the church in Philadelphia. I'm not talking about some church in Philly, in Pennsylvania. **I'm talking about the first-century church in the ancient Roman city of Philadelphia.** It was a faithful church. That becomes clear when you compare them to the other churches mentioned in Revelation chapters 2-3.
  - Understand that, in those days, the Christian church was under a dark cloud of persecution. **The Apostle John likely wrote Revelation, at the end of the first-century, during the height of the imperial cult.** Where Roman emperors demanded from their subjects – not just allegiance – but worship. John himself was banished to the prison island of Patmos for his refusal to bend the knee to Caesar.
  
- ❖ **So he knows the kind of persecution facing these seven churches in Revelation.** Sadly, most weren't doing well. They were buckling under pressure. They were compromising their allegiance to Christ. In these letters, you'll find Jesus saying to these churches, *“But I have this against you.”* And then he calls them out for somehow compromising the gospel.

- ❖ But not the church in Philadelphia. Jesus has no rebuke for them. Nothing critical to say. They were faithful. But a church like that must not grow complacent. **Even churches with a legacy of faithfulness are at risk of slipping into compromise.** They can't rest on the laurels of their past faithfulness. **Extending their legacy into the future requires faithful churches to hold fast to the promises of Christ.** Promises found in this morning's text.
  - We're going to see: (1) The promise of access and acceptance (vv7-9). (2) The promise of protection and perseverance (vv10-11). (3) The promise of permanence and presence (vv12-13).

### The Promise of Access and Acceptance

- ❖ Let's consider the first. **The promise of access and acceptance.** It's symbolized by an open door. Listen to vv7-8, *"7And 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.'"*
  - Jesus is described here as holy and true and carrying David's keys. In Scripture, keys signify authority. **The authority to open or shut doors – granting or forbidding access.** In chapter 1:18, we're told that Jesus holds in his hands the keys to Death and Hades. In other words, Death has no authority over him. A point that he made abundantly clear through his Resurrection.
    - Now our text is referring to a different set of keys. A different kind of authority. **If you have the keys of David, you have authority over the kingdom of David – over the nation of Israel.** You have the authority to determine who's welcomed and who's shut out from the people of God.
- ❖ **This is a particular concern because context reveals that Christians were being shut out of the synagogue in Philadelphia (v9).** Anyone who confessed Jesus as Messiah was excommunicated – no longer considered part of the people of God. **So for those recently shut out of the synagogue, v8 offers so much hope and promise.** *"8I 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."*
  - **Now you might be wondering why Christians would even want to be associated with a local synagogue in the first place.** Well, a large part of the appeal is the fact that Judaism was recognized by Rome as a legal religion. **Which meant Jews were exempt from the requirements of imperial cult worship.**
- ❖ **So to lose access to the synagogue was to lose your legal cover. Your excuse to avoid the demands of emperor worship.** Before Christ, these Jews enjoyed a persecution-free life. But since becoming Christ-followers, they found themselves shut out of the synagogue and pressured to bow to Caesar.
  - That's a huge cost. **But v8 says they accepted that cost of discipleship.** They felt the pressure to compromise their faith. But they kept the word and refused to deny the name of Jesus.

- ❖ And for that, Jesus says he has set before them an open door, which no one is able to shut. **He's reminding them of the door of salvation that he opened.** Jesus is saying, "Don't worry that they banned you from the synagogue. I've opened the doors of the true temple for you. And no one will ever shut you out." **That's a promise of access.**
  - **And there's also a promise of acceptance.** Listen to v9, "*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.*" **In other words, I'll vindicate you.** I'll expose the lies of those in the synagogue who shut you out and say you're not a part of my people. I'll prove them wrong. **Eventually they'll come back to you admitting that they were wrong and that you are truly accepted by me.** That you are loved by me.
  
- ❖ Church, these words are meant to encourage you as well. **The faith that's been handed down to us has fallen out of favor in society. Because it won't conform to the spirit of this age.** It's viewed as too narrow. Too backwards. Too traditional.
  - If you're a biblical Christian who holds firm to the Word of God, don't be surprised to find a few doors shut in your face. **For some of you, in your line of work, being a Christian is a liability.** Being open about your faith could result in closed doors as you seek advancement or other career opportunities.
  
- ❖ That's the cost of discipleship. **A cost that is much easier to accept when you're told that a open door has been set before you.** By Jesus himself, who holds the keys of the kingdom. He opened that door and made a way for us to be accepted by God. By taking our place and bearing our sin. **He was led outside the gates of Jerusalem and shut out. So that we, who trust in him, may never be shut out.** He was forsaken that we might always be welcomed with complete access to his kingdom. That's the good news of the gospel.

### **The Promise of Protection and Perseverance**

- ❖ So the first promise that faithful churches must hold fast to is the promise of access and acceptance. **The second is the promise of protection and perseverance.** This is emphasized in v10, "*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.*"
  - Their faithfulness is reinforced here. The church in Philadelphia has kept Jesus's word about patient endurance. About the need for all Christians to patiently persevere in the face of mounting persecution.
  
- ❖ That word for *endurance* is translated elsewhere in the NT as steadfastness, fortitude, or just plain toughness. It literally refers to the ability to stand under a heavy weight. **So to have patient endurance means you have what it takes to stand up under the pressure of great trials without letting them crush your faith.**

- ❖ These believers were faithfully bearing the weight of persecution coming from both the Jewish synagogue and the Roman populace. **Jesus acknowledged their faithfulness and promised, in v10, to reward them.** He says he will keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world (cf. Dan 12:1). We're talking about end-times judgment.
  - **Now some believe Jesus is promising in v10 to rapture away his church before judgment comes.** So that Christians avoid the hour of trial altogether. But that interpretation doesn't fit the context. In Revelation, there's no indication that saints will be snatched away and spared the coming storm. **Rather the promise is that we'll survive it. That we'll endure the storm.** That's how God keeps his people.
  
- ❖ Consider the Exodus. And how, during the Ten Plagues, God's people still had to live in the same land as the Egyptians. **Yes, they were kept from judgment. But some of those plagues were so widespread that even the Israelites were troubled by them.** When the Nile was turned to blood, it affected "*all the land of Egypt.*" (Ex 7:19) Which meant God's people couldn't drink from the river either. But even so, it's still accurate to say that the LORD kept his people from the Ten Plagues. They were spared his judicial wrath.
  - **This is how God keeps his saints from coming judgment. Not by removing us from the scene. But by protecting us and persevering us through the fiery trial.** That's what Jesus prayed for in John 17:15. "*I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*" So there's no promise that the Church will altogether avoid persecution. But she certainly will avoid God's wrath.
    - **That's because his wrath against his people has been fully satisfied in the substitutionary death of his Son.** Jesus bore the wrath. He patiently endured it. So that you and I can patiently endure and stand up under any trial.
  
- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, my whole point is that churches can't rest on their past track record of gospel faithfulness.** We shouldn't assume a faithful church like ours will avoid future trials and tribulations. That Christ will return soon to snatch us away before all the trouble comes. No, that's not how Jesus exhorts the church in Philadelphia.
  - Look at v11, "*I am coming soon.*" Notice what he doesn't say next. He doesn't say, "So huddle up and just wait it out." No, Jesus says, "*I am coming soon. [So] Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.*" It looks like we'll have to hold fast. **We'll have to keep exercising patient endurance now so that we'll be ready to stand under those bigger trials later.**
  
- ❖ When I entered my forties, I came to the humbling realization that I can't rest on my past history of exercise and fitness. Being fit in your twenties is great. But if you don't keep up with exercising, all that muscle turns into flab. If I had to run a 10K tomorrow – or any other test of strength and endurance – I'd fail miserably. **I can't rely on my past fitness.**

- ❖ **Church, in the same way, we can't rely on our past faithfulness.** Relying on how we've patiently endured our share of trials and tribulations. Relational conflicts. Personnel issues. Moral failures. Financial challenges. **As a church, we experienced those past trials AND endured.** All by the grace of God. All by his protecting and persevering grace.
  - Let's be thankful for that. But let's not rest on that. **Let's learn from each experience.** So that we keep holding fast and pressing on. Treating all of these smaller trials as a means of preparation for the bigger trials that the Church of the Living God will have to endure.

### **The Promise of Permanence and Presence**

- ❖ So every faithful church needs to press on and hold fast to Jesus's promise of access and acceptance and his promise of protection and perseverance. Here's the third and final promise to hold fast to: **The promise of permanence and presence.**
  - For a church living in times of instability, being persecuted and shut out of the synagogue. **What could be more comforting than the promise of a permanent position in God's temple?** That's the promise in v12. *"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."*
    - The church in Philadelphia remained firm in their faith. **So Jesus promises to make them into permanent pillars in the true temple of God.** Because they refused to deny his name. Jesus promises to inscribe on them three names: God's name, the name of the new Jerusalem, and his own new name.
- ❖ **This idea of writing names on pillars actually has precedence in the OT.** In 1 Kings 7:21, we're told that the two pillars at the vestibule (the open lobby) of the temple were named Jachin and Boaz. That's a high honor to have your name inscribed on a pillar in the temple. But over time those pillars fell, along with that temple in Jerusalem.
  - **But here we're talking about permanent pillars in the true temple, located in the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven.** Which points to Revelation 21 where John sees a vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Established on a New Earth that has been cleansed of all sin and unrighteousness.
    - **To have the name of that city engraved on you is meant to communicate that you belong there.** The New Jerusalem is your city. Your hometown.
- ❖ **And what's fascinating about the way the New Jerusalem is described is how no temple is to be found in the city.** The most distinguishing feature of the old city is conspicuously absent. *"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."* (21:22) **There's no need for a temple when the Lord God and the Lamb have taken up permanent residence in your city.** That's the promise of permanence and presence. The worshippers of the Lamb will forever be – and forever remain – in the permanent presence of our God.

- ❖ Church, that's what's being promised to us. **If you hold fast and conquer, you'll be made into a pillar in the true temple of God. You'll have Jesus's name – his new name – written on you.** In Revelation 19:12, Jesus comes down out of heaven riding a white horse. His eyes are like a flame of fire. On his head are many diadems. *“And he has a name written that no one knows but himself.”*
  - That secret name, Jesus reveals to us. And not only that, he writes it on us. **Writing your name on something signifies ownership.** Like a kid scribbling his name on his toys. Like Andy in those Toy Story movies. That's how you know you're loved. That's how you know you belong. Jesus puts his name on you.
  
- ❖ **Church, we have to hold fast to these promises if we hope to extend our faithfulness over the next fifty years.** Let's be thankful for the past. But it's the future that concerns us. Will we remain faithful? As we press on in this building project. As we seek to raise the necessary funds. As we develop new ministries that reach the lost. That make more disciples. In our city and to the ends of the earth. ***Will we be faithful?*** By God's grace, we will.