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REVELATION 3: 7 – 13

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## PHILADELPHIA – FAITHFUL AND ENDURING

In the previous chapter we were in Sardis and we were looking at a dead church. Not that it looked like a dead church. We would never have thought it a dead church if Christ would not have told us so. There were lots of things going on. Everything looked great and lively. No wonder they had a reputation of being alive.

But Jesus Christ had nothing good to say about her. *You are dead*, he said. Whatever was driving people in their activities in the church, it was not a living and saving faith in Jesus as the only Saviour. And then we talked a bit about what is really essential for being a living church.

As we move on and enter the city of Philadelphia, we find the opposite. Christ tells us that in the Christian congregation in Philadelphia we have a prime example of a living church. There is no criticism in this message. He has only good things to say about her.

That is not because they are so strong and powerful and influential. It is not because they are so well-respected in town. It is not because they have an impressive cathedral with a big organ. The church in Philadelphia is not a successful mega-church. No, they *have only little power*, says Christ.

And on top of that – in the antichristian Jews, and in the Hellenistic Gentiles they had powerful enemies. The opposition and resistance was strong.

And yet, *you have kept my word*, says Jesus. *And you have not denied my name*. Under mounting pressure this small band of believers has been faithful and enduring, hanging on to the Word of God's love in Jesus Christ. Here is our example, our role-model among these churches, so to speak.

They may have been insignificant in human eyes, but they were great in God's eyes. The exalted Christ has only words of praise for them.

When we travel from Sardis to Laodicea we go a little bit to the south, but mostly eastward, deeper into the interior of the Roman province of Asia, which is today western Turkey. About 45 km on the way, about one-third of the distance from Sardis to Laodicea, we come to the city of Philadelphia. Philadelphia was founded in the second century before Christ by the Greek king Attalus II. This makes it the youngest of the seven cities where the churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3 are located.

The city was established as the centre for spreading the Greek culture, language, and lifestyle further into Asia. Over time, in the next centuries, this turned out to be a successful endeavour. Sometimes Philadelphia was called 'little Athens', and in the time of the Romans it was a prosperous city, although it was often damaged by regular earthquakes. There were always buildings that needed to be fixed or were under repair.

The fertile soil north of the city made the area suitable for growing grapes, and so there were lots of vineyards and wineries. That was the reason that, when it comes to the religious life, Dionysus, the god of wine and unrestrained sensuality, was one of the most important Greek gods to be worshipped in Philadelphia.

This is the context, the background that helps us to understand what the Christian congregation in Philadelphia was struggling with. Indeed, Jesus Christ had gathered his church also in Philadelphia. And it is to this church that the exalted Christ presents himself now as *the holy one* and *the true one*.

He is "the Holy One". In the Old Testament, this is the name of God Almighty, the LORD. He is unique, glorious, and highly exalted. The same can be said about the other name: "the True One", or "the Trustworthy One".

This name indicates that God's works and words are true, reliable, and absolutely trustworthy.

Well, with both those names, which were exclusively used for the Almighty God in the Old Testament, Christ Jesus presents himself to his small and helpless church in Philadelphia. To encourage his people, he stresses his power and majesty as the only One who is the true and authentic Messiah, the Son of God.

And he also *has the key of David*, he says. The symbolism is simple and clear. The one who has keys has the authority and the power, but also the responsibility, to open doors or to shut and lock doors; to allow access or to deny access; to let some people in and to let other people out, whatever it is such doors would be leading to.

In Rev. 1:18 the glorified Christ says about himself that he *has the keys of death and Hades*. You cannot identify this with "the key of David" in our text, but the analogy is clear. With the "key of death and Hades" Christ has the power to unlock death's door and to set prisoners free from the realm of death, or Hades. This key opens the door that leads to life. And Christ is the only one who can do this.

Here, it is *the key of David*. *What he opens no one will shut, and what he shuts no one opens*. He is in absolute control! The expression goes back to Isaiah 22:15–25. Through the prophet Isaiah the LORD Almighty expresses his indignation and anger about the unfaithfulness of Jerusalem, the city of David.

But then his anger concentrates on Shebna, the official who was in charge of the royal palace. Apparently this Shebna had misused his powerful position. And then the LORD says, "I will punish you for this, and I will appoint a replacement in Eliakim. *I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and He shall shut, and none shall open*" (Isaiah 22:22).

This was a huge responsibility for this Eliakim. No one would be able to get in or out of the royal palace without his permission and even without him knowing it. The question is: would this Eliakim be able to handle this responsibility perfectly? Isaiah 22:25 shows that the answer is 'no'.

So how does this prophecy in Isaiah 22 relate to Christ? The point is that Jesus Christ came to fulfill these words about Eliakim. He presents himself as the heir of David's royal house and kingdom. And what neither David himself, nor Eliakim, nor anyone else in the Old Testament could do, Christ has done. He opened God's kingdom.

By his death on the cross, and his resurrection, he took away what prevented us from entering. He opened the door and now the access is free for all who believe in him.

Jesus Christ was given this unique authority, *the key of David*, which opens the door to the eternal destiny of God's redeemed people, to the gates of the city of David, the New Jerusalem. He alone can do this: "When he opens – no one can shut". And the opposite is true, too. Without Jesus there will be no access to God or God's kingdom, for any one! "When he shuts – no one can open."

This self-presentation of the glorified Christ is so comforting and encouraging, especially when the Christian church is small and helpless, and finds many doors shut in this world, controlled by powerful enemies of the faith. The One with the power of the holy and true God knows exactly what is going on in Philadelphia.

*I know your works*, he says. "I know the difficult circumstances you find yourself in. I know the hostilities you are facing, and I am fully aware how you have handled these." In the prosperous and culturally advanced city of Philadelphia not many people were very impressed by this small and weak group of Christians. But Christ looked at this church with love and respect.

*I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut*. What does Christ mean by this image? You can think of a number of different things. But remember, Christ is the key-bearer. With this power and authority, he controls your future and destination as God's people, God's church. And as we journey toward the kingdom of heaven, he takes care of his church and he provides for her, despite the fierce opposition she may be facing.

He gives open minds and eager hearts that listen to the gospel and embrace its message. He guarantees your freedom to approach God through Jesus'

sacrifice. And by the power of his Holy Spirit he opens up outreach possibilities for his church that we would not even think of.

And all this comes with the permanent access Christ opens for us, giving access to God and to his kingdom. Permanent, in the sense that no one can take it away or block it. It is a door *that no one is able to shut*, no matter how difficult they make it for the church. The trials and hardships can be many for God's children. They can shut many doors for you. But no one can slam the door in your face that leads to the glorious victory in Christ's eternal kingdom. This "open door" tells you that God's plan will be realized.

You could see this first of all in the faithfulness of the congregation in Philadelphia. *I know that you have but little power*, says Christ. It was not much, this church. It was a small group, only a few members, weak and vulnerable. They did not have much wealth or members with significant influence or social status. Nothing like that! And then the opposition – it can easily become disappointing and discouraging.

And yet, despite this outward weakness, *you have kept my word and have not denied my name*, says Christ. Despite the pressure, they have persistently confessed the one name by which we can be saved, the name of Jesus. They have remained faithful and loyal to Jesus Christ and to his Word. They have believed that Christ kept the door to God open, and so they have even grown in faith and developed spiritually. And they have resisted the lure and temptations of Babylon, the attractive norms and values of the contemporary culture.

Is this your congregation? Is this your church? Do you recognize this picture? Do not say too quickly: "sure, this is us!" Is it indeed your faithfulness and loyalty to Jesus Christ and to his Word that fills your heart and drives you to stick persistently to confessing the only name by which we can be saved? And do you at all times just as persistently refuse to deny this name?

Another result of "the open door" that Christ has set before his people in Philadelphia is the surprising promise in v.9. Just as the congregation in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11), the church in Philadelphia had to deal with people *who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie*. The point is again, as we saw before, that the true seed of Abraham, the true Jews, are the Christians.

But the people Christ talks about here are the antichristian Jews. They call themselves God's people, but it is the opposite, they reject Jesus Christ. And Satan leads them to slander and attack the church. They form the *synagogue of Satan*. That is scary and intimidating. Those hostilities could easily discourage this small congregation and make them feel insecure. What do you do?

Well, here is the surprise! *I will make them come*, says Christ. No, not to attack you or ridicule you or humiliate you, but *to bow down before your feet and learn that I have loved you*. This is amazing! Some of the most dangerous enemies of the church will come, turn to this small and insignificant Christian church, and repent. They will acknowledge Christ's love for his church as his Bride.

No, this is not an announcement of a general conversion of all Jews to the Christian faith. But here is our incredible encouragement, also today. Look through the open door that no one can shut. See God's glory as he fulfils his plan. And therefore, do not be intimidated, do not be frightened, do not be discouraged by hostilities, by ridicule or hatred. But continue to trust in God's victory. Christ has opened this door that no one can shut, and he will continue to do surprising things as the church journeys on, regardless of the circumstances.

This whole message to Philadelphia is so full of encouragement for God's faithful churches everywhere. The exalted Christ is so happy when his church remains faithful and shows steadfast endurance in holding on to the true gospel, even when this church is, humanly speaking, small, weak, and insignificant; when she is faced with scoffing, false accusations, and oppression. He will continue to provide security, even in the most threatening circumstances.

*Because you have kept my word about patient endurance*, he says, now you may trust, that *I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world*. "The hour of trial" refers to the trials and punishments that God will send into this world, as we will hear about it in the rest of this book. And this will be ongoing, a constant reality, during the last days. The entire time before Jesus' return is characterized by such trials, then here and then there.

It will be a time of testing. It will be a sifting process to show who Christ's enemies are and who his followers are. Will you choose to follow the Lamb of God on the journey to the New Jerusalem or will you settle down in Babylon and make your permanent home in this world? Will you side with the one true God and worship him or will you side with the false gods and worship them? Watch out! Satan will do his utmost to make you deny the name of your Saviour and forget his Word.

This time before the establishment of God's eternal kingdom will be a time of trial for the strengthening of the believers and for the hardening of the wicked. As it says in Daniel 12: *There shall be a time of trouble such as never has been since there was a nation till that time (vs.1). Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly (vs.10).*

So, who are those facing this "trial"? Christ says that it is *to try those who dwell on the earth*. Or: "the inhabitants of the earth". Now that expression is often used in Revelation to refer to people who do not follow Jesus Christ, enemies of God and the church. Those are earthbound people, so to speak. Earth is where their citizenship is, as opposed to those whose citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

However, when Jesus says to his church, *I will keep you from the hour of trial*, he does not mean that God's church will escape the tribulation and trials. It does not mean that this sifting process will not affect you and me as believers. It is going to be a difficult and dangerous time, also for God's children. You will also be tested as to your commitment to persevere and to resist the temptation to settle in Babylon.

No, Christ does not promise to rapture the believers out of this world, before the tribulation begins, but to provide the spiritual protection they will need in the midst of this. He will keep his faithful church safe. When all hell breaks loose, you will be protected in your Father's hands, since *nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:39).

God knows those who are his own. He knows them all and he will seal them and protect them. By his grace you will not perish.

Oh, it's true, "the hour of trial" will be frightening in many ways. "But don't be afraid. I have the key to give you access to God's glorious victory," says Christ. "And *I will keep you*. Trust in me when things get scary. And trust my promise: *I am coming soon*." Here is your comfort and encouragement: your trials and temptations will not last. That would be so discouraging and depressing. But no, it will all come to an end. The coming of Jesus Christ will be the end of 'the hour of trial'.

This perspective gives even more urgency to the call to remain strong. There is light at the end of the tunnel, the light of the coming Christ in glory. And in the meantime, hang in there and *hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown*.

But what do you have to hold fast? Well, your faith in God's Word, and your desire to obey this word, your loyalty to Jesus Christ, your confession of the name of Christ, and your trust in the powerful victory of God's love.

Do not let go of these things when trials come and when times get tough. Do not cave in under pressure. When darkness creeps in and when Satan uses opposition, trials, persecution, and whatever he can find to make it really hard for you, turn to him who is holy and true, and who holds the key of David. Trust that what he opens in your life no one can shut, *so that no one may seize your crown*.

Yes, you have a 'crown'. This is the image of your final victory, your communion with Jesus Christ, that you may enjoy in full in the completed kingdom of God, your Father in heaven. Believe in Jesus Christ, and this 'crown of victory' is yours already. It is ready to be handed out – whether that will be on the day of your death or the day of Jesus' return – whichever comes first.

Think of what Paul wrote to Timothy: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day* (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

"Yes, it's yours," says Christ to the church in Philadelphia. "You have kept my word and have not denied my name. Hold on to that. Let no one take it away from you. It is urgent! Let no one distract you from focussing on me



in your life, so that you would miss out on the glorious coronation that is waiting for you.”

“Continue to confess my name, and I will keep the door open for you to access the great future in store for you.”

It is worth it. It really is! At the end of his message to the church in Philadelphia the exalted Christ has again marvellous promises for *the one who conquers*. That is the one who holds fast what God gave him; the one who endures in the hour of trial; the one who suffers because of his faithfulness to Jesus Christ, but wins the victory in the good fight of faith. *I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.*

Some pillars were freestanding. Think of the two bronze pillars that were standing on both sides of the entrance of Solomon’s temple. We read about those in 1 Kings 7. The one was called *Jakin*, which means “he established”. The other one had the name *Boaz* and that means “in him is strength”. With these names those pillars symbolized that Israel was entirely dependent on God’s power.

But most pillars were part of a large building – a temple, a palace, or a mansion. And they were important. They were supporting the structure so that the building would not collapse. Those pillars could never be removed. They were a necessary and significant permanent presence in such a building. Such pillars became symbols of security and stability.

This image would speak to the congregation in Philadelphia. The believers would be pillars in God’s temple, a building more stable and more secure than anything ever built in Philadelphia with its regular earthquakes.

What does Christ mean with “the temple of my God”? A temple is a place of worship. But, as we know, the New Jerusalem will have no temple. It says in Rev. 21:22, *I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.*

So, this will happen: if you overcome all the trials and temptations, and you remain faithful to your Saviour Jesus Christ, you will be given a permanent place in the perfect and triumphant church and in God’s holy presence to worship him for ever and ever. United in living communion with Jesus

Christ you will receive a supporting role in the completed church as God's eternal building.

And *never shall he go out of it*. In Jesus Christ, your place in God's temple and your joyful participation in the eternal worship will be secure. For with your own eyes you will see what David is longing for in Ps. 27:4 - *One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in his temple.*

To confirm the security of this marvellous future, Christ adds that he will mark you with three names, just to emphasize and assure you beyond any doubt who you are, where you're going, and who makes you ready for this.

The first is *the name of my God*, he says. You have something similar in the Old Testament already. In Numbers 6:27 we read that the LORD says, when the priests will bless God's people, *they will put my name on the Israelites*. God claims them to belong to him. And it is the same here as elsewhere in Revelation where we hear about 'seals' or 'the Father's name' on the foreheads of God's children. With this name God the Father claims his ownership. You belong to him, as his possession. This comes with the promise that he will always take care of you and protect you.

The second is *the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God*. This name confirms that you have been registered as a citizen of the New Jerusalem. And with this name written on you, you know for sure that this is your destination; this is what you are heading for, the New Jerusalem or the new heaven and the new earth.

The third is the name of him who makes all this possible by the victorious power of his grace - *I will also write on him my own new name*, says Christ. We may still be somewhat puzzled by this "new name". It may refer to what Paul says in Philippians 2:9, that when Jesus Christ completed his work of reconciliation, *God gave him the name that is above every name*. Somehow this name expresses the identity of our Saviour in a way that is more glorious and more powerful than we can imagine today.

So yes, that is you as a child of God holding on to Jesus Christ and to his word. You live in this dark and broken world. And as you face the hour of trial, the challenges and temptations, the struggles and hardships, are many.

But you are marked with these three names. It is almost like a package with an address label that says that you are ready to be shipped out.

The label has the name of your Owner: God the Father, who claims you and is ready to receive you.

It has the address: your destination is the New Jerusalem, the New Earth.

And it has the name of the Sender: the glorified Jesus Christ, who by his grace makes you ready for shipping.

This is how you may go through life. Look at the names on your shipping-label and praise God for the abundant assurance that the victory will be yours.

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.

2. How can a dead church become alive again? Describe the differences between a dead church and a church that is alive. How do you find out?
3. Some interpretations of the Book of Revelation (and other passages in the New Testament that speak about Jesus' return) talk about 'the rapture'. This is the view that Jesus will come to take the true believers up to heaven, before 'the hour of trial', also called 'the great tribulation', after which he will return to judge. What do you think about this idea, and how would this impact our faith life?
4. How can the Book of Revelation help us today to apply, in our lives, passages like Ephesians 6:10-18; Matt. 25:1-13; John 17; Colossians. 1:15-23; 1 Thess. 5:1-11?

#### **Chapter 8 – Revelation 3:7-13**

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Philadelphia Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Compare the promise in Revelation 3:9 with what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 11. Some Christians believe that the Jews still have a privileged position as God's Old Testament covenant people, and that there is a special promise of a general conversion of the Jewish people. Discuss.
3. When the church is facing opposition in this world – something we are seeing and hearing more and more – Christian believers need to be reassured and encouraged. What are the ways in which the glorified Christ is doing this here in this passage?
4. How does the letter to the church in Philadelphia encourage us to be actively involved in mission and evangelism?

#### **Chapter 9 – Revelation 3:14-22**

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Laodicea Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the