

Self-doubt

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. It's great to be here with you again. Many of us have moved to new cities. We've just thought about Bobby and Joanna moving to Perth.

For some of you, that was very recent in the last few months. For me, it was about 18 years ago. For some of you, it was much longer ago.

But when you move to a new city, one of the important things is to find a good church to settle into. But how do you choose a good church?

Maybe you look at their website. Maybe you see what activities are listed there. Are they active?

Are they reaching out to their community?

Are they growing? Maybe you look at their statement of faith. Does it tick all the key boxes? Is their doctrine sound?

[1 : 03] Maybe you listen to recordings of a couple of their sermons and see, are they giving good teaching? Or maybe you ask around. What are they known for?

What is their reputation? Over the last few weeks, we've read time and time again of churches that seem to be doing really well.

That sound like the ideal place to call home. And yet we've read again and again of the complaints that Jesus brings against them for major failings right at their core.

So what would the ideal church look like? What would the church look like that got no criticism from Jesus?

Presumably we'd read accounts of wonderful acts of service. Of growth. Of the impact they're making in their community. The letter to the church in Philadelphia is one of only two that has no complaint in it.

[2 : 15] But despite the lack of complaint, this is not a church without its difficulties. They're finding things tough. Where some churches need rebuke, this church needs encouragement and reassurance.

Other than the lack of complaint, it follows the same pattern as others. After an initial greeting, he gives a report on their condition. Then he gives one or more commands.

And finally gives promises of hope or of judgment. So, first of all, what is his diagnosis of their condition?

This is where we'll spend the majority of our time. And we'll see that Jesus notes four truths. Two of these are truths that they can see. And two of them are unseen, but that they need to be reminded of.

The first truth that we see in verse 8 is that they are weak. That they only have a little strength.

[3 : 30] We don't know. We're not told exactly how they were weak. Were they weak in numbers? Was there maybe only a handful of believers in that city?

Were they lacking in good teachers and leaders to build them up? Were they marginalized, oppressed?

Were they struggling to have impact on their community? Or were they just plain exhausted and at the end of their resources? We're not told.

But we're told that they only have a little strength. Some would see this as a complaint. As a criticism against the church.

But I don't think that it is. I think it is just a realistic assessment of their situation. Unlike what much of the world would teach us, the Bible does not teach us that weakness is wrong.

[4 : 36] Instead, we see time and time again, Jesus on the side of the weak, the poor, the downtrodden, the humble. Isaiah would write a bruised reed he will not break.

A smouldering wick he will not snuff out. So instead of criticism, this is comfort. He knows them.

He knows their weakness. But he knows that although they are weak, they have been faithful. They have kept to his word. They have stayed true to what they have been taught.

In particular, they have stayed true to what they have been taught about patience and endurance. Because they have kept going.

Despite all the pressure from those around them, they have not denied his name. Whatever may be going on in their circumstances, they are not ashamed to acknowledge that they belong to Christ and that they bear his name.

[5 : 55] But then the second truth that we see in verse 9 is that they have opposition. We're not told that they're facing direct persecution here.

There's no suggestion that their lives are in immediate danger, unlike those in some of the other cities. Instead, opposition seems to be far more subtle and therefore potentially more deadly.

It's difficult for us to know how we would act in a situation of someone putting a gun against our head and telling us to deny our faith or they will pull the trigger.

We can hope that in that extreme black and white situation where everything is put on the line, that we would have courage to remain faithful as many around the world have done and paid with their lives.

But what about the subtle whispers in our ear? Did God really say? Are you sure you really believe that?

[7 : 15] How can you know that you are saved anyway? These things can slowly eat away at our confidence, slowly undermine our faith until we get to the point that we're not really sure what, if anything, we believe anymore.

That sort of opposition is possibly far more difficult to resist. And it seems that that is what the Philadelphians were facing here.

Because there is this group that Jesus calls the synagogue of Satan who claim to be Jews though they are not. Archie dealt with this group a few weeks ago when covering the letter to the church in Smyrna.

So I won't go into too much detail here. Recommend you listen to that sermon. But it's not clear exactly whether these people are Gentiles who are calling themselves Jews to take advantage of some of the freedoms that Jews were given at that time.

Or whether these are ethnically Jews who are taking their status before God for granted on the basis of their ancestry. It's also not clear whether these people have become embedded in the church or are just sniping at them from the outside.

[8 : 49] I would think probably on the outside or there might be harsher words here. But whoever exactly they are it seems that they are questioning the status of these Christians.

they are questioning whether they are truly loved by God. It seems that they think that they have the privilege of access to God and that these Christians have got it all wrong.

In John's Gospel Jesus would confront a similar group who claimed Abraham as their father. but he tells them you are of your father the devil and your will is to do your father's desires for he is a liar and a father of lies.

Here too he says that these people are not really Jews but that they belong to Satan and are liars. They think they know the truth but they are only telling lies and these lies are subtle attacks at the foundation on which this church is built.

So these first two truths are clear to them. They are very conscious of the fact that they are weak. They are well aware that they have opposition but there are two other unseen truths that they need to be reminded of.

[10 : 25] The first is that there is a door open before them. People read this in many different ways. Some would see it as an open door for their ministry with allusions to Paul's request for prayer in Colossians that God may open a door for our message.

Others would see it as a more generic opening of opportunity. one TV preacher put it as God has a plan for our lives and he has opened the doors needed to fulfill our destiny followed by a sales pitch on his books videos etc which you needed to buy to help you fulfill that destiny.

But I don't think that either of these is what has been meant here. to understand that we need to go back and see where is this a reference from?

When walking about on earth Jesus filled his teaching with references to the scriptures to our Old Testament and so when he is speaking from heaven he does the same.

this is not just a cryptic statement for us to make up our own best interpretation of but is an almost word for word quote from Isaiah 22.

[11 : 54] In Isaiah 22 in verse 15 we read this is what the Lord the Lord Almighty says go say to this steward to Shebna the palace administrator what are you doing here?

And God brings various accusations against this man Shebna who is described as a steward a palace administrator the man who is in charge of the palace.

But then down in verse 19 I will depose you from your office you will be ousted from your position. In that day I will summon my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over him.

I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open.

This man Eliakim has been given power and authority. He now holds the keys to the palace. He now controls who has access to the king.

[13 : 09] Who has access to all the treasuries of the king. His authority is absolute. No one can override his decisions.

So when Jesus uses these words about himself what does he mean? I think he means that he is the one that provides access to the throne of God and to all the blessings that come from it.

He has the keys to the door of salvation. More than that, that he himself is the means of access to God. as the writer to the Hebrews says, we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

But why should they trust him? Why should they believe what he says against what their opponents would say? Let's look back at verse 7 at how he introduced himself.

In each of the letters, the greeting is different. In each one, he describes himself in a way particularly relevant to the message he has to bring to that church.

[14 : 30] At the start of this letter, he identified himself with two words, holy and true. He describes himself as holy.

He is perfect. He is pure. He is untainted by evil. And while this is glorious and beautiful, it is also terrifying.

If there was any God who would restrict access to his presence to anyone that was impure, anyone who did not live up to his standards of perfection, it would be a holy God like this.

But on the flip side of that, if you are accepted by a God like this, that acceptance is absolutely secure, because who can condemn you?

And then he describes himself as true. He doesn't just speak truth, but he is the embodiment of truth itself.

[15 : 38] in this world of fake news and alternative facts, his word is the standard against which everything else can be fact-checked.

What he says can absolutely, without question, be relied upon for both this life and the life to come. their opponents were denying their salvation. Effectively, they were claiming that they held the keys, that they could determine who was in and who was out.

But here Jesus is saying, no, only I have that authority, and I have opened that door for you, and no one can shut it.

Salvation is not in anything else but Jesus. Nor is it in anything and Jesus. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, no more and no less.

[16 : 51] This is given as reassurance to them. They may be weak. They may face opposition but their salvation stands secure, unquestionable and unshakable.

They have direct access to the throne of God, and that door is not going to be slammed in their face. But of course, while I don't think this is directly talking about an open door for their ministry, this truth does still give encouragement for evangelism.

Firstly, because it gives confidence. I think that possibly one of the biggest barriers we face today to evangelism is confidence in what we believe.

Confidence that it is not just something that as the world would tell us is true for us, but it's so true that it is truth for everyone that we come in contact with.

And along with that confidence in what we believe, is the truth that if we believe that the door is open for us, then it is also open for any who would accept that call to come to him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

[18 : 19] truth. The second of these unseen truths we see at the end of verse 9, and I think this is the key to it all.

I have loved you. They are loved, and it's not just that they are loved, but they are loved by the glorious, holy, true Son of God.

This is the key to it all. This is the basis of their salvation. This is why they can endure despite being weak.

I remember growing up one of the elders in our church, a passionate man with a young family, thriving career, and a real gift in Bible teaching.

At one point he was probably preaching at least every second week, if not far more, while holding down his career. And then he burnt out.

[19 : 28] He had a complete breakdown. Everything got too much, and he just could not cope. But I remember one Sunday morning at the breaking of bread service, him asking us to sing a song, one that communicated the one thing that he was still sure of, the one thing he knew he could depend on.

You probably know the song. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong.

We are weak, but he is strong. when he hit rock bottom, there he found the love of Christ.

I don't know where you are in your lives right now. I don't know how you are coping with the challenges that this year has thrown at us.

I don't know where your faith is. possibly some of you feel that you are almost at that rock bottom.

But you can rest secure in this, that even then, even when everything else gives way, there you can find the love of Jesus.

[21 : 03] So, having seen how Jesus sees their condition, what commands are they given? Are they told they need to do better?

Are they told of greater works that are required of them? No. There's only one command that's given. Hold on.

They're not being asked to do anything heroic here, just to hold on to what they have. He knows they are weak. He knows he can't ask anything more of them, and so he doesn't.

There are many great things that we can do for Christ, but none is more important than this. We can do great works of charity.

we can preach the gospel to millions, but what matters most is are we holding on to what we have?

[22 : 11] Are we clinging to Jesus? Is he all that we are depending on? If not, then we've completely missed the point.

But it's important to clarify our salvation is not dependent on the strength of our grip. Back in Hogmanay last year, I was at the watch night service at Greenvew, and the person there giving the epilogue just before the bells talked about how a baby clings on to their mother with their little clenched fists.

They see security there, and so they hold on with all their strength. But their safety is not dependent on how tightly they hold on, but on the strength of their mother's arms that are holding them.

We are told to hold on, but it is his hands that hold us secure. I think it's also important that we don't use weakness as an excuse.

It would be so easy for us to say, yes, I'm weak, that's okay, and use it as an excuse for the things that the other churches are condemned for, for loss of love, for compromise, for lukewarmness, even for being dead.

[23 : 53] We're not told you're weak. That's fine. We're told you're weak, so hold on tight. Holding on is not a passive thing, but it's an active thing.

It's something we must choose to do each day, to fix our eyes on him, to confess our dependence on him, to fill our minds with his word, to fill our hearts with his praise, to surround ourselves with his people, so that when the challenges of life come, as they will, we can stand.

And so finally, having given them the command to hold on, what promises does he give them?

There are at least six given in this passage, and I'll rattle through them pretty quickly.

The first promise in verse 9 is that they will be vindicated, that those who oppose them will acknowledge their salvation.

They will acknowledge that they were loved all along. At the end of the day, their faith will be seen to be well founded.

[25 : 19] Those who questioned it will be seen for what they were. Liars. The second promise is that they were kept from the hour of trial.

This can be interpreted in all sorts of ways, depending on your understanding of the rest of the book. And if you were hoping for some grand eschatology from me here, I'm sorry to disappoint.

But whatever deeper cosmic meaning it may have, this was originally written to a particular church in a particular time in history.

history, what did it mean to them? It definitely didn't mean that life would be easy, and that none of them would suffer or die.

It's reported that a living Christians from Philadelphia were martyred alongside Polycarp in 155 AD. But I think partly what it means is that God knows what they can handle.

[26 : 31] Sometimes he will take his people through the middle of suffering and give them the strength to endure. Sometimes he will take them out and keep them safe from suffering.

Sometimes he will take them through death to be with him. But he knows us. He will not test us beyond what we can bear.

He knew them. He knew their faithfulness, but he also knew their weakness. And so he will keep them safe and secure from what was to come.

His third promise is that he is coming soon. This is the whole focus of the book of Revelation. The promise that he will return.

The promise that this is not all that there is. The promise that evil will not go on forever unchecked. The injustice will be dealt with.

[27 : 44] He has gone to prepare a place for them and he will come again to take them to be with him forever in his father's house.

The fourth promise is that they will be made pillars in the temple. The image of the people of God being the stones of a temple is used elsewhere in the Bible.

But what's interesting here is that they will be the pillars. pillars. Because the pillars are strong structural elements that hold the whole building up.

Take them away and the whole thing collapses. And Jesus is saying that this church that has little strength, they will be the key structural elements in his temple.

all throughout the New Testament, we see how God takes delight in building his church from an unlikely group of unqualified, unsuitable, weak failures.

[29 : 02] Peter denied him. Paul persecuted his people. Others fled or locked themselves in an upper room in terror.

God showed his glory by building his church with such people. And he still does today. I've probably told this story before, so forgive me.

But I remember when Tim was applying to go to the faith mission. I had to fill out a reference for him. The questions they asked were horrific.

They were basically requiring complete character assassination. But the one question I remember was the last one, which asked, do you think this person is suitable for Christian service?

I'm not exactly sure what answer they were hoping for. But I answered saying that all Christians were suitable for Christian service.

[30 : 09] in fact, that it wasn't an option, it was an obligation. That God has always built his church with broken, weak people. And that the only required qualification was being willing to be used.

So we see here that weakness is not an excuse to not let God use you. And then the final couple of promises relate to names.

I'm sure we all remember going to school with our names written on everything. Pretty much anything that could move would be labelled.

Jumpers, pencil cases, lunch boxes, jotters. Don't know if it was just our family, but we always took a shaving of the paint off a pencil so that you could write our names on to the side of our pencils.

These labels were not for decoration, but to make it clear who these things belonged to. And it's the same here.

[31 : 19] He promises that they will have his name written on them. He is claiming ownership. He is saying to them, you belong to me.

You are mine. But he also says that he will write on them the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem.

He's not just putting a name label on them, but also a return address. they have a home. And that home is not Philadelphia.

He's echoing here the promises that would come in Revelation 21, which Graham took us to last week. If you've not listened to that sermon, I highly recommend that you do.

But those promises that the dwelling of God will be with men, that he will be their God, and that they will be his people.

[32 : 26] And so that is what the ideal church looks like. The one you should get involved with. They may be weak.

They may have opposition, but they are faithful. Their salvation is secure, and they are loved, and that is all they need.

He calls them to hold on, and weak as they are, he will use them to build his church. He tells them that they are his, and that he will take them home.

back at that service in Hogmanay, we went into the new year singing one of the songs that we listened to earlier.

At that point, we had no idea what 2020 would bring. Yes, we'd maybe heard reports of this new virus over in China, but it was distant news of something at the other side of the world that didn't really affect us.

[33 : 38] Little did we know that everything was about to change, but these are the words that we sang. When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast.

When the tempter would prevail, he will hold me fast. I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path, for my love is often cold.

he must hold me fast. Those he saves are his delight, Christ will hold me fast.

Precious in his holy sight, he will hold me fast. He'll not let my soul be lost. His promises shall last, bought by him at such a cost.

He will hold me fast. So as we head rapidly to the end of this year and into the next with a mix of hope and trepidation, that is what matters.

[34 : 54] Are we clinging to the one who is faithful, to the one who will hold us fast? Amen. Amen.