

I. Introduction

A. How do you measure success? Years ago, Morgan Stanley Dean Witter ran an ad campaign that said, “We measure success one investor at a time.” Of course, their investors measured success by return on their portfolio. And some measure success by job title, or paycheck or the car you drive. How should a Christ-follower measure success?¹ How does Jesus measure success?

B. Today we look at a the 6th church of the 7 who get a letter from Jesus. By all outward measures, things are not working for them. They are small in number, weak in power, and suffering in several ways. But Jesus applauds them.

C. Last week we looked at the Christians in Sardis – who lived just a few miles away from those in Philadelphia. And they were not affirmed, only corrected. Today it’s the opposite, Jesus has nothing bad to say, only good. And he seems especially taken with their endurance.

II. As you know, the Book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It was written when John – the Apostle and also the Bishop of Ephesus – is an old man and is living on the island of Patmos.

A. During His morning devotion one day he is called up into Heaven with Christ, and told to take notes. And when he is back, he writes this picture book full of colors and numbers and lots of symbolism.

B. It is written to people who are suffering and headed into even more suffering. The big message is that Jesus wins. Not – as I noted in my Friday Update a few days ago – that “we win.”

C. Today we are have come to the sixth of the seven letters that open the book. In this case, it’s to the small city of Philadelphia (not Philly PA, but Philly in what was then called Asia Minor and is now called Turkey).

D. Here is an overview of Eastern Turkey ([picture one](#)). We started in Ephesus and have been making our way clockwise. As you can see, we are nearing the end.

E. Last week was Sardis. You do not travel very far to get from there to Philadelphia – but modern tours often do not make the trip because there is little to see in Philadelphia. Here is a picture of the ruins of some of the walls. ([picture two](#))

1. You can see some of the buildings of the current city – now called Alasehir – in the background.

F. As I noted, Philadelphia – which was founded between 180 and 159 BC as a commercial center on a trade route - was never big. But it was ideally located, so the people there had money and influence. In fact, there is some evidence that it was planted as a missionary city for Greek culture. If so, it worked. By the time this letter is written the whole region is speaking only Greek, and Philadelphia (which means brotherly love) was referred to as “Little Athens.”

G. So, it was a prosperous city for a while. But then two things happened.

1. First, the earthquake of 17 AD – which destroyed the mountain top location of Sardis - devastated Philly as well. In fact, she was set back so far that Rome gave the citizens of Philly a five tax holiday. What Rome did not do was provide any help, which upset the Philadelphians.

2. And then, a bit later, Domitian the Emperor, decided he didn't like the competition the vineyards around Philly were giving to the vineyards around Rome, so he ordered them destroyed. This broke their economy.

H. In addition to the hardships caused by the earthquake and broken economy, the Christians living there suffered at the hands of the Jews and Romans. The theme is they are "locked out."

1. Remember, for a while, those following Christ were all Jews and most people looked at Christianity as just another group of Jews – like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the like. But after Nero blamed the fire of Rome on Christians, and after Christianity started to grow and rival Judaism in terms of number – many Jews started to distance themselves from Christians.

2. And this was trouble for Christians because the Jews had a pass on declaring Caesar as Lord. Their names were in a book and so they didn't have to say it. Christians names were being taken out of that book. So it meant persecution from Rome.

I. We get hints of this in the letter.

III. But before we look there let me note, the Book John writes works.

A. John is writing to Christians who are suffering. One of the messages is, it's going to get worse. And it did. But the big theme is, hang in there. Hold on. You can make it. God is watching. This ends well.

B. This is a message you may need to hear. Right now you may need to hear, you can get through what you are going through. You can – and this letter, and the vision is offers, is help. And we have examples of that – such as the Scillitan martyrs.

C. In an ancient text we find a dialogue between six men in Carthage and the Proconsul Saturnius. The latter is saying, "look, you can go free if you will return to your right mind and declare your allegiance to Caesar.

D. One of the men says, "We are sane, and we have never done anything wrong or spoken ill of Caesar. Beyond that, when we have been mistreated we have given thanks.

E. The proconsul says: Don't make this so hard. It's simple. At which point one of the men says, "Let me tell you about simple, and he starts to explain the Gospel."

F. And the Procounsul says, "don't go there."

G. And one of the men says, "we serve the true God you should join us."

H. They go back and forth. The proconsul says, "I am going to give you 30 days to rethink this."

I. They say, "no thanks. there is nothing to reconsider"

J. He says, "then you will be put to death by the sword."

K. They say, "OK, Then today we will be martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God.

L. And the Roman official orders their execution. And they say, "Our God is king of kings and Lord of Lords" – that is a quote from Revelation. What Jesus gave them were words that gave them endurance.

M. Indeed, in this book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, who did not like Christians, and blames them for the fall of Rome, notes that the Christians in Philadelphia did not buckle under.²

IV. Rev. 3:7-13: **To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true.** This is Jesus. Remember the pattern. Every letter starts by identifying who it is headed to and then with some reference to Jesus. Every other letter uses a title for Jesus that is from the Old Testament, has some link back to Rev 1 and is somehow meaningful to the people in the city. This is a bit different.

- A. There is no link back to Revelation one.
- B. It does reach back to an Old Testament. Holiness is God's supreme attribute. Here Jesus is referenced as holy – which means He is God. He is not fickle and selfish like Domitian who had their vineyards destroyed. He is also true – which suggests he is faithful. He can be trusted.
- C. It also speaks to their challenges. They are locked out and facing closed doors, and here they are told that Jesus has the key of David, which suggests that he can open those closed doors.

V. **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.** This is a quote out of Isaiah 22:22.³ It seems to be a reference to heaven, though some see it as a door opened for evangelism, and some are not sure what it means other than that open doors are more positive images that closed ones.

VI. V8: **I know your deeds.** Which may seem like a terrifying thing.

- A. Years ago, I was talking to a friend who was working at Microsoft. He had started in the mid 80s. When he started, I had not heard of the company. This is a few years later and now everyone knows it. And he had been in a meeting where their group had reported in to Gates. And I asked him what Gates was like, and he said, "He's smart and he doesn't suffer fools. We started in making a report and he stopped us and he said, "Look, I went on the server and looked at your work. You guys are idiots or are playing around when you should be working."
- B. And my friend couldn't believe Gates had looked at his work. "He knows." That can be horrifying.
- C. Or it can be encouraging. Here it's the second.

VII. **See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength. I am here for you! Yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.**

VIII. Starting with verse 10 we get four promises.

IX. V10: **I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan (the same phrase used of those suffering in Smyrna), 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.**

- A. Some think this means those Jews who did not accept Christ were no longer "the people of God." Others claim it's a reference to the Jews who were persecuting Christians. The point is, Jesus is promising you will win this exchange.

X. **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 on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.** There is a lot written about what this trial is. Some link it to things happening then and others linking it to those things happening before the very end. It's not clear. What is clear is that Jesus is celebrating those who patiently endure.

A. The Greek word is hupomeno. Meno = to stay; Hupermeno = hyper stay (also to stay while under stress). In Hebrews 12 we are told that Jesus Christ “huber-menoed” the cross

B. We know from historical accounts that some of the Roman Emperors around this time – like Trajan – were horrifically cruel. They would feed Christians to the wild animals, cover them with pitch and light them on fire, cut off their toes.

XI. This passage is worth some reflection. How do you deal with problems and set backs? Crumble or hyper-meno?

A. The Romans were fascinated by Christians who were willing to go to their death – with a calmness and lack of bitterness. Who were that “non-anxious presence” we all instinctively like to be around.

B. This patient enduring under stress is extremely practical. It is a statement to others. It can be a gift to others. But it is not very common. Some of us can't hyper-stand a ten-minute delay, or any type of peer-pressure.

C. Jesus had ability to stand withstand the cross. And he told Peter – the most impetuous of his followers – that he would make him a rock, who could hyper-stand. And Peter became just that. Initially it was cut and run, but later Peter and the others all went to their deaths for Christ. In the face of persecution, they did not back down.

D. It is worth noting that at this moment, thousands of Christians – perhaps 10s of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Christians – are being persecuted. Are suffering for Christ. Don't think it couldn't happen to you or me.

E. I am not sure how likely that is. I read the reports suggesting that under certain scenarios, Christians in the US will start to be persecuted. I want to note:

1. inconveniences are not persecution.

2. And under almost any scenario that seems likely, those of us living in the US will still have it better than most people in the world.

F. So, I do not know about persecution. But it is likely that you will suffer from living in this broken world. Are you ready for that? Expecting that? I am going to circle back to this in a minute.

XII. V11: I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Here is the third promise. Number one is, you will overcome the synagogue of Satan; number two is, you will be sustained through the hour of trial. Number three is, Jesus will return and rescue us.

XIII. Number four: V12: **The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God.** Pillars are solid and strong. I do not tire of looking at the marvelous pillars you find at these sites. **Never again will they leave it.** You are not going to be chased out and locked out.

XIV. I will write on them 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 them my new name. Jesus will put his mark on us. Keep us into forever. **V 13: Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

XV. What we see here is that Jesus is an encourager and cheerleader for those who stand for him and endure. Please note, He does not tell them that he will keep them from persecution, but that he would keep them through it. He will protect them in the midst of it. The Christians at the church of Smyrna – the other church that heard only affirmation from Jesus – were told, there is no crown without the cross. We get the same kind of thing here. This runs very contrary to the deal most people think they have with Jesus – which is, if you believe you will have an easy life.

XVI. And when you think that is the deal, struggles are even harder than they need to be.

XVII. Where does that leave us? What do we take from this passage? Let me suggest that there is help here for facing the challenges that we are facing – there is advice here for how to get through what we are going through. The Bible is clear that we need to see suffering through a particular lens.

A. We need:

1. to expect it;
2. to understand that it can make us better. It can refine us. Break us down, make us humble, help us see things differently, purify our faith;
3. to understand that suffering can help us know ourself.
4. that suffering can help us know what lasts.

B. The Bible suggests that it is a mercy that God lets bad things happen – because we can learn so much through suffering.

XVIII. This passage suggests a few other things. It suggest that Christians who suffer patiently – like the Christians in Philadelphia were doing (who hupomeno) – can help others.

A. We can be an encouragement to other Christians;

B. And we can challenge those outside the faith to consider Christ.

XIX. I am not sure what you are being asked to patiently endured. Career setbacks? Health challenges? Something else? But here are the five things I would share with you based on what Jesus says to the Christians in Philadelphia.

A. It is important to understand that suffering does not have to be for nothing. It can make us better. It can have purpose. The suffering you are undergoing – for whatever, is an opportunity to get better. See it as a chance to grow, or to be helpful to others.

B. It is important to know that Jesus knows. He sees you. It is not unnoticed by everyone. God knows. You are being seen.

C. It is important to know that He is doing what is best. The Christians in Philadelphia were weak, and were getting picked on by the Romans and the Jews. Jesus doesn't stop it. He sees wins in it. And he does what is best for us. I think it is fair to say, if we knew everything Jesus knew, we'd choose the path he chooses for us.

D. Finally, Jesus has it under control. The passage we are looking at – which talks about Jesus having the keys – and the Book of Revelation in particular, note that Jesus has final control.

E. Finally, let me remind you, Jesus suffered for you. While there are questions about pain and suffering that we cannot answer. While this side of the grave the problem of evil can only be wrestled down to a certain point. We do not have a God who is removed from it. He bore our sin – he suffered in our place – and that changes everything. He showed up.

XX. Men and women, you can get through what you are going through: 1) expect it to be hard; 2) see it as an opportunity to get better; 3) know that Jesus sees what is going on; and 4) know that he suffered for you.

XXI. Determine that you are going to hupo-meno. By the way, I think there is a great illustration of what this looks like in the first Rocky movie.

A. As you may know, because of a fluke, this second rate boxer is going to fight the heavy weight champion of the world. He goes into training. And just before the fight, he says to his girlfriend – Adrian – I know I can't beat him. I just want to go the distance.

B. That's not a bad goal for us – Jesus says, “don't give in.” Hold on, even when you are being pummeled.⁴

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horseman, One Lord*, p. 127.

² JMB, p. 137

³ In Is. 22:22 it refers to Eliakim who was chief steward while Hezekiah was king.

⁴ Rocky illustration is also from Boice