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Revelation 3:7-13

Eighth Message

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STANDING FIRM

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Each day we open our newspapers and news magazines, we read that the American public is suffering a massive loss of confidence. Loss of confidence in the stock market as the indices tumble. Loss of confidence in the business executives, enmeshed in scandals at Enron, Tyco, WorldCom. Even Martha Stewart is tarnished. Loss of confidence in the accountants who were supposed to keep the businesses honest. Loss of confidence in the financial analysts. Loss of confidence in the regulators. Loss of confidence even in Alan Greenspan: three years ago he could do no wrong; now we see that he doesn't have the golden touch. Shaken on all fronts, investor confidence is in the tank. Accompanying this loss of confidence is a strong sense of betrayal: betrayal by the executives, by the accountants, by the regulators, by the analysts, by the market, by the system.

This loss of confidence extends beyond the economic world. Our sense of national security was shredded by the attacks on 9/11. Who would have dared predict on September 10th that by midday the next day the twin towers of the World Trade Center would be mounds of rubble? Those towers which seemed so strong, so invincible brought low by people armed with nothing more than box cutters.

How the mighty have fallen: the World Trade Center, Enron, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom. What has been so amazing has been the speed with which these mighty empires have collapsed. But this is quite in keeping with the Book of Revelation, where three times in chapter 18 the lament goes up that Babylon the "great city" has fallen "in one hour" (18:10, 16-17, 19).

Perhaps it is something else that has left you feeling shaken: serious illness or death in the family, marital difficulties, problems with your kids.

Whatever your source of anxiety, many of you are feeling like the rug has been pulled out from under your feet, that there is no stability. Perhaps you found it difficult to say those words from our responsive reading: "Surely he will never be shaken...He will have no fear of bad news...His heart is secure, he will have no fear" (Ps 112:6-8). You can't relate because you're full of fear and profoundly shaken. How do we stand firm when everything around us seems shaky? May the message of Jesus Christ to his church in Philadelphia be of help to us today.

A. The Message to the Church in Philadelphia

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Philadelphia:

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge

that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:7-13 NIV)

1. Philadelphia

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: (3:7a)

We all know that Philadelphia means "brotherly love." This city, the original Philadelphia, was established around 160 BC by the king of Pergamum, either Eumenes II (197-159) or his brother and successor Attalus II (159-138). Though it is unclear exactly which of these brothers founded the city, what is clear is that it was named in honor of Attalus, whose loyalty to his older brother during the thirty-eight years that the latter was king earned him the nickname Philadelphus, meaning "brother-lover." During all those years Eumenes had confidence that his younger brother was not plotting to usurp him from the throne.

Philadelphia is located about thirty miles upstream and southeast of Sardis. The youngest of the seven cities, it was a frontier town. A frontier town geographically, located at the point where the major road to all points east left the river valleys and climbed up into the mountainous plateau of the interior. A frontier town culturally, established as a base for spreading Greek civilization into the interior lands that had recently come under the dominion of Pergamum.

It was a prosperous agricultural region, with rich volcanic soils, ideally suited to the growing of grape vines. Even today the land around Alasehir, modern day Philadelphia, is planted with mile after mile of vineyards.

Philadelphia lay in a region prone to earthquakes. A massive earthquake destroyed the city in AD 17, the same earthquake that destroyed Sardis. Tiberius, the current emperor, gave the city generous aid. In gratitude the city took the name Neocaesarea. Fifty years later the city took a third name, Flavia, family name of the emperor Vespasian. By the time this message was written the city bore three names: Philadelphia in honor of the loyalty of Attalus to Eumenes, Neocaesarea in honor of the generosity of Tiberius, and Flavia in honor of Vespasian.

But then the rug was pulled out from under the feet of the Philadelphians. Vespasian's son Domitian, emperor since 81, faced two major agricultural crises throughout the empire: overproduction of wine and a severe shortage of grain. In AD 92 he issued a decree that half of the vineyards in the provinces be destroyed, so as to protect

the Italian wine industry, and encourage the growing of grain. Philadelphia was heavily dependent upon the wine industry, so dependent that its chief deity was Dionysius, the Greek god of wine. Imagine the sense of betrayal by the city that bore Domitian's family name. This would be far worse than a US president ordering the destruction of half the vineyards of the Napa Valley in order to bolster New York wineries. Domitian claimed the title "Lord and God" and demanded the worship of his people. This is worship that the provinces had been willing to give, particularly the province of Asia where the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace first established by Augustus, brought great prosperity. Asia was enormously grateful to Rome and to her emperors, and built many temples in their honor. But what do you do when your "lord and god" turns on you?

Domitian issued this edict just three years before Jesus addressed the church in Philadelphia. How will Jesus address his church in a city that has been rocked by earthquakes in the past and recently betrayed by the Roman emperor?

2. Self-description of Jesus

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. (3:7b)

As with the other messages, Jesus introduces himself in a manner which is relevant to Philadelphia's situation and directs the gaze of the church onto himself. Jesus is holy and true. We could just as well translate this second word as "genuine." As the Jesus People said back in the early seventies, borrowing from the Coke ad, Jesus is the "real thing." Unlike Domitian, he will never betray his people.

A major theme of the book of Revelation is exposing the contrast between the true and the counterfeit. In the visible world there is a throne, a ruler, a city, a people, worship. In Revelation's imagery, the throne is occupied by the beast, the city is Babylon, her residents are called the inhabitants of the world, and they give their worship to the beast. At the end of the first century AD, Babylon is Rome, or more generally the Roman Empire, and the beast is the Roman emperor. If Philadelphia places all her confidence in Rome and her emperors, then she is bound to end up betrayed in the end, for their throne is a counterfeit throne. In the end, Rome will be exposed and the mighty empire will come crashing down. Rome, the self-proclaimed eternal city, did fall suddenly, but Babylon is alive and well. Wherever gathered mankind lives in autonomy from God, there is Babylon. Wherever men are at home in the present world, there are the inhabitants of the world. Wherever man sets himself up as king, there is the beast. But this is all a sham, a deception by the dragon, Satan.

The church in Philadelphia is not to be so deceived, for she knows the true. Her eyes have been opened to see what is unseen to the others. In the normally invisible realm there is also a throne, a ruler, a city, a people, and worship. On the true throne, the throne that really does lie at the center of the universe, sits God, and beside him sits the Lamb. The true city is the New Jerusalem, home and destiny of all those who long for God. Her residents give their worship to God and to the Lamb.

While Philadelphia looks to Rome and its Caesar, to Domitian who claims to be Lord but betrays his people, the church is to look to Jesus, who truly is Lord. Jesus, whose very name is "Faithful and True" (19:11). Jesus who is faithful to his God and Father and is therefore faithful to his people. The single greatest need for all seven churches is to look to Jesus. This is why Jesus begins each message with a revelation of himself.

Secondly, Jesus introduces himself as the one who holds the key of David, imagery drawn from Isaiah 22:22. There it was used of the authority that King Hezekiah's steward had in granting access into the king's throne room. Here Jesus uses it to describe his authority to grant access into the heavenly throne room, into the very presence of God. Jesus alone can determine this. Jesus himself is the door, and it is through him alone that we have access into God's presence. He is the doorway into the New Jerusalem at the end of the book. Those whom Jesus admits cannot be shut out by any one else, no matter what level of hostility there might be from society. As in the other messages, Jesus focuses the attention of the church onto himself. The thinking of the churches must begin and end with him. Indeed he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega (22:13).

3. Prophetic Message

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (3:8)

Jesus' prophetic word to each church begins with the statement, "I know." He is aware of the exact circumstances of each church; nothing is hidden from him. In most of the churches there is good and bad; they are a mixed bag. But in Philadelphia, as in its counterpart Smyrna, Jesus sees no bad; he issues no word of condemnation, only commendation.

Jesus is aware of three features of the Philadelphian church: it has little strength, it has kept his word, it has not denied his name. He knows that the church in Philadelphia has little strength. Presumably the church is numerically small, probably socially weak, the antithesis of one of today's mega-churches. The church is under pressure from the synagogue of Satan to deny the name of Jesus. The synagogue of Satan, active also in Smyrna, probably refers to Jews who are persecuting the church. Initially Rome considered the Church to be a Jewish sect, and therefore eligible for the religious privileges that Rome had granted the Jews, notably exemption from emperor worship. But, as foreseen by Jesus (John 16:2), the time came when the Jews cast the followers of Jesus out of the synagogues. By rejecting the people of Jesus these Jews showed that they were not the synagogue of God but the synagogue of Satan, for they were opposing the purposes of God. Fifty years after these messages were sent to the churches, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in that city, after being betrayed to the authorities by the Jews. In the document describing his death, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, mention is made of other martyrs in Smyrna, and also in Philadelphia. It seems that in the mid-second century these two cities suffered unique persecution from the Jews. This persecution was already underway in AD 95.

Though the church was weak and under attack it had not given in. It was loyal to Jesus, having kept his command to hang in there in patient endurance. What did Jesus expect of his church in Philadelphia? That she be large, impressive, influential? No, what he expects of her is loyalty, that she hold faithfully to his name, that she endure even under pressure. That's all.

With this verse I have to take issue with the NIV (and NRSV), in favor of NASB: "Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, *because* you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name." It was because the Philadelphian church had held on to Jesus despite its lack of strength that Jesus set before it an open door. Many understand this as an open door for mission, appropriate to Philadelphia's situation as a frontier city. It is true that the church is called to witness, and faithful testimony to God and to Jesus is a major theme of the book. But I think

the immediate context of the keys of David, and the broader context of the whole book require us to consider this door as the entrance into God's throne room, into the new heavens and the new earth, into the New Jerusalem. Nothing the synagogue of Satan can do can prevent the admission of the faithful saints into that blessed state. All they have to do is remain faithful to the name of Jesus.

The church in Philadelphia is weak but faithful. What action will Jesus take with her?

I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. (3:9-10)

Because the church is doing nothing to earn condemnation, there is no need for any warning of judgment. Instead, Jesus says there are two positive things he will give the church: acknowledgement by her enemies and preservation through tribulation.

All those enemies who sought to shut the believers out, Jesus will finally bring to acknowledge that it was upon this little church that his favor rested. The church might be small and weak, but it is beloved of Jesus, and that is what matters.

Because the church has already endured patiently, he will preserve it through tribulation. Many see this as a reference to the Rapture, that Jesus will remove the church from the world prior to the seven-year Great Tribulation that marks the End Times. But I disagree. The only other New Testament use of this phrase “keep from” (*tēreō ek*) is on the lips of Jesus in his Upper Room Discourse to his disciples, “I do not ask that you take them up out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Jesus specifically does not ask the Father to remove his disciples from the world. Jesus wants his church to be in the world as a testimony to his saving grace. Removing the saints would rob the world of faithful witnesses. He wants his faithful followers in Philadelphia. He wants his faithful followers in Silicon Valley. But that raises a problem. Since the enemy is so much stronger than the disciples, how are the saints to withstand his attacks? It is for this reason that Jesus petitions the Father to preserve the disciples through these attacks. The church is preserved not by being removed but by the divine hand of Father and Son upon her. On her own the church cannot possibly withstand tribulation, but she is backed by Jesus.

Tribulation is going to come. In Philadelphia it had already started as the Jews opposed the Christians. Within fifty years this would lead to martyrdom. That had already happened in Pergamum, where Antipas had been publicly killed for his faithful witness (2:13). But God in Christ preserves his Church. This does not mean that he keeps his followers from suffering, or even that he keeps them from death. The Book of Revelation makes it clear that faithful witness to Jesus is costly; all the faithful witnesses end up dead. But therein lies victory, because of the open door into the New Jerusalem.

As a third component of his prophetic message, Jesus gives the church a simple command, preceded by a promise.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (3:11)

All the church has to do is to hold on to what it already has. Again, the vitality of the church lies not in coming up with something new, but in holding on to what it already has, or, if it has forgotten that, in remembering and repenting. What the church has is Jesus. The

church is to hold on lest anyone take her crown. The Greek word *stephanos*, whence comes the name Stephen, this crown is not the diadem of a ruler, but the victory wreath of a champion. The believers will emerge victorious as long as they hold on.

Why should the church hold on in the face of persecution? Because of its simple hope in the return of Jesus. Seven times Jesus says “I am coming” (*erchomai* 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). Four of these times he says “I am coming soon” (*erchomai tachy* 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). Already nineteen hundred years have passed, but still it is true that Jesus is coming soon. This is what motivates us to hold on. This is how we stand firm when all around us is giving way.

4. Promise to the Victor

As with the other letters, Jesus closes his message to the church in Philadelphia with a promise to the victor, to the one who overcomes.

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. (3:12)

The victor in Philadelphia is the one who does not deny the name of Jesus even in the face of hostility and persecution. To this one Jesus promises two things: a place in his temple, and a set of new names. Solomon's temple featured two free-standing pillars outside the door; Solomon named them Jakin, “he will establish,” and Boaz, “in strength” (1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chr 3:15-17). The new temple will also have pillars, but these will be not bronze columns but people. When it comes right down to it, the New Jerusalem does not feature a temple at all (21:22). This would be most unusual in the ancient world. It was already unusual enough for Jerusalem to have a single temple, when most cities had multiple temples. But the New Jerusalem has no temple at all. Why? The temple represents the earthly residence of the deity. Confining the deity to a building limits him. In the New Jerusalem there will be no confinement. The physical building is replaced by the people as God is fully present with his people. Such is the promise held out to the saints in Philadelphia. Because they are incorporated into the very structure of God's residence, never again will the believer have to leave. After each of the earthquakes that struck Philadelphia, the residents took to the countryside, living in simple shelters. There will be no earthquakes in the New Jerusalem, the will be nothing unsettling that might cause flight.

Philadelphia had taken on a set of new names to show her appreciation for the Roman emperors. Likewise, the faithful saints will have a set of new names, ones not of their own choosing, but given by Jesus. He will grant a set of three new names, expressing the believers' new identity. The Bible contains many examples of people being renamed to express their new identity: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul. Geographically the church is in Philadelphia, a city that has defined itself with respect to the Roman Emperors. But that is not how the believers are to define themselves. They are a colony of heaven on earth, an outpost of the New Jerusalem. As Don Carson says, the church is “an eschatological outpost in time.” This means that written upon it is New Jerusalem not Philadelphia, New Jerusalem not Cupertino.

B. Standing Firm

How do we stand firm today in a shaky world? Not by denying that we should even face trials which threaten to shake us, for both Peter and John tell us not to be surprised when trials and tribulation befall us (1 Pet 4:12; 1 John 3:13). The question is not how we can

keep ourselves from ever being hit by trials, but how can we stand firm when the trials do come. I learn two valuable lessons from Jesus' message to his church in Philadelphia: I stand firm in my weakness, and I stand firm in my identity.

1. Standing Firm in Our Weakness

The first key to standing firm is to recognize that, paradoxically, we have no strength of our own. Jesus commends the Philadelphian church because she has stood firm despite her limited strength. The church is not called to have strength. She is called to grasp onto Jesus.

Let me give you a beautiful picture of the church in weakness. My parents were missionaries in Thailand for almost forty years. In their early years they each worked with leprosy sufferers. In the mid-1950s, my mother, then still single, helped with leprosy clinics. Each day teams of two women missionaries would visit a different village, riding their bikes in the dry season or going by boat in the rainy season. They would set up under a *sala*, a simple shelter consisting of four posts and a simple roof. Here they would invite those with leprosy to come to them for treatment. In the 1950s leprosy was still a greatly feared disease, and those afflicted with the disease were treated as outcasts. These women would touch the lepers, treat their wounds, give them medication to arrest the disease. They would also tell them of a savior who cared for the outcast, a savior who reached out to the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector, a savior who calls "the last, the lost, the least...and the dead"¹ to come to him. A church was born in Central Thailand. In fact two churches were born: a "leprosy church" and a "well church." The missionaries called the church of the leprosy sufferers the "*sala* church" because they met in these simple rural shelters. They had no money and no resources. The "well" Christians could afford to rent a building in town, or even build their own. Which was the stronger church? The leprosy church was considerably stronger, both numerically and spiritually. So much so that the missionaries would say of the one, "physically not well but spiritually well," and of the other, "physically well but spiritually not well." These leprosy sufferers had no illusions of trying to do anything in their own strength. They knew they had no strength, and so they were more ready to look to Jesus for their strength, and therefore stand firm. Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life. It is not the strong whom God chooses but the weak.

2. Standing Firm in Our Identity

The second key to standing firm is to examine how we identify ourselves. Philadelphia defined herself by Rome and her emperors, but Domitian turned upon her. If we define ourselves by the transitory we will be shaken. If you define yourself by your job, you will be shaken if you lose it. If you define yourself by your portfolio, you will be shaken by turmoil in the stock market. If you define yourself by your health, you will be shaken by illness or aging. If you define yourself by your family, you'll be shaken by marital discord or strife with the kids.

Discovering that our identity does not lie fully in God and in Christ can be a very hard lesson to learn. It is easy to assure ourselves that we are trusting only in Jesus, only to discover under trial that this is not so. I think I first woke up to the risk of this self-deception when I read the following words by the 18th-century English pastor and hymn-writer Philip Doddridge,

Can you maintain a more steady calmness and serenity when God is striking at your dearest enjoyments in this world, and acting most

directly contrary to your present interests and to your natural passions and desires.²

If you can, said Doddridge, it's a sure sign of growth in grace. The one who trusts in God can never be shaken even when God takes away what is most dear to him, because his identity is defined not by what he has but by whose he is.

Let me illustrate with another missionary story. In *Green Leaf in Drought*, Isobel Kuhn tells the story of the last few China Inland Mission members detained in China after the Communist takeover. In 1950 Arthur and Wilda Mathews arrived in the far north-west of China, not far from Tibet. They had spent years preparing for this and were confident that God would bless their ministry. But immediately Communist officials began to tighten a noose around them, first confiscating the meeting hall which they had rented and renovated at considerable cost. In January 1951 the Mission ordered the evacuation of all its members in China, but the officials refused to allow the Mathews to leave. The noose tightened: the Mathews were forbidden to leave their compound, then forbidden to talk with the Chinese, then confined to a single room. It would be nice to say that they met each blow with grace, but that would be unrealistic; that would make them superheroes to whom we could not relate. No, they struggled greatly. They desperately grasped onto any sign that they might be released, only to have their hopes dashed again and again. Finally "there came a day...when together Arthur and Wilda knelt before the Lord and abandoned themselves to live on in that stunted little kitchen as long as He wished them to. And the peace of God poured in like a flood bringing such joy as they had not known before."³ Their problems did not immediately end; they were not permitted to leave until July 1953. But they found what Isobel Kuhn called "the Feather Curtain of God...soft and comforting to the sheltered one; but intangible, mysterious, and baffling to the outsider."⁴ It was not till God stripped them of all their props that they found stability. Then they could stand firm no matter what else was thrown at them.

Is this consistent with your view of God? It certainly is consistent with God as revealed in the Book of Revelation. Is your identity hidden in a God like that? God who can strike at all your props, but then throw down his feather curtain around you. If so, then you can stand firm, no matter what befall.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.

2. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), excerpted in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 183; republished as *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2000).

3. Isobel Kuhn, *Green Leaf in Drought* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1948), 78.

4. Kuhn, *Green Leaf*, 61.