

“Hold Fast to What You Have”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
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“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.” (Revelation 3:11)

Letters of encouragement and instruction. The early chapters of the book of Revelation contain letters from the Lord to seven churches in “Asia” (Revelation 1:11). These are messages of *encouragement* and *instruction* to early Christians and stand as an introduction to the visionary and prophetic themes of the book of Revelation, which many of us turn to and hear about in this month of New Church Day.

In an effort to personalize these messages, or see them as applying to our lives, I draw your attention to two contexts. One is a yearly development review or performance evaluation at work. While not always something we look forward to, often these have the same formula as these letters: overall encouragement and gratitude for the things going well, articulation of challenge areas, and goal setting together with incentives for improvement. If that context is too formal and business-like, perhaps we could think of it as a letter written from a beloved older relative at a milestone birthday of ours, where the person gets real with us: here are the things I love about you—your strengths; and here are some things you need to think about if you want the happiness that the Lord wants for you.

The message to the church in Philadelphia is the focus for today, an area in Asia Minor believed to be within modern day Turkey. According to the Heavenly Doctrines, this message is addressed to those “who are governed by truths springing from goodness derived from the Lord” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 172). That’s a good group to be a part of. I take that to mean people who are trying to pay attention to what the Lord says, who want to live a good life with His help. Maybe that’s us sometimes and maybe it’s not. But the message is that all of us have a “Philadelphia” desire within us, put in there by the Lord. When activated, we use the Word as a guide for living because that’s what the Lord wants us to do. One goal for today is to get in touch with that part of us more often, and to strengthen it, which is the point of this letter.

An Open Door. After identifying the Lord as the one speaking to us—the One in the midst of the seven golden lampstands who calls Himself holy and true—He provides an amazingly beautiful invitation. This is the encouragement part. “See I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it” (Revelation 3:8). We read that “to those who are governed by truths springing from goodness derived from the Lord (Philadelphia) *heaven is opened* (emphasis added, *Apocalypse Revealed* 176). This passage goes on to describe people being led along pathways or through entrances to their home in heaven. It mentions some powerful Scriptures:

- “I am the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)
- “I am the door of the sheep... If anyone enters by Me he will be saved...” (John 10:7,9)

Then there are echoes of messages to come in the book of Revelation: “Behold I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20), which means His presence and how He presses to be

received (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 217). And the twelve open gates of the Holy City New Jerusalem welcoming us into the church and into a heavenly way of life.

How many of us resonate with the way this particular invitation is framed? “See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.” The Lord as Savior offers to lead us to everything good and eternal and blessed. He encourages us by reminding us that we’ve responded in the past: “You have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (Revelation 3:8). We’re on the path. We’re people who have some of that Philadelphia quality in us. We’ve seen some of the value in actively living a spiritual life.

Trials and hardship. That’s the encouraging part. Now comes a dose of realism—the instruction. We are going to need perseverance in “the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

What is this hour of trial? One passage identifies it as “an internal spiritual battle, called temptation” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 185). Other letters identify similar trials in the form of persecution, or headwinds for those striving to live a spiritual life.

Whether they’re external forces or internal ones, the challenge for us is to stay strong in temptation. It may be a temptation to hide our light of faith, to go along to get along, instead of staying true to religious principle when we need to. Or it could be one of the many personal failings we have, when our unregenerate characteristics manifest in destructive ways: anger, selfishness, justification to treat others in ways we would not want to be treated, worldly pursuits for no higher useful purpose, an unwillingness to give people any benefit of the doubt but a temptation to write them off, resorting to lies about ourselves or others in the fear of discovery of our failings. We know these weaknesses. We are aware of times when it feels like our “little strength” that the Lord identifies is not enough.

But notice the Lord’s encouragement even here. “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I will also keep you” (Revelation 3:10). The Lord is offering to help us “[fight against evils and reject falsities]” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 185). He will give us the strength and endurance to be the kind of people we aspire to be—firm in the face of adversity, able to change from destructive patterns, willing to walk with the Lord into the next phase of our regeneration.

Here we could call to mind a teaching about temptations—that they are absolutely necessary steps on the path to heaven:

In a word, to the extent people cast the devil behind them, to the same extent they are adopted by the Lord and taught, led, withheld from evils by Him and kept in goods. This is the way, the only way, from hell to heaven. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 531:6; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 798:7).

“Hold Fast.” What comes next is arguably the crux of this whole message to the people of Philadelphia. It is to “hold fast to what you have” (Revelation 3:11). Do you hear the call to tenaciousness, endurance, the perseverance already mentioned, the fortitude that the Lord can inspire in us? I hear Him asking us to keep going: believe the things you know to be true, do the things you know to be good; stand on the principles you know are honorable and important.

The Heavenly Doctrines summarize all that as follows: we are to “...retain the few things that [we] know from the Word about charity and its resulting faith, and live according

to them” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 145). We are also asked to remain “steadfast in love and faith” (*Apocalypse Explained* 217).

What are some examples? The Ten Commandments are a good place to focus—just four of them on the second table, as explained in the work *Doctrine of Life*. Personalizing these commandments we might strengthen our resolve saying: “I will not murder.” I will not hate or seek revenge, but will persevere in a desire to come from love in my dealings with those who have wronged me (*Doctrine of Life* 67-69). “I will not commit adultery.” I will do my very best not to “behave licentiously...engage in obscene acts, speak lasciviously, [or] entertain filthy thoughts” (*Doctrine of Life* 74). “I will not steal.” I will not resort to “guile or subterfuge” which is I acknowledge to be at the heart of any form of theft—taking from others their dignity, their intellectual property, their livelihood (*Doctrine of Life* 81). Instead, I will hold fast to the opposite principle of loving honesty and dealing honorably (*Doctrine of life* 82,83). “I will not bear false witness,” or profess false things about people I don’t currently like. Instead, I will hold firm in an effort to look for and love the truth about them (see *Doctrine of Life* 87,88).

The fact of the matter is, the Lord is constantly encouraging us to hold fast to these and many other basics of spiritual life. Like the staff in Moses’ hand when Israel fought against Amalek (Exodus 17:9), or the sword in Joshua’s hand when he and the Israelites conquered the enemies of the land (Joshua 11:10-12); like Jacob who fought with the angel all night and would not let go (Genesis 32:26); like David who would not harm Saul even when he sought to kill him, saying, “I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD’s anointed” (1 Samuel 24:10)—we too can be led by the Lord to tenaciously and with courage hold onto what we know to be true and good, and persevere in the face of adversity with the Lord’s help.

Rewards. Now to the rewards. We recall the structure of these letters: encouragement, calls to action, and rewards for responsiveness.

For the people of Philadelphia the first reward is a crown. But note that it already belongs to them. “Hold fast to what you have, that no one may take your crown” (Revelation 3:11). We’re taught that these words mean, “Lest they lose the wisdom from which comes eternal happiness” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 189). There’s a meaningful concept here that cuts deeply into the New Church faith. This passage continues, “Wisdom perishes in people when they stop putting truths into practice, that is, when they stop living in accordance with them.” It gets worse, even. “They also then cease to love wisdom, and accordingly to love the Lord.”

What’s at play here is a use-it-or-lose-it concept (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 932, et. al.). Central to our calling as people on the path to heaven is to actually live the life that leads to heaven—to compel ourselves to refrain from what is hurtful to ourselves or others, and to do what is helpful and loving instead. We show that we care about and internalize those truths by striving to use them in the decisions and choices of life. Otherwise, there’s nothing to hold them in our spirits, or eventually even in our memories. They, in effect, become meaningless to us and we lose them.

Contrary to that is the truth that we do make our own—that becomes for us a “rule of life” (*Arcana Caelestia* 4190, 6637:2). These lived principles are as visible to others as a crown on our heads, not in a self-aggrandizing way, but in the sense of what rules our lives.

But the rewards do not stop there. We read of, concerning the person of Philadelphia:

“I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on Him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, and I will write on Him My new name” (Revelation 3:12).

First off there is an opportunity: to be a pillar in the temple of the Lord. That means “to sustain the Lord’s church in heaven” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 191). What is before us, amazingly, is a chance to strengthen the Lord’s kingdom. Our steadfast efforts to live as the Lord asks, however feeble at times, sustain heaven. They strengthen the church. What I hear is the call to be a part of a grand cause of the Lord, to be a part of “the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2).

“We shall go out no more.” Again, amazingly, it says, “they will remain in that church to eternity” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 192). When we cooperate with the Lord, the message is that He is able to regenerate us or create anew a steadfast and strong part in us that will not waver.

Even more telling are the names: Written on our spirits, or the promise of that writing, is “the name of My God” and “the name of the city of My God” and “My new name.” These are the truths, or these are the heavenly qualities, that are “engraved on our hearts” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 193-194). And this is the path toward acknowledgment and worship of the Lord alone, which is the Lord’s new name that we come to know (*Apocalypse Revealed* 196).

That’s quite a list! Let’s acknowledge of course that it is aspirational. It is the direction of spiritual life that the Lord lays before us. It is the heavenly reward of a full and complete trust in His providence, from a sense of the principles of His Word which truly protect us and bring blessing to our lives.

Yet all of us are invited on the journey toward that end-state, and we are actually on it. The truth is, the trust, peace and blessing that we long for in our souls can be ours to the extent that we welcome the invitation. It continues each day we choose to walk through the open door, firmly and decidedly into the way of living and believing that leads to heaven. May today, or this time, especially as we prepare for a celebration of New Church Day, be a moment of recommitment to that path.

It continues further with our efforts to “hold fast to what we have.” We have so much. We have treasure troves of blessings in our lives—called by the special name of “remains” or “remnant states” in the Word. We have the Word and its teachings in abundance. We have a church, a beautiful communion of saints or people who are striving to do what we’re doing—to put the truths we know into practice. We have memories of when those truths have been our friends—when they’ve helped us resolve challenges and find comfort. And we have the Lord Himself, encouraging the very best in us.

Let us, then, persevere, and hold fast to what we have, and take the next steps through that open door with the Lord’s help. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:13). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Revelation 3:7-13; Deuteronomy 11:22-28; *Apocalypse Revealed* 185, 145.

Revelation 3

⁷ “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,

‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”’: ⁸ “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹ Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

¹³ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’

Deuteronomy 11

²² “For if you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do—to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, and to hold fast to Him— ²³ then the LORD will drive out all these nations from before you, and you will dispossess greater and mightier nations than yourselves. ²⁴ Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea, shall be your territory. ²⁵ No man shall be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put the dread of you and the fear of you upon all the land where you tread, just as He has said to you.

²⁶ “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you today; ²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known.”

Apocalypse Revealed 185

““Because you have kept My command to persevere.”” This symbolically means, because they have fought against evils and then rejected falsities.

The command to persevere means, symbolically, a spiritual battle, called temptation or a trial. This is apparent from the words that follow next, “I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come,” for someone who is tried in the world is not tried after death.

A spiritual battle, which is what temptation or a trial is, is called the Lord’s command to persevere or endure, because in temptations or trials the Lord battles for a person, and He does so by means of truths derived from His Word.

Apocalypse Revealed 145

““Still, hold fast what you have till I come.”” This symbolically means, so that they may retain the few things that they know from the Word about charity and its resulting faith, and live according to them, until the New Heaven and New Church are formed, which are the Lord’s advent. For it is only people like this who accept what the doctrine of the New Jerusalem teaches regarding the Lord and charity.