

## “Decide and Conquer” (Revelation 3:7-13)

A daughter complained to her father about how hard things were for her. “As soon as I solve one problem,” she said, “another one comes up. I’m tired of struggling.” Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen where he filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In one he placed carrots, in the second, eggs, and in the last, ground coffee beans. He let them sit and boil without saying a word.

The daughter impatiently waited wondering what he was doing. After awhile he went over and turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. He poured the coffee into a bowl. Turning to her he asked, “Darling, what do you see?” “Carrots, eggs, and coffee,” she replied. He brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled as she tasted its rich flavor.

She asked, “What does it mean, Father?” He explained that each of them had faced the same adversity—boiling water—but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. By being in the boiling water they changed the water. The father then asked his daughter, “When adversity strikes, which are you?”<sup>1</sup>

Far too many Christians discover that when adversity strikes they are more like carrots or eggs than coffee. This results in many Christians and many churches bringing about little or no change in society. Fortunately, this doesn’t have to be the case. We can learn from the church of Philadelphia<sup>2</sup>—a church that faithfully served God in the midst of great adversity. As we look at Revelation 3:7-13, we will be called to “decide and conquer” our afflictions through Christ.

**1. The Character (3:7).** Before we consider Christ’s character, it is important that we note that Philadelphia and Smyrna (2:8-11) are the only two churches with no rebuke. It is interesting that both churches were experiencing adversity in the form of severe persecution from unbelieving Jews. Yet the tribulation of these two churches actually strengthened their spiritual lives. This is a reminder that present tribulation is no obstacle to faithfulness. This is very important. We are often tempted to think that adversity and opposition is the reason for our present failures in our spiritual lives, when in reality the exact opposite is true. The final church that we will study, the church of Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22), was the one church that seemed to be relatively free of adversity, yet they were lukewarm and were vomited out of Christ’s mouth.

In light of the faithfulness of Philadelphia, Jesus picks three titles that would encourage and reassure these believers. In contrast to the previous five letters, Jesus does not identify Himself with language from Rev 1:12-18.<sup>3</sup> Instead Jesus refers to Himself as holy, true, and sovereign. The first two expressions “**holy**” and “**true**” underscore the two things most vigorously denied concerning the Lord Jesus.<sup>4</sup> The first term, “**holy**” (*hagios*) means “set apart” or “a cut above” (Isa 6:3; 40:25; 65:16; Hab 3:3).<sup>5</sup> In this context it means that Jesus has been set apart to God. The term stresses His deity.<sup>6</sup> During His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus claimed to be God and was persistently accused of blasphemy when He did so by those who rejected Him as Messiah (cf. John 8:42-59; 10:29-33). Yet Jesus remains the perfect Son of God. Jesus is not only “holy”; He is “**true**.” The word “**true**” (*alethinos*) means “genuine” or “authentic.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus is the One who corresponds to reality. Many deny these two attributes as applied to Jesus, yet the Scriptures are our guide and they insist that Jesus is both holy and true.

The final description refers to Jesus as the One with **“the key<sup>8</sup> of David”** who can open and shut doors. The expressions **“the key of David”** and **“the open door”** originate in Isaiah 22 where God gave Eliakim the key to the house of David. Before Eliakim received this key, an incident occurred that gave Eliakim the rights to the “key of David.” King Hezekiah caught Shebna (the steward or governor in charge of the king’s palace) in a fraud. Apparently Shebna had used his position to allow only those favorable to him and to his ideology into the king’s presence. God sent Shebna in exile to Babylon. God then replaced him with Eliakim, giving him the “key of David.” This gave Eliakim access to all of David’s riches. In the same way, Jesus, as the heir of David’s covenant, has been given all authority to grant entrance into heaven and the New Jerusalem (Rev 3:12, 21-22; cf. 1:18).

Notice that this verse doesn’t say that Jesus has “a” key. Rather, Jesus says that He has **“the”** key. He has the master key! He possesses all of heaven’s resources and authority. This means that Jesus can get into everything. He can unlock all the doors in your life: health, employment, and relationships. Jesus Christ holds the key. Why do you and I need to know this? Because if you ever need something from heaven, you need someone who has the key that can unlock the door. In order for you to have victory on earth, you need the resources of heaven. It may seem hard at times to break through to heaven. Could it be that you’re using the wrong key? The key is to know who Jesus is. That is really the most important thing we need to know in this life.

**2. The Commendation (3:8-10).** In 3:8, Jesus begins with the familiar words, **“I know your deeds.”**<sup>9</sup> He then says, **“Behold,<sup>10</sup> I have put before you an open door which no one can shut.”** In this context, Jesus states that He will open the door of heaven to the church in Philadelphia.<sup>11</sup> The mention that no one can shut this door likely means that the Jews in Philadelphia (cf. 3:9) sought to exclude Gentiles from God.<sup>12</sup> Yet, through His own death and resurrection, Jesus has given free access to both Jew and Gentile. This is a verse of comfort. Our names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life; we have been granted security in Christ. He is sovereign over who is saved and ensures that all of His children remain saved.

In the NASB, the rest of 3:8 reads, **“because you have a little power, and<sup>13</sup> have kept My word, and have not denied My name.”** This phrase gives the impression that the church at Philadelphia was given the free gift of salvation because they had “a little power, had kept Jesus’ Word, and had not denied His name.” Yet this is not the case. If you look at various English versions (e.g., ESV, NIV, NRSV, NLT), you will find that there is a period after **“Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut.”** I believe that this is a better rendering of this verse, which should be staggered to distinguish what Jesus is saying. Jesus now says to Philadelphia, “Even though you have only **‘a little power,’**<sup>14</sup> you have remained faithful to My Word and to My name. What perseverance!”

Two dogs were arguing about who could open a door the easiest. In their bow-wow language, they were going at it. The Great Dane said to the little Chihuahua, “Be quiet, you can’t do anything. You can’t even reach the knob. Just stand on your hind legs and see how high you can get. The Chihuahua said, “I know I can go faster than you can.” But the Dane said, “Stand back, and then he got up on his hind legs, got his paws around the knob and twisted and turned. After exerting much energy, in about five minutes the Dane was finally able to open the door. He then closed the door and began barking, “Five minutes! How are you going to beat that? The door is closed and you can’t even reach the knob. What are you going to do? I’m the big dog; you’re a little puppy!” The Chihuahua said, “Stand back. The one with the little power came up to the door, took his front paws and started scratching. After 40 seconds, the master of the house came and opened the door.

Some of you out there are big dogs. You think you can open your own door. You can make your own way. You can do it all by yourself. But there are those of you with little power. You know that you’re unable to reach that high. Just scratch the door. Heavenly Father, let me out. Heavenly Father, make a way out of no way. Please come and open the door for me.<sup>15</sup>

In 3:9-10a, Jesus says, **“Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you because<sup>16</sup> you have kept the word of My perseverance.”** The **“synagogue of Satan”** (cf. Rev 2:9) was a Jewish gathering that had rejected Jesus as their Messiah and which aggressively persecuted the church in their city. Although this group was made up of Jewish people, Jesus didn’t consider them spiritual Jews.<sup>17</sup>

Why did Jesus promise these Christians that one day He would make these Jews come and bow down at their feet and know that He loved them?<sup>18</sup> It is likely that these Jews were slandering these Christ-followers. They no doubt said, “How can you say you’re God’s people when you are hated and despised? Is that how God treats those he loves? We know we are God’s people and we are safe, secure, and prosperous. Just say Jesus is a prophet or a wise rabbi and you can worship with us and have peace and security.” You may be rejected at work, in your neighborhood, or by your family because you claim to have God’s unique approval and unique truth.

The Lord promised His church that He would make her enemies bow down, not that they would voluntarily and willingly do so. Also, they will bow down “at their feet,” an expression of defeat and humiliation (see Isa 60:14). The subjected enemies of the church are not said to acknowledge anything about the Lord here, but rather to acknowledge that the Lord has loved the saints at Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup> The message then would be that those who presently oppose the saints will be made to submit to them and to acknowledge God’s choice (as conveyed by the word “love,” cf. Rom. 9:13) of those who constitute the church.

In 3:10b, Jesus’ commendation continues. Jesus says to this church and to every church down throughout the ages, **“I also will keep<sup>20</sup> you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world,<sup>21</sup> to test those<sup>22</sup> who dwell on the earth.”** The **“hour”** about which Jesus spoke is what Jesus called “the great tribulation” (Matt 24:21; cf. Rev 7:14).<sup>23</sup> This part of world history will be unparalleled in its degree of human suffering because God’s wrath will punish rebellious mankind for its refusal to submit to Him. That is the period described in so much detail in Revelation 6-19. Fortunately, the Bible teaches that believers will be kept through this specific time of testing. Down throughout history, Jesus has kept His church from this period of tribulation through death, but for one generation, they will be kept from this period by the rapture.

**3. The Challenge (3:11). “I am coming<sup>24</sup> quickly.”** The word **“quickly”<sup>25</sup>** means “suddenly, unexpectedly, without announcement.” When Jesus comes the event will unfold rapidly.<sup>26</sup> It will happen with one fell swoop. Yet, it is important for us to recognize that it does not necessarily mean “soon.” Nevertheless, there are no prophecies that must occur before the rapture of the church takes place.<sup>27</sup> Jesus could return next year, next week, or before this day is over.

This doesn’t mean that we should quit our jobs, move to a commune, or max out our credit cards and go to Disney World. But it does mean that we should live each day with the realization that at any moment the trumpet could sound, the clouds could part, and the Lord could appear for His own.<sup>28</sup> The coming of Christ is an incentive for perseverance under pressure. The constant expectation of the imminent coming of Christ keeps us on the tiptoe of expectancy. He will not announce His coming. It will come when we least expect it. The New Testament teaching of the imminent return of Christ is the strongest possible motive. I don’t want to be ashamed before Him when He returns (1 John 2:28). The only way I can avoid the risk of being ashamed is to discharge my Christian responsibilities faithfully day by day, just as the Philadelphian Christians were doing. I can remain faithful with the anticipation of being transported to the Father’s house at any moment.

Let me ask you this: If you were conscious of the fact that Jesus could return in the next few minutes would you view pornography? Would you go turn on a CD that you know full well God wouldn't listen to? Would you begin to slander that person who has irritated you?

Jesus' challenge continues with the charge, **“hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”** To **“hold fast”** (Rev 2:13, 25; 3:3) is a warning against spiritual carelessness and carnality. Jesus is saying, “Don't budge!” The warning reminds us to live in the light of His coming, to hold fast to Him in faith and service. For when He comes it will mean examination and rewards. He will not forget our service on His behalf, but we must hold fast to the hope and expectation of His coming for us or we will live carelessly, indifferent to our calling and purpose as believers. When that happens we lose our crowns, rewards for faithful service.

**“That no one will take your crown”**<sup>29</sup> is an interesting picture. To lose a crown is to be deprived of the honor or glory potentially available through faithful living. There are two possible ideas here: (1) It could refer to rewards, which are lost and given to others because we failed to hold fast (1 Cor 9:24). In the parable of the minas in Luke 19 the Lord says regarding the unfaithful servant, “Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas” (19:24). (2) Or, it could refer to rewards lost because of the evil influences that we might allow to hinder us in the race of life.<sup>30</sup>

The loss of rewards is a great motivator. When Christian author, Bruce Wilkinson, was raising his children, he gave them an allowance. He then expected them to complete their chores. Often they would do so, but there were times that they would not. So he decided to begin to take away money when they did not fulfill their family responsibilities. This caused his children immense pain. Wilkinson concluded that the loss of rewards is a greater motivator than the prospect of gaining rewards. The judgment seat of Christ will be an occasion of either reward or regret (2 Cor 5:10). It is determined by our faithfulness here and now.

**4. The Call (3:12-13).** In 3:12, the believer who overcomes is promised three specific rewards. First, Jesus says, **“I will make him a pillar in the temple”**<sup>31</sup> **of My God.** The New Testament informs us that for the past 2,000 years a spiritual temple called “the church” has been in the process of being built.<sup>32</sup> Paul and Peter tell us that every believer is a living stone in this spiritual temple (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5). However, in Revelation 21:22, John records that in the eternal realm there will be no temple, “for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” Back in our context, Jesus tells us that the overcoming believer will be “a pillar in God's temple.” A **“pillar”** (*stulos*) is a column supporting the weight of a building.<sup>33</sup> A pillar is a picture of strength.<sup>34</sup> Jesus will make the overcomer bear the weight of that temple. To be a pillar is a sign of special reward with a permanent and prominent position of honor and responsibilities in the millennium and eternal state (Isa 22:23; Luke 19:16-19).

The second reward promised is that **“he who overcomes will not go out from it [the temple] anymore.”** Once a builder puts a pillar in place it does not move from that building. Jesus assures these believers that they will never be removed from their place of preeminence in the eternal temple.<sup>35</sup> The overcomer has a fixed eternal place of honor in the sanctuary of God. There will be no more rejection and persecution, only approval and blessing.

The final reward Jesus promises the overcomer is that he will have three special names<sup>36</sup>: the name of God (signifying His ownership), the city of God, the New Jerusalem (signifying citizenship in the heavenly city, cf. Ps 87:5-6), and Christ's new name<sup>37</sup> (the full revelation of His character and special intimacy with Christ in His kingdom (Rev 3:4, 21; 2:7, 17)).<sup>38</sup>

If you've broken a bone and found yourself in a cast, you realize that the only redeeming benefit is having people write your name followed by an encouraging note, signed with their name. If you persevere in your faith, one day Jesus is going to write names of encouragement all over you.

This letter closes with the familiar words: **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:13)**. This charge reminds us again that the message of each of these seven letters is applicable to all churches of all time. Finally the letter is closed with the usual charge to all the churches or to the church of God at large, wherever it may exist in the world, to hear and take this message to heart.

My brother, Tim, and I graduated from Bremerton High School. Our school mascot was a “knight.” Every year, there is a special ceremony where a handful of students are “knighted.” If you are fortunate enough to be “knighted” it means that you have faithfully represented Bremerton High School in such things as academic excellence, athletic achievement, school and community service, and character. Initially, candidates for “knighting” are voted into consideration by students and faculty. Then a committee decides those who will receive this great honor.<sup>39</sup>

The knighting ceremony is the last assembly of the year. Prior to that assembly the candidates do not know who will be knighted. During the ceremony, a group of perhaps a dozen juniors dressed in dark robes, walk randomly in circles throughout the crowd of seniors seated in chairs on the gym floor. The rest of the underclassmen sit in the bleachers, looking down on the entire spectacle. There is a long period of silence between the reading of the names, as tension builds up to a drum-roll style finale for the reading of each name. In an instant one of the seniors would feel a tap from behind, on the shoulder, from one of the robed juniors; just then the person's name would be announced to the cheers and applause of the audience. The senior would then walk up to the stage and kneel before the knight dressed in armor who would then tap the individual on each shoulder with his sword.<sup>40</sup>

Being knighted is considered the highest honor one can achieve at Bremerton High. In fact, at the entrance of Bremerton High, there is a long hallway where you can see the names and the pictures of those who have been knighted over the years.<sup>41</sup> While it is certainly an honor, it is a temporal reward for faithful high school overcomers. Jesus promises an eternal reward that will never perish or decay. It will mean honor and glory in the presence of Jesus Christ and fellow believers for all eternity.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Preaching Today Citation: From the Internet; submitted by Eric Reed, managing editor, *Leadership Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word “Philadelphia” means “brotherly love.”

<sup>3</sup> This is the only letter where this is the case.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. “the holy one” and “the true one.” The only other place this description is found is Rev 6:10. Jesus is also declared to be “holy” (Rev 15:4) and “true” (Rev 19:11).

<sup>5</sup> I remember the definition of “holy” (*hagios*) by the mnemonic Hagen-Das ice cream (“set apart” or “a cut above” other brands). For a great study on the holiness of God, please see R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998 2<sup>nd</sup>, ed.).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ps 16:10; Isa 40:25, 34; Hab 3:3; Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; 4:34; John 6:69; Acts 4:27, 30; 1 Pet 1:15; 1 John 2:20; Rev 4:8; 6:10.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus was not claiming to be the truth, while this is so (cf. John 14:6). Neither was He claiming to be “truthful” or “faithful.” Instead, He reminds those believing saints in Philadelphia whose adversaries of “the synagogue of Satan,” would have insisted that Jesus was, indeed, illegitimate (cf. John 8:41) that He was the legitimate, authentic Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

<sup>8</sup> “Having the key,” indicates the power and authority of its holder.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rev 2:2, 19; 3:1, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Gk. *idou* (“look” or “pay attention”) is used three times in this letter (Rev 3:8-9).

<sup>11</sup> Some have suggested that this “open door” is an opportunity for evangelism (cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3), however, it is more likely a reference to the coming kingdom.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Matt 23:13; 1 Thess 2:15f.

<sup>13</sup> The word “and” (*kai*) should be translated “but.” There is a strong contrast being made here. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 189.

<sup>14</sup> Since there is no article before “little” in the Greek text, it is possible to understand their “little power” as a reference to their small influence, evidently because of their small number.

<sup>15</sup> This illustration comes from Dr. Tony Evans.

<sup>16</sup> See John Niemela, “For You Have Kept My Word: The Grammar of Revelation 3:10” (Part 1), *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal*, Vol 6, No 1 Jan-Mar 2000. [http://www.chafer.edu/CTSjournal/journals/v6n1\\_2.pdf](http://www.chafer.edu/CTSjournal/journals/v6n1_2.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> In John 8:39, Jesus told the Jews of His day, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did” (ESV). In Romans 2:28-29, Paul declared, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly...but he is a Jew who is one inwardly.”

<sup>18</sup> Eventually, these unbelieving Jews would have to admit their error at the great white throne Judgment, if not earlier (Isa 45:23; 60:14; Phil 2:10-11). However the future repentance of Israel at Messiah’s Second Coming that will result in the Jews’ respectful treatment of Gentile believers may be in view here (cf. Isa 45:14; 49:23; Ezek 36:23; 37:28; Zech 8:20-23).

<sup>19</sup> While some scholars suggest that these Judaizers will be converted this is unlikely.

<sup>20</sup> Gk. *tereo ek* (“kept from”) is used only one other time in John 17:15. We are “kept from” the Evil One though we are in the world. We will never “belong” to him but only to God.

<sup>21</sup> The “whole world” (Gk. *oikoymenes*, the inhabited earth), not just a local area.

<sup>22</sup> Those entering the “hour of testing” (i.e., the Tribulation) are described in Scripture as “those who dwell on the earth” (cf. Luke 21:35; Rev 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:8). This description always refers to unbelievers.

<sup>23</sup> Because this period of tribulation will immediately precede the coming of the Lord to earth in power and great glory (cf. Matt 24:29, 30), and because the generation to whom John wrote these words has long since passed away, Philadelphia’s representation of not just the other six churches of Asia but also of the church universal throughout the present age is evident.

<sup>24</sup> Gk. *erchomai* = This verb is a futuristic present.

<sup>25</sup> Gk. *tachu*, cf. Rev 1:1, 7; 2:16; 22:7, 12, 20; see also 2 Pet 3:8.

<sup>26</sup> “Some have advanced a theory that God’s promise to Philadelphia consists of a pledge to protect the faithful from the effects of God’s wrath while they remain on earth during the time others around them are suffering such severe consequences. That proposal does not correspond with the facts, however, because faithful followers of Christ on earth during that period, though delivered from God’s wrath, will suffer the worst persecution that the forces of Satan can muster against them. In fact, many believers will become martyrs for their faith during the ‘hour’ (see, for example, Rev 6:9-11; 7:9-14). What incentive to remain faithful a little longer is a promise to a persecuted people

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that if they remain faithful a little longer, they can expect to be ushered into a time in history when their persecution will become even worse than they are presently experiencing? This idea that the promise of Jesus entails their remaining on earth during the future tribulation is a complete misfit in the context of the Philadelphian letter.” Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Revelation* (2003), <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/revelation.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> This is not true of Christ’s Second Coming (Rev 19:1-8).

<sup>28</sup> Robert Jeffress, *As Time Runs Out* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 65-66.

<sup>29</sup> Jesus used the singular “**crown**” because He is speaking of “the crown of life” (Rev 2:10; Jas 1:12). This crown is given for persevering through hardship and trials.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Matt 13:7, 22; Col 2:18; 2 John 8; Rev 2:20 with 2:25f.

<sup>31</sup> The New Testament uses the word “temple” (*naos*) for the inner part of the temple in Jerusalem (Matt 23:35; Gal 2:9; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10; Rev 21:22). The temple was the place of God’s presence.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., 1 Cor 3:16; 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 3:6.

<sup>33</sup> Metaphorically, the Bible uses this term for the church (1 Tim 3:15-16) for a permanent position in the eternal temple.

<sup>34</sup> When people sojourn to ancient ruins, they note that often all that remains are the pillars.

<sup>35</sup> The overcomer “will not go out” like the high priest used to have to. This is an added promise of permanence in the presence of God.

<sup>36</sup> The threefold occurrence of “name” (*onoma*) is impressive and amounts to a threefold assurance of his identity with God.

<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Jesus’ name is a symbol of His character, which overcomers can appreciate only when they see Him (cf. Rev 2:17; 3:5). Scripture does not reveal Christ’s new name elsewhere. However, Revelation 19:12 says that when Jesus appears, He will come with that new name.

<sup>38</sup> Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 1740.

<sup>39</sup> Tim and I graduated with a senior class of approximately 400. Those who are knighted make up the top 5% of every graduating class. This means out of 400 only about 20 are knighted. While everyone in the class eligible for graduation graduates, only the overcomers are knighted. This illustration breaks down here because to be “knighted” does require some degree of physical intellect and gifting. However, in the spiritual realm, all believers are “gifted” and the rewards given to the overcomer are based on faithfulness in one’s stewardship, not raw ability.

<sup>40</sup> Following this, the senior would take his place on the stage with all of the others who had been knighted. When all of the individuals had been knighted, the principal or someone would generally speak, and the ceremony would end with the singing of the school song.

<sup>41</sup> In many ways, this is picturesque of the hall of faithfulness in Hebrews 11.