

Revelation 3:7-13
Building Blocks of Worship Series: History
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Revelation 3:7-13 "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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² 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. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Dear Christian friends,

So here we are, the last sermon of the series: Building Blocks of Worship. We have looked at the foundational blocks of the Gospel, participation, gifts, and now today the foundational block of ♦ History.

And you know, after all of these weeks of blocks and building, we ought to be looking at pretty good church, huh? It has at its core the message of the gospel. It offers God's people the opportunity to hear the gospel and then participate together in response to God's grace. It recognizes the gifts given to it by the Lord and makes faithful use of them. Sounds like a successful kind of church, not so?

Today we need to hold this kind of church up to the light of history. ♦ As the writer to the Hebrews explains, **Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.** ⁸ *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* And it is this *same* Jesus who gives us this opportunity to understand what true success is and to see if we truly are successful by

pointing to the past. He does so through his Revelation to St. John, chapter 3, the sixth letter sent to the churches, the letter sent to the church in Philadelphia.

♦ Many of you will recall the time we took to look at this church when we were studying the book of Revelation a few weeks back. Today, once again, Jesus invites us, his Church, to know the secret to a successful church. But the secret to success for a Church just might surprise you. Join me for a little history lesson this morning as we consider true success in light of the building block of history...

In many areas of this life, of course, the experts and experience will tell you that ♦ the secret to success is to play to your strengths. If you're a great running team, you'll win games by running the football. If your people skills are great, you'll succeed in a position where you interact with people. To succeed, you play to your strengths.

The same is true for the Church. But for the congregation in our text for today, the church in the city of Philadelphia, the problem was *finding* their strengths. Philadelphia was not one of the huge bustling cities in the area. It was a new city, just getting started. ♦ It was not known for much of anything early on, except for earthquakes. In 17 AD a great earthquake destroyed Philadelphia. For the next 20 years the city experienced dangerous tremors keeping the citizens in a state of fear. Greek historian Strabo (c. 63 BC - c.21 AD) wrote: "*Philadelphia has no trustworthy walls, but daily in one direction or another they keep tottering and falling apart.*" Strabo questioned the sanity of the people for planning to return and rebuild. Because of the constant fear of aftershocks, most of the people lived in huts outside the city. It was certainly not a *glorious* city.

And the Church that met there, they weren't glorious either. They didn't look like a successful church. Even Jesus admits it. Jesus said to them, "***I know that you have little strength.***"

Most likely, the church was a small group with few members, unlike the mega-churches you see on TV and around town.

The people were probably commoners—not influential—no big money or power, unlike the churches filled with the movers and shakers that we all know so well today. Perhaps the pastor didn't have the kind of charisma, or look, or sound that so many churches demand of their leaders. No, the church there looked small and weak and ineffective. But mostly, they looked unsuccessful.

That's the way the world saw them, anyway. But that's not the way their Savior saw them. Out of all the churches that received letters, no one received such words of praise from Jesus as this one. Jesus said that this little church was wildly successful.

But how? How could he say that? How could they play to their strengths when they didn't have any? No big membership, no powerful people, no inspiring pastor...

You see, they knew the secret. ♦ The secret to success for the Church is realizing that *we* are not strong at all. And that *we* need to play to someone else's strengths. Listen to what Jesus said to them: ***I know that you have little strength, but you kept my word and have not denied my name.***

My friends, if you want a church that knows the secret to success, that means wanting a church that plays to *Christ's* strengths. This little group of Christians didn't cling to anything but the Word of God. And they teach us a valuable lesson. For the measure of a church is not in its buildings or its programs or its people. The measure of a church is not in how many of your neighbors attend or how often they have youth group gatherings. The measure of a church is not how attractive their sanctuary is or how well the pastor speaks.

No, ♦ the measure of a church's success is in its devotion to Christ's Word and Christ's Name. Jesus said, ***I know you have little strength***, but you relied on my strength. You have faithfully held to my word, you've studied it, and it has taken root in your heart. And, Jesus said, ***you have not denied my name.*** In fact, they did just the opposite. They boldly shared it with a lost and sinful world.

♦ My friends, you and I, we want a successful church. That's what *Jesus* wants,

too. But we dare not look at the world to find the measure of our success. We look to Christ alone. And he says that ♦ if we here at New life want to be a successful church, then we need to do two things: ♦ We need to hold to the truth of his Word, and ♦ we need to faithfully proclaim his name. That's it! As simple as could be, right?

So why do we have such trouble with it? Because it means curbing the spiritual laziness of our sinful natures. It begins by joining with fellow believers in worship as God's people have done since Adam and Eve gathered around the Tree of Life, not ***giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.*** But it doesn't end there. It also means letting God's Word put down deep roots in our hearts by being in the Bible, every day, on our own and with others in Bible study, Sunday School, confirmation class, and the like. And it means regularly communicating with your heavenly Father by speaking to him in prayer every day. And it means proclaiming Christ's name to the world around us every chance we get, whether that's going door to door, or passing out flyers, or teaching your children or friends and family about the Savior, or leading in the above actions by example. *That's* what it takes to be successful.

Now I know, some may be thinking, "I'm not really good at those things. I have trouble talking to people about my faith. I don't think I know enough about the Bible to do the right kind of Bible studies. I don't think that I'm that strong of a Christian..." When you think those thoughts, Jesus says, ***I know. I know that you have little strength.*** That means you're going to have to depend on me." And that, my friends, is recognizing how weak *we* are, and then playing to *Christ's* strengths—that is the secret to being a successful church. And if we do those things, we will be a successful church. Even if there are times when we don't look like it.

Once there was a man who knew a lot about defeat. In 1832, he lost his job and was defeated for the state legislature. In 1833 he failed in business. In 1835 his sweetheart died. In 1836 he had a nervous

breakdown. In 1838 he was defeated for House Speaker of his state legislature. In 1843 he was defeated for nomination for Congress. In 1846 he was elected to Congress but lost his bid for reelection. In 1854 he was defeated for the US Senate. In 1856 he was defeated for nomination to the Vice Presidency. In 1858 he was again defeated for the US Senate.

Talk about a man who knew defeat! Talk about someone who looked unsuccessful. It would be easy for people to look at him and think that he was weak and ineffective and unsuccessful.

And sometimes the Church on earth can seem that way. We don't always look successful. As the world gets more evil and as Christians get more worldly, it often looks like the Church is defeated. But it only looks that way if people are focused on earthly results.

That man who was defeated so many times? In 1860, he finally won an election. He was elected President of the United States—he was ♦ Abraham Lincoln (maybe you've heard of him?).

You look at the Church here on earth, and it can look unsuccessful, but it only looks that way if we're focusing on short-term, earthly results. Keep your eyes fixed on the long-term, heavenly results, just as Jesus ♦ invited the church in Philadelphia to do. He pointed them to a door, a pillar, and a name.

Jesus said, ***“See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.”*** The resurrected Savior tells his church, tells you and me, that when he died on the cross, he paid for all of our weakness, all of our ineffectiveness, all of our defeats and failures. He paid for them all and then he opened the door to the kingdom of heaven so that you and I and all believers can walk through, unhindered, into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

And it's a door that no one can shut. The devil can't shut it, no matter how hard he tries. Your conscience can't shut it, no matter how much it condemns you. Your sins can't shut it, no matter how high they are piled. Jesus wants you in heaven forever,

and he paid in blood so that door will never close.

My friends, a successful church never takes its eyes off that open door. Because that's why we're here: to worship the Savior who opened that door, and to bring everyone we can through it with us.

And when you focus on that door, Jesus even lets you peek through it to see what is waiting for us on the other side. Jesus said, ***“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; and I will also write on him my new name.”***

For the people who lived in huts outside of the earthquake ravaged city of Philadelphia, these were powerful words—to be promised a city that would stand rock solid forever, a city that wouldn't sway or topple, a city they would actually live in, in permanent dwellings, and never again have to leave. And then, on top of that, to be promised a pillar? Understand that in Philadelphia, if someone served the city with honor and distinction, they had a pillar erected in their honor in one of the temples. God says to each of us, that he will *make us* a pillar in *his* sanctuary—not to our honor, but to his. You: a living pillar in the city of God. Christ's sign and name on you. Your place in God's kingdom – certain, sure, and immovable.

♦ As we look to the History of the Church, we long to be as successful, to hear our Savior's acknowledgment, like the church in Philadelphia. But what will we be? Will we be a successful church? We know the secret—play to Jesus' strengths, and focus on the long term by being in God's Word, proclaiming Christ to the world, and remembering just what's in store for us. By God's grace that is what we are; by God's grace that is what this church will always be. As we live our lives of worship, let this history of the church be honored in who we are, what we do, and how we worship. ♦ ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*** Amen. ♦