

“The Seven Martyrs of the Apocalypse: Dear Philadelphia” Revelation 3: 7-13

On our recent trip to Egypt, more than the pyramids, more than the tombs,---all of which were magnificent---Ellie and I were stunned by the ancient temples. Our guide, Ramez, told us all about the political and religious aspects of each temple.

The kings of Egypt were responsible for leading the Egyptian people safely into life after death. So the pyramids, the tombs, and the temples were not built to impress anyone. Pharaohs weren't made into mummies to impress anyone. They did what they did in order to find a permanent home in the afterlife. And they believed that the tombs and temples and pyramids and mummies would last long enough for their dead Pharaohs to lead them into everlasting life.

These days, it's become fairly common for people to have their bodies cremated and their ashes scattered. Kind of the opposite extreme of a pyramid with mummies, huh?

Whether we make careful plans for our gravestones to be marked, or we leave it to our children to scatter our ashes, we're trying to make our peace with our death. With our lack of permanence. To do something decisive now, knowing that one day we ourselves will collapse.

Jesus himself confronts this feeling of ours as he writes to the church in Philadelphia. Through this letter, he's calling us to stand firm when everything seems to be collapsing. He's promising to stand *with* his people when things start crumbling. And he's offering us the hope, that one day, we will be able to stand firm and tall *forever*.

- 1) The call to stand firm
- 2) The promise to stand *with*
- 3) The hope to stand forever

1. The call to stand firm

When we are in the middle of our toughest days and months and years, we feel our lack of permanence, don't we? “How am I going to make it through this?” we think. I've got a couple of friends who've described their dark days to me. One said that they felt like their heart was being squeezed, and they couldn't get rid of that feeling. Another friend told me they felt like their fuel tank was utterly empty. Whatever it is that brings us into this valley of shadows, when we're there, our strength is gone, and we feel like we can't stand up straight, much less walk and run. If we haven't been there before, we will get our turn.

The followers of Jesus in first-century Philadelphia felt this way.

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By trusting in Jesus and binding together as a local church, they had made themselves tiny minorities in that city. Once again (9), there's a group of Jews living there that have spread all kinds of lies about these Christians. They excluded these followers of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, from the synagogue---which meant that the Christians were cut off from the one place and community and identity in which they could have some rights as a minority group. Maybe most hurtful of all, by excluding the Christians, this particular synagogue was saying “You're not one of us. God is against you; in fact, God curses you!” How confusing this must have been for the Greek believers. And how painful it must have been for the Jewish believers in that church!

And once again, Jesus says “I know” (8).

“I know your deeds. I know you have little strength. I know the lies that are being spread about you. I know that in the midst of all this sorrow and exhaustion, you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”

I've told you about my friend and encourager, who signs all his notes and emails: “Stand Fast, George.” This is exactly what Jesus calls the Philadelphian church to do. “You feel you can't stand. But stand fast. You feel like you're putting your own reputation, and even your life, in danger by speaking about me in this city. But keep bearing witness.”

And he says, verse 8, that there's an open door in front of them. They need to go through it. Maybe the “open door” is an opportunity to bear witness. Maybe he means that God's kingdom itself is wide open to them. Actually, I think it's both. But they have to go through it. Entering the kingdom is not easy; it only happens through much tribulation (Acts 14:22). Continuing to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ is not easy. But Jesus calls the church, then and now, to walk through the open door. To hold on for dear life (11), and to finish the race and win the victory (12).

Trusting in Jesus, and being faithful to Jesus, *always* feels a lot like dying. Whether you're giving up your selfish desires or you're giving up your very life. It always feels like the doorway to a better life is somewhere else, not through the difficult work of bearing faithful testimony to Jesus, with your words and your actions and your attitudes, in private and in public.

In downtown Seoul, Korea, there's a shopping area called Myeongdong. It's got blazing bright signs. And outside each store there's a cute Korean young lady or young man calling you in their cutest tone of voice to come on in, try some cosmetics, try on a pair of shoes, try on a better life.

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Every day we walk past a hundred doors with signs that say things like “your best life now” and “money, sex, and power” or “follow your heart.” But the door you’ve got to walk through has a very unsexy sign on it that says *steady, humble, self-forgetful faithfulness*. That’s your door.

Outside each door there’s a co-worker, a celebrity, or even a family member that’s saying “no one will know,” or “you deserve this,” or “this won’t hurt anyone” or “just relax and have a little fun.” But your door has a man from Nazareth outside it saying “I know it’s hard, but stick with me.”

Church, I don’t know what attractive doors you’re having to pass by in order to follow Jesus through his open door and be identified with his own death and resurrection. But Jesus knows.

And still, steady as ever, he’s looking you in the face and saying “stay with me. In all you think, believe, say, and do. Stand with me.”

If someone were to interview the 10 people that know me best, would they say, “you know what? More than anything else, it’s obvious that Andy has been captured by the love of Jesus, because it’s so obvious that, time and time again, he stands with Jesus”?

What about you?

2. The promise to stand *with*

Philadelphia was a city prone to earthquakes. They also had experienced metaphorical “earthquakes” --- significant economic crises. So all the language beginning in verse 10---of trials and tribulations, of pillars and temples and cities---would have made total sense to the church as they read Jesus’ letters. Jesus is promising to stand with them, and make them able to stand when the city around them is shaken.

Members of the church who knew the Hebrew Bible would be thinking of Isaiah 22, where the prophet tells king Eliakim that despite the political earthquakes of his time, he wouldn’t only get the key to the house of David (7), but that he would be a peg nailed firmly into place—that Israel could finally hang their hopes on him.

The promise for the Christian church at Philadelphia is that if they stand for Jesus, Jesus will stand with them. “I will keep you from the hour of trial (10)—when the shaking *really* starts, we’ll stand tall together, because you’ll stand with me.”

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He’s coming soon, he says (11). Whatever sorrow we experience for being faithful will not last forever. His coming is always nearer than it was a moment before. And whether we die standing for Jesus, or he comes while we’re still standing, he’s going to stand with us.

Rich Mullins was the greatest American Christian singer-songwriter of the late-20th Century. And he sang the words, “if I stand, let me stand on the promise that you’ll pull me through. If I can’t let me fall on the Grace that first brought me to you. If I sing, let me sing for the joy that has born in me this song. And if I weep let me weep as as a man who is longing for his home.”

Rich sang, and wept and fell on grace and stood with Jesus. He once described the overwhelming temptation while touring to go find himself a prostitute—and he had to weep and beg for grace and stand with Jesus instead. And then of course he wrote and sang a song about it.

The Spirit is calling Jesus’ church today to stand like Rich and so many others. And just like the Christians at Philadelphia, promises that if you stand with him, whatever comes, he will be standing with you. So stand.

3. The hope to stand forever

And that’s the third thing Jesus says through the Spirit in this letter to the churches. Stand fast. I’ll stand with you. But finally, if you stand fast with me, you’re going to be able to do what no one but I have been able to do so far. Stand up and walk and run and climb and dance and work and laugh and play --- forever.

How does Jesus describe this experience to us?

First, he says that we’ll become a pillar in the temple of God (12). Remember how David sang in Psalm 27---there’s only one thing I want, more than anything else: to dwell in the house of the LORD forever, to gaze upon his beauty in his temple! Here Jesus says, to David and to all who hold the key of David: your request has been granted!

You see, through all these trials and temptations; through all the difficulties of bearing faithful witness to Jesus, Jesus has been strengthening this desire in us, purifying this desire in us. Why? So that he can *give us this one great desire of our hearts!*

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The ancient temples in Jerusalem were destroyed, and the people of God—because of their failure to stand true—were sent away from God’s home. But the ache hasn’t gone away. We were made to be home with our Creator forever.

But Jesus says “one day (12) my people will be immovable, indestructible pillars in the everlasting temple God---never again to be sent away. You, church, will have the name of the Lord, and of his city, New Jerusalem, on you. And the whole creation will know that you, my church, are my home!”

You won’t just have the *keys* to his temple and house of David (7): you *are* that house, and you’ll *be* that temple.

The whole city, New Jerusalem, is a temple, and the people that live there are its pillars. All your work and your play and your rest will become temple worship, because your whole eternal experience will take place in the new creation in the immediate presence of God!

And finally, you won’t just be *loved*. It will be *crystal clear to everyone* just how much you are loved. In the end of verse 9 Jesus writes that even these poor folks in Philadelphia who can’t see right now just how dearly I love you will on that day say: “wow, weren’t we wrong! No one has ever loved another person the way that God in Jesus Christ has loved his faithful witnesses.”

Conclusion

This is the same hope that Jesus himself counted on when *he* had to stand up during his own trial. “If I stand for my Father, even if I stand alone, out of strength, even if I *die* showing the Father’s love, even if my Father, for the first time in all eternity turns his face away from me as I bear the weight of sin, my Father will stand up for me, and with me, and even raise me from the grave, and give me everything I’ve longed for: to be with my people, and my father, together, forever.”

Jesus doesn’t say there will be no earthquake, no trouble. He says that if we stand firm, he’ll stand with us. When our bodies are returned to dust---buried or scattered--- and Jesus stands up on the last day, and the trumpet blows, we’ll stand up, too. And Jesus will be there standing beside us.

And the quality and the quantity of the days of our sorrow will not be worth comparing to the glory of the days of our rejoicing.

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Friends, Jesus does all the miracles here. Jesus shows all the grace. Jesus comes with all the rewards, which are way better and last far longer than our tough devotion to him.

Our call is simple and small in comparison:

Stand with him

Speak for him

Stick by him

Will we?