Westlake Church Lausanne

A Church on a Threshold
Revelation 3:7-13

So this is letter number 6 from Jesus to these seven city churches. And someone once said that the job of a preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. And you don't want to go getting those round the wrong way!

But that's also been Jesus' job in dictating these letters. Where they've needed correction, he's given it. But he's also given comfort to those who need it. And the church in Philadelphia needs comfort, because in many ways it's beat up. But despite the pressure it's under, Jesus makes clear it's also a church on the threshold of something great.

So we're going to see four things, four characteristics of a church under pressure, and a church on the threshold: the church's Lord, the church's opposition, the church's opportunity and the church's hope.

The Church's Lord
Now, what you think of God, matters, doesn't it? And it matters especially when life is hard. Because then, how you see or think of God, has the power to either see you through a hard-time, and you come out of it better, and with more joy, and with your faith strengthened, or you end up eaten up by anxiety or fear or bitterness.

Which is why the way Jesus describes himself here matters. Verse 7, 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David.' So Jesus begins by telling them he's holy, he's true and he's the one with authority.

Think about those first two. Now, John, who Jesus is dictating this letter to, knows that Jesus is holy, doesn't he? He's just fallen on his face before the one whose holiness burns like the sun. But this matters for another reason for these Christians in Philadelphia. You see, 'The Holy One' is used repeatedly in the Old Testament to refer to God. And in a few chapters time, this combination of Holy and True is used again, but this time to describe God: 'O Sovereign Lord, Holy and True' (Rev 6:10). And these guys are facing opposition from the Jewish community in their city: that Jesus is a false Messiah, that they're worshipping a false god. So they need to hear that Jesus really is God, that they're not worshipping and suffering for something false. So Jesus tells them – I am the real article, and I am going to be faithful and true to you.

And if they need to hear it, so do we, don't we? You see, in our post-Christian culture, you can begin to wonder what reality is. And when truth is relativized, you can begin to wonder what truth really is, and your faith can be shakey. And if you life starts getting hard, or you face opposition for your faith, you can begin to wonder if there's anywhere solid to plant your feet. And so Jesus comes to us, as much as to them and says, 'I am the Holy One and the True One. I am the real deal. I'm the absolute you need, I'm the ground you can stand on when everything seems to be shaking.'

But the third way Jesus describes himself is, the one who 'has the key of David.' Now, how many keys do you have? The key to your room, the key to your bike lock, the key to your car. Now, how would you feel if you lost a key? It all depends on what it opens, doesn't it? I mean, imagine that as a joke a friend has taken two of your keys. One opens a padlock that you have long since lost, and now is totally useless to you, but the other is the only key that opens a safe deposit box containing millions of Swiss franks. And your friend, for a joke, is threatening to throw one of those keys in the lake. How would you react? It all depends on which key he's threatening to throw. If it's the key to the long lost bike lock, you'll be going, 'See how far you can throw it!' But if it's the only key that opens the safe – things will be different! You see the value of a key depends entirely on what it opens.

So what does the key of David open? Well, when Jesus says he's the one with the key of David, and then says, 'who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens' he's quoting the prophet Isaiah - 22:22. And there, a man called Eliakim is given the keys to the house of David – and it's said of him, what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. And Eliakim is now the Secretary of State, he's the CEO of the royal court. He controls access to the king, to the palace, to the treasury.

Great, but why does Jesus quote that? Because these Christians in Philadelphia have been kicked out of the synagogue. And Jesus is saying, no, it's me who has the keys. It's me who let's you enter the king's house, it's me who invites you and welcomes you to the palace, it's me who says you can come in and enjoy all the king's treasures. And if Eliakim had power over the royal household in Jerusalem, Jesus' authority is far wider. As Abraham Kuyper said, 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'

And one of the crucial times you need to know that is when you're facing trouble for your faith.

The Church's Opposition
You see, these Christians were experiencing the hostility of what Jesus calls, v9, 'the synagogue of Satan'. Now, that's anti-Semitic. What Jesus is taking aim at is the power of religion to pressurise those who want to follow him.

You see, imagine a detective investigating a string of crimes. What does he do? He examines all the evidence. He follows the clues, until they lead him to the criminal mastermind behind it all. And Jesus is saying that whilst for now it might be the synagogue which is causing trouble, ultimately, the mastermind behind this opposition is the power of darkness, it's Satan. The one who later on is called, 'the accuser of our brothers' (12:10).

And here in Philadelphia he does that through the Synagogue. But for us, it's going to be different – not because religion doesn't try and pressurise you, but because of the form it takes.

You see, think what is happening here in Philadelphia. The Synagogue is saying to these Christians – you're wrong, you refuse to worship our God they way we say you should, so you have no part with us, we're excluding you. And today you see that same dynamic at work. Someone refuses to worship the gods of this age – like radical personal freedom, or sex, or the endless getting of consumerism. And then, if you don't bend the knee to whatever society currently worships, you're also excluded. And Christianity used to be considered the moral position, but now, if you hold orthodox, historic Christian positions on sex, or family, or marriage, or what makes for human thriving, you can get labelled as *immoral*, as a bigot, because you've decline to worship at the altar of culture's religion.

And the problem is that when you're in a minority like that – you can feel it, can't you? You can feel the weakness of your position. And that's how these guys felt: v8, as Jesus says to them, "I know that you have but little power." I know you're weak. I know you're few in number. I know you don't have much influence. I know you feel inadequate about trying to speak about your faith without sounding like a jerk, or navigating the complexities of life as a Christian.

And when you feel weak like that, when the world is religiously hostile to true faith in Jesus like that, there's a temptation: to give up, to bend to the world, to go back to the synagogue, to join everyone else bowing at society's altar. And yet these guys didn't do that. Verse 8, "I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." And for any church to survive in such a world, it has to hold on – to stay faithful to Christ and to his word. To who he is, and to what he says.

But to survive and thrive in a hostile culture a church has to do more than just hold on – it's also got to reach out. And we might be tempted to think that facing opposition is a very good reason for keeping quiet about our faith. But Jesus sees things differently.

The Church's Opportunity
Verse 8, "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." So, the synagogue and wider society might have shut the door on their faces, but Jesus hasn't. In fact, he tells them, and us, that he's done the opposite. Through his death and resurrection, he's thrown open the door to God's kingdom. So, others may say unkind or untrue things about them, or about you. Others may say they're not welcome. And today, what the gospel has to say about God and about us may not be popular, but there is a place where those who hold to Jesus are always welcome.

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When Naomi and Lukas first started dating, because he was a good boy Lukas would ring the doorbell before entering the house. But there came a time when I told him, Lukas, you don't need to ring the bell, you can just come in. Why? Because he was always welcome, because we loved having him there. And Jesus says to them and to us, the door to my Father is always open, you don't need to ring, you don't need to knock, you can just come, because we love you.

But Jesus means something else as well. You see, John is listening to Jesus speak whilst Jesus is standing among the lampstands, representing these seven churches. And the point of a lampstand is to give light. And the people of God, the church, is to be a light to the nations. And elsewhere in the New Testament, this idea of an open door is used of an opening, a wonderful opportunity, for mission and evangelism, for the word of God to go out into an area. Because when you know that Jesus has opened the door for you to know the Father's love, when you've experienced that - you don't want to keep that to yourself.

And they may be weak, they may be small, they may sense their inadequacy – but Jesus says, look the opportunity for the good news of the gospel here in your city, is great.

You see, since when has human weakness been a blockage to God's power? It's the opposite isn't it – it's when we're strong in ourselves, when we're confident in our abilities, when we think we don't need God, that *I* can do this, it's then that God has a hard time working through us. But when we're weak, as the apostle Paul says, that's when we're strong, because God's power is perfected in our weakness. It's precisely as we realise, I'm not up to this, that Jesus says, 'of course, but I am, I've set before you an open door.' It's why God will often bring us to the end of ourselves, to the point when nothing seems to be working, and you realise you can't do it, before he does do it.

And Philadelphia was like Lausanne – it sat at the crossroads of languages, cultures, and people groups. And because of its geographical position it was known as 'the gateway to the east'. In fact, apparently, it was first built as a missionary city – to spread the Greek culture and way of life into the east. So, just like today, the culture of a society is missionary, isn't it – it wants to convert you, it wants to get you to live and think and do as they do. But in the midst of such a culture, Jesus calls his people, then and now, to be counter-cultural, and he sets before us, then in Philadelphia, now in Lausanne, this great open door of missional, evangelistic opportunity, to take the gospel to a city and a region: to step across the threshold into what he would have us do.

And just think what Jesus can do with a bunch of people who know they can't do it, but that he can.

But again, how can you do that when you know it won't be easy?

The Church's Hope
Look at 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 at your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you." Now, through Isaiah, God promised that the day would come when the nations would come and bow down before the Jewish people. But here, Jesus turns that on its head and promises that one day he will vindicate this church, and those who've opposed them will come and bow down to them, and acknowledge that God really does love them.

Now today, if people want to say anything of God, they'll want to say he's loving, that God is love – which is absolutely true. The problem is that when we say that, often what we mean is that given he's loving, he won't possibly disapprove of my behaviour – which is not true. And if God doesn't disapprove of my behaviour, neither should you; and if you do, you're not loving, you're a hater. But here Jesus says the day will come when others will see that those who have stayed faithful to me, however costly that is, are loved by me. That knowing you are loved like that by Jesus will keep you faithful.

But notice that Jesus says that *he* will make these enemies bow down. That means you don't have to try and do it. You don't need to try and score points, or humiliate others, or get angry, or vindicate yourself. You can leave that to Jesus. And that gives you the heart space to love, not hate, your enemy.

But the second hope Jesus gives them is fruitfulness in evangelism – that their enemies will respond to the gospel. You see, in Isaiah, when the Lord promises that the nations will come and bow down before the Jewish people, the context is of salvation coming to the gentiles – that the gentiles will one day join the covenant people of God in bowing down to him. So when Jesus uses that same picture here of Jews coming and bowing, it's not just for the Church's vindication, it's also for their enemies' salvation. And the verb for bowing down here is always used in Revelation for voluntary, *'I want to do this'*, worship. So this is not forced submission, this is people coming and voluntarily bowing in worship and adoration of Jesus, with the church. This is Jew and Gentile coming together to acknowledge the incredible fact that God loves us both in the Lord Jesus. That one part of this open door for gospel spreading, is that those who oppose them, who shut them out, will one day come and join them.

But the third hope he gives is eternal security. Verse 10, "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." So these guys already know what it is to face trouble, and Jesus says worse is to come – that one day, God's judgement will come. But when it comes, Christ will be their protection. They've been faithful to him, and he is not about to be unfaithful to them. It's a rock-solid promise that when final judgement comes – these guys will be safe.

Verse 12, "The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God." Now, maybe the thought of being a block of stone is not exactly motivating for you. But a couple of years back we visited Rome. And after about 3 days of sightseeing the girls said, Dad, we've seen quite enough broken down buildings for one life. But what had they seen? What was left of all those magnificent buildings? Pillars. Almost everything else has gone and what remains are pillars.

And Philadelphia was a city prone to earthquakes. In fact, in AD 17, it was devastated by one. So these guys knew what broken down buildings looked like. And what would have been left standing after the shocks were pillars. And Jesus is promising them – and us - that whatever opposition you face, you will stand.

And yet, this is not a promise to be a pillar surrounded by rubble, is it? – but a pillar in the house of God: v12, 'Never shall he go out of it.' It's a promise of a permanent place in God's kingdom. Others may kick you out – but Jesus never will.

And then Jesus gives them, and us, one final promise: to write on those who stay faithful to him, v12, "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."

Now, when someone puts their signature on something, what does it mean? Why does an artist sign his painting? Because it says, this is my handiwork, I did this, this is the genuine article. And when Jesus promises to write God's name on you, it's him saying, you are my handiwork. It doesn't matter what anyone else says, you're genuine.

But a signature also conveys value, doesn't it. You could take a photo of some film star and it would probably be worth nothing, but get that film star to sign it – and suddenly it's a collector's piece. And Jesus is saying, we will write our names on you; you may question your own value, others might think the Christian faith is irrelevant, but Jesus says, you are of inestimable value in our sight.

But putting a name on something says something else. Why do you label things with your name? Because it says, this belongs to….. So when God the Father and the Lord Jesus write their name on you, you know who you belong to. And not just to them – but also to the city of God, the new Jerusalem. You belong to the king, and to his city. In other words, when you feel inadequate, or lost, or uprooted, you can know where you really belong.

So even when you're under pressure, or facing hostility, or life is hard, you can know who Jesus is. You can know that you are loved, owned and valued by God. You can know where you truly belong, and then walk through the door, and go spread the gospel to a world that needs it.