

SERIES: Letters From Jesus to Eight Churches

SERMON: To Philadelphia: The Church of the Faithful Witness

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 3:7-12

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In our series on Revelation 2 & 3, we come today to the sixth letter Jesus wrote, the one to the church at Philadelphia. This is the only one of the seven churches whose name we recognize immediately. Maybe some of you are wondering why Jesus would write a letter to Philadelphia and not to Boston or New York or Kansas City. Well, this Philadelphia is not in Pennsylvania but in Turkey. It is the second-to-last church on the postal route starting with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea.

Philadelphia is one of only two churches with which Christ finds no fault, the other being Smyrna, so this message is more encouraging than most. Yet a time of testing approaches—the ongoing ordeal of God’s faithful people in a fallen world. Christ does not minimize the difficulties, but He does encourage His church with the fact that opposition provides opportunity. He challenges them to be faithful in overcoming the opposition while taking advantage of the opportunity.

Let’s begin this morning with some background and history regarding Philadelphia. About 30 miles from Sardis, the city of Philadelphia was strategically located in a river valley surrounded by volcanic mountains, which provided the rich soil for famous local wines. It was strategically located both militarily and for trade routes, and was important in disseminating Greek language and culture throughout Asia Minor.

One problem was Philadelphia’s proclivity for earthquakes. In AD 17, when Jesus was just a young man, the city was virtually leveled by an earthquake. Afterwards, many people chose to live in the rural area around the city, and those who re-inhabited the town would flee at the slightest sign of a tremor. The city was eventually rebuilt with the help of the emperor Tiberius, and in gratitude it took on the honorific name, "Neocaesarea." This was a great honor for the city and tied it closely to the emperor's service and to the worship of him as a god. Nothing is known about the origin of the church in Philadelphia, but it is assumed that it was evangelized by disciples of Paul, like the other six cities to whom Jesus wrote. It continued to maintain a faithful witness to Christ for centuries.

With that background, we turn to our text. Let’s read the powerful words our Savior wrote to Philadelphia, as found in 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. 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. 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. 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. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

This church's future is brighter than its past. (7-8a)

1. It is brighter because of who its Lord is. At the beginning of each letter Christ introduces himself in a way that is especially relevant to the challenge the church is facing. First, He is holy. At its root the term holiness in the NT means “set apart,” particularly from sin and all that is ungodly. Jesus is also set apart from all the so-called gods, especially the cult of the imperial emperor. The pagan gods were all immoral, deceitful, violent, and never trustworthy, but Jesus is holy. The church at Philadelphia needs to recognize that, and so do we. Do we recognize Him as pure, holy, awesome, and perfect, and therefore as one deserving our obedience and reverent fear? And do other people see the holiness of Jesus reflected in us?

Second, Jesus is True, and therefore One who is real, dependable, and genuine, not like the so-called gods of the Greeks. These Philadelphian disciples lived in a culture very similar to our own—pluralistic, open to many so-called truths, and tolerant of everything except intolerance and exclusivity. But here Jesus makes a radical claim to be the perfect standard and the absolute authority in the midst of a culture that is full of doubts, hypocrisy, and outright lies. The church at Philadelphia desperately needs to acknowledge this, and so do we. Do we believe that both the living Word of God and the written Word of God are absolutely true and trustworthy? Do we make it a priority to know this Word and put our hope in it?

Third, Jesus holds the Key of David. He is the messianic King, the one who holds the keys to the Kingdom of God (Matthew 16:19; 23:13). No one comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6). He alone opens and closes the door to heaven. This is another critical fact for the church to understand and sink its teeth into. Do we believe that Jesus is sovereign, absolute and unchallenged in His power? That He is always perfectly capable to accomplish His will? That He alone holds all power over salvation and judgment?

There is no one else in the church—not the pastor, not the Elders, not the deacons—no one who is holy, true, and sovereign.

It is brighter because of what its Lord promises. “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” I am fascinated by the concept of the “open door,” as discussed often in the NT. There are some passages that speak of an open door of salvation. For example, in Matthew 7:13, 14, we read, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” There are two gates for each person to choose from, and both are open. It is true that one is wide and the other narrow. The wide one enables people to surge through in large numbers, but the narrow one is accessible just one at a time. The fact that it is small probably implies that it is low so that a

person has to stoop to enter. Furthermore, we can't take any of our "stuff" with us, because there is only room for the individual. But friend, don't fail to see that this door is open—to anyone who puts his faith and trust in Christ.

But there are other passages in the NT that speak of an open door of service, or an open door of opportunity, and I believe this is the door Jesus is referring to in His letter to the Philadelphian church. The Pax Romana (Roman peace), the Roman language (Latin), and the Roman roads that crisscross the civilized world provided huge openings for the Gospel that enabled Christian evangelists to travel extensively, sharing the truth of Jesus Christ to those with inquisitive minds and hungry hearts.

But an open door is not the same as a lack of opposition. On his third missionary journey the Apostle Paul spent three years in the city of Ephesus. He gave public lectures in a rented hall, and he visited many people in their homes. Night and day he was busy preaching the Gospel. But he writes a strange thing to the Corinthian church explaining why he is delaying a visit to them: "I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me" (1 Corinthians 16:7-9).

It is common for us to look at opposition as evidence of a closed door, but not Paul. As we saw a couple of weeks ago with the church at Sardis, the absence of persecution and opposition can actually be evidence of a dead church!

Later Paul was taken to Rome as a prisoner, and for two years he was under house arrest. Again he saw an open door of opportunity, and he witnessed to all who came into contact with him—Jews, Romans, and even members of Caesar's household! The runaway slave named Onesimus, as we learn in the NT book of Philemon, found Christ through Paul's witness in Rome while he was a prisoner. Yet, all these opportunities were not enough for Paul, and he prayed for even more. In Colossians 4:2-4 we read, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may *open a door* for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."

I want us to ask ourselves a question this morning: when we ask the Lord, as all of us do from time to time, to open a door of opportunity for ourselves or for our church, do we mean it? If we really mean it, let me ask a second question, "Is there any reason to believe He hasn't already done so?" If we're looking for the total lack of opposition, for all our needs to be met in advance, and for people to just come up and ask us, "What must I do to be saved?", then God is probably not going to do that. But if we're willing to step out in faith and trust Him to provide our needs, then the door may already be open.

We have a term we use in missions a lot—we speak of closed countries. We need to use that term cautiously. There really are no countries closed to the Gospel; there are only countries in which traditional missionaries are not welcome. No country is closed to Christian businessmen and women, closed to the airwaves, closed to the internet, closed to concerted prayer, closed to

creative means of sharing the Gospel.

So the biblical concept of the open door speaks of the opportunity to share the Gospel, with or without opposition present. Back in Revelation 3 let's look once again at what Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia about the open door: "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." That is why I say this church's future is greater than its past. So is ours, in fact, even more so, if we will take advantage of the opportunities Jesus has set before us.

This church's commitment is stronger than its earthly resources. (8b)

The last half of verse 8 reads, "I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." This congregation is pathetically weak, but I do not see this as a criticism but rather as a simple statement of fact. They are few in number and have little in terms of financial resources or stature in the community. More than likely they were made up primarily of the lower classes of society, just like Paul describes the Corinthian church: "not many wise by human standards, not many influential, not many of noble birth."

Yet despite their lack of strength, these believers have done two things for which they are commended, one positive and one negative: (1) they have kept Christ's Word and (2) they have not denied His name. What does it mean to keep His Word? Well, it has to start with knowing it. You can't keep something you're unfamiliar with. Then it involves believing it. There are sadly many today but have a certain acquaintance with Scripture but they fail to believe what they read. The whole Da Vinci phenomenon has shown how dangerous a little learning can be in the hands of someone who feels quite free to massage the truth and create his own reality. The recent uproar in over National Geographic's exposure of the Gospel of Judas is positively silly. Bible scholars have been aware of scores of Gnostic and other false Gospels for the whole history of the church. These phony writings were rejected by the early Christians for obvious reasons, and only a postmodern mentality that is eager to debunk any Christian claims to truth would try to resurrect these tired and weak arguments.

But knowing and believing is not all that is entailed in "keeping Christ's Word"; we must also obey it and live it. These Philadelphian believers apparently are doing that, but there are many today who do not. They will fight tooth and nail over a fine point of doctrine, but their lives are a disgrace.

But there is still a further implication. In addition to knowing and believing and obeying and living, Jesus is interested in having His Word proclaimed. Have the believers at Philadelphia kept Christ's word? Then let them spread it! That is the principal reason He has opened the door of opportunity for them. And the same is true of us.

The second thing the Philadelphians are known for, despite their lack of strength, is that they have not denied the name of Christ. Even in the face of persecution, threat, poverty, death, or whatever the Evil One could throw at them, they refuse to deny Him. That's why I say their commitment is stronger than their earthly resources. How about ours? At times we feel that we

have little strength left, but by God’s grace we can maintain our commitment to His Word and His name, because we know He is faithful and His grace is infinite. Do you remember that song, *He Giveth More Grace?*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done.
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father’s full giving is only begun.*

This church’s protection is greater than its opposition. (9)

Look at verse 9 again: “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.” What a serious charge Jesus makes against the Jews in Philadelphia who are persecuting the Christians! So fanatical is their resistance to the Gospel that He calls them a synagogue of Satan!

Jesus was a Jew, of course, and so were the vast majority of the Apostles and early Christian leaders. They were faithful Jews in that they believed and taught the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures. Again and again in the NT Paul distinguishes between those who are spiritual Jews and those who are merely Jews physically. Jesus makes the same distinction here. He says these persecutors claim to be Jews, but they are not really; they are liars. They may have circumcised bodies but not circumcised hearts. The Jews, of course, are not the only ones who pretend to be what they are not. There are those in every religion and every denomination who are spiritual in name only.

Jesus promises to protect His people in Philadelphia from these hypocritical persecutors. He says, “I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” The OT taught in many places that Gentiles would be forced to pay homage to the Jews due to the fact that they are God’s chosen people; but now this promise is turned on its head: Jewish oppressors will be forced to pay homage to Gentile believers. Some have thought that this homage is referring to the future conversion of the Jews, but notice that Jesus will make them fall down at “your” feet, not “my” feet. This is submission, not worship. The Jewish people will eventually learn that God’s true efficacious love is for those who have believed in His Messiah.

This church’s protection is greater than her opposition. And so is ours. In contrast to the Philadelphians, we have it really easy. Unfortunately we give up a lot more easily, too. Listen to John Stott:

Subtle and specious are the excuses we give for avoiding the challenge of evangelism. Our forces are small and feeble, we say. The opposition is great, and the danger of further unpleasantness real. So let us not do anything rash or foolish. Let us wait a while until the circumstances become more favorable. Does not the Bible itself say: “There is a time to speak and a time to be silent”? Yes, indeed, but the devil himself is adept at misquoting and misapplying Scripture. Neither the church’s weakness nor present nor future opposition should silence us.”ⁱ

This church's perseverance is tougher than its tests. (10)

Look at verse 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." Jesus promises to keep this church from some terrible trial. I want us to explore what this trial might be referring to, but first I want you to note *why* He promises to protect them: "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently." They have persevered up to this point with patience, so He will keep them safe in the future.

There are many who interpret this promise of keeping the church from the hour of trial as proof that the Church will be raptured before the Great Tribulation. The real question is whether Christ is promising to "protect His church *in*" or "remove them *from*" the tribulation that is coming. The Greek can be understood either way, and frankly, there are good arguments on both sides. I am inclined to believe Christ is promising to protect His church while they are going through this hour of trial. There is strong support for this interpretation in John 17:15: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you *protect them from* the evil one." The Greek phrase here is the same as found in Rev. 3:10 (protect from), and here it clearly does *not* mean "remove from" but rather "protect while being attacked by the evil one."

Certainly it is comforting to many to think that believers will enjoy a secret exit from this condemned planet just in the nick of time, as the *Left Behind Series* suggests, but that comfort may not be well founded. While I am not dogmatic on the subject, I believe the NT evidence favors the view that the church will go *through* the Tribulation (or at least most of it), but that we will be protected from the wrath of God as it is being poured out on the earth. By the way, it is important to realize that we may not escape the wrath of Satan, for there will be many martyrs during the Great Tribulation, but there is a huge difference between the wrath of God and the wrath of Satan. Someone has said, "But if you're dead, you're dead." Yes, but persecution for the sake of Christ is seen as a privilege in the NT, and martyrdom is viewed as a victory over Satan, not a defeat.

This church's ultimate rewards are higher than its risks. (11-13)

Jesus says, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have ..." Unlike the letters to compromising churches, the promise of Christ's coming soon is not a threat, but an exhortation to continue to do the good they have been doing. Do you ever remember your mom saying, "Your father will be home in about an hour." That statement had a very different meaning depending on whether you'd been good or bad while he was away. We are to live every day in an attitude of expectation that the Lord may come back at any time and demand an accounting. Are you ready to meet God today? Would you be glad to see Jesus come stand before you right now, or would you be afraid because you have left much unfinished work?

Jesus mentions three ultimate rewards that await those believers who overcome, who take the risk of walking through the open door and seizing the opportunities that Christ puts before them.

Those three rewards are all symbolic—a crown, a pillar in the temple, and a name, or rather three names. Our task is to figure out what they are symbolic of.

A crown. “Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” The crown imagery is especially meaningful here due to the popularity of athletic games in Philadelphia. The crown is the prize the victor receives, as Paul writes to the Corinthian believers:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

There are enemies out there fighting against us, not just against Christianity in general, but against our faith and our life in Christ. The world, the devil, and our own sinful desires all war against us, telling us to take it easy, to relax, not to get so worked up about this Christianity thing. Seek your own comfort, look out for number one—would this God of yours deny you the pleasure of living? But if we do so, we may end up being disqualified.

A pillar in the temple. “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.” So the reward here is not the we will *receive* a pillar but that we will *be* a pillar. A pillar speaks of something stable, immovable, and secure. (Do you remember the story of Samson, who in his death killed more pagan Philistines than in his life, and that was a lot!? He did so by leaning against the pillars in the house of Dagon and pulling them down with his enormous strength, which he had lost due to sin but had restored by God due to repentance). Well, God is going to make us a pillar that will never fall. This speaks of absolute security. In a city that was known for its earthquakes, and in a church that was plagued by persecution, this promise of security must have been most welcome. And isn’t security what most people desperately want—in relationships, in their finances, in their work? It is a reward God promises to those who overcome. If we are a faithful pilgrim in this life, we will be a pillar in the next.ⁱⁱ

Three names. Jesus promises to write three names on the believer who overcomes—the name of my God, the name of the city of my God, and “my new name.” Well, the personal name of God is Yahweh, the city of God is clearly the New Jerusalem, and the new name of Jesus is, according to Rev. 19:12, “a name that no one knows but he himself.” Frankly, I don’t know all that is involved in these names, but they clearly speak of our identity. Jesus will acknowledge us before his Father, not with the titles we so often give ourselves and others—black or white, Republican or Democrat, single, divorced, abused, rich, poor, lawyer, construction worker, unemployed—but with titles like “Child of God, Beloved Son, Beloved Daughter.” In this world you may be rejected, forgotten, unloved, ignored, or unpopular, but Jesus gives his loving affirmation of ownership to all those who are His by faith.

Conclusion: Dr. Grant Osborne, professor at our own Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, writes cogently:

Every small church in a difficult area of ministry will find this letter encouraging.

Every Christian uncertain about his or her gifts and place in the church as a whole will be comforted. The basic message is profound: God is more interested in faithfulness than success. I met a pastor who had been ministering in an inner-city situation where growth was impossible. He was told by a church growth leader that he should leave since there was no future in that church. The leaders in Philadelphia would have been told the same. Does God care only about suburban ministry where neighborhoods are exploding with people and “church growth” is almost inevitable. I think not. When we get to heaven, the greatest rewards may well be for the kind of Christians who persevered in situations like that in Philadelphia, who remained true to the Lord in an extremely difficult situation.ⁱⁱⁱ

John Bunyan, the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, had little worldly success and much pain. At 16, when he became a lay preacher in the army, his friend was killed standing next to him. At 17, his mother died. At 21 he was a husband, and at 27 he became a widower, the father of four young children, one of them blind. At 32, when he was jailed for preaching without government license, his second wife suddenly went into labor and delivered a child who soon died. He was offered his freedom if he would stop preaching the gospel, but he famously replied, "If I am freed today, I will preach tomorrow."

Bunyan spent the next 12 years of his life in prison. Yet In the midst of a life full of loss, sorrow, and trouble, Bunyan faithfully wrote and preached of God's grace and goodness to him. Not many of us will be given a platform to impact thousands of people or manage millions of dollars, but God has put an open door of opportunity in front of each one of us. And success is faithfully doing what God has given us to do in His power, for His glory.

i. John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 102.

ii. Stott, 110.

iii. Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, 199-200.