

“To the Church in Philadelphia”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 8

Texts: Revelation 3:7-13; Isaiah 22:20-25

Jesus has no word of commendation whatsoever for the church in Sardis. Because of their lax attitude toward doctrinal matters and because their compromise with paganism, the congregation in Sardis receives only a stern word of rebuke from the Lord of the church. But to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus utters no words of rebuke. For the Christians living in Philadelphia, Jesus only has words of commendation. Unlike the church in Sardis, Christians in this church have kept Christ’s word and refused to deny their Lord even though their church was weak and struggling. Because of their faithfulness, Jesus promises to deliver them from the trial which is coming upon the earth and to grant them entrance into the heavenly city.

We are continuing with our series on the Book of Revelation and we are working our way through the opening section of this amazing book which begins in Revelation 1:12 with John’s vision of the resurrected Christ who walks in the midst of his church. This first vision recorded by John extends through the end of chapter three, and includes the seven letters addressed by Christ to seven churches scattered throughout western Asia Minor. We have already covered five of these seven letters to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis. Now we turn to the sixth of these letters, our Lord’s letter to his church in Philadelphia.

As we have seen in each of these letters, Jesus speaks directly to his churches. He commends several of them for being faithful, before offering each of them encouragement in the midst of their struggles. But he also rebukes the churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis for serious shortcomings. Either these churches have lost their first love—their love for their brethren—or else they have tolerated false teaching and paganism in their midst. Jesus commands Christians in these churches to repent, lest they face immediate judgment. But we have also pointed out that each of these letters ends with a promise from the Lord of his church to all those who are faithful and who overcome through faith in him. Jesus knows the struggles his people face. He promises all those who are his that they will overcome, despite the efforts of those who oppose the gospel and seek to do Christ’s people harm.

As I have pointed out with each of these letters, knowing something about each church and its particular environs is very critical in understanding the promised blessing or threatened curse given by Jesus. Philadelphia was a city which had experienced wide-spread damage as a result of an earthquake in A.D. 17. In fact, the recent history of this city factors greatly into word of encouragement Jesus gives to this struggling congregation.

The ancient city of Philadelphia (modern day Alashir) was founded about 140 B.C. by Attalus II, whose surname was Philadelphus. Out of love and admiration for his brother, Eumenes, Attalus named the new city Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.¹ Located along the strategic road which linked Asia with Europe, Philadelphia became an important center of commerce and trade. As such an important crossroad, the was city a kind of open door through which Greek culture spread south and east into Asia Minor, Syria, and Persia, and through which, in turn, Asian goods passed to the north en route to Greece

¹ Kistemaker, Revelation, 157.

and Rome. Philadelphia was, in a sense, a kind of gateway between east and west.

The city was built on a very fertile volcanic plain and the local vineyards produced renowned wines and fermented beverages. But given the proximity of the city to an ancient volcano, the area was often hit by powerful earthquakes. A massive quake did in fact hit the area in A.D. 17. The damage was so severe and widespread that the Roman government under the emperor Tiberius exempted the city from paying tribute (taxes) for some time. Tiberius even donated a vast sum of money to help the city rebuild. But the aftershocks from this quake were so strong and persisted for so long that people slept outside of their dwellings for years afterward. According to ancient records, a number of people maintained homes and businesses in the city, but at dusk left the city to sleep in the surrounding countryside because of fears that the next quake would bury them in their sleep. The people lived in fear for generations and the city continually suffered damage from these aftershocks.

But Philadelphia's political leaders were so impressed with Tiberius's generosity toward them that they decided to honor Tiberius by renaming the city Neocaesarea (New Caesar), a name which stuck for some thirty years, until the city was renamed "Flavia" in the 70's, in honor of Emperor Vespasian (Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus). But local residents still called the city Philadelphia, even though the city's name had been officially changed at least twice.

According to the famed archaeologist/historian William Ramsey—in his book on the seven churches—all of these events play an important role in our Lord's letter to this particular church. Ramsey points them out to us: "First, [Philadelphia] was the missionary city; secondly, its people lived always in dread of disaster, 'the day of trial'; thirdly, many of its people went out of the city to dwell; fourthly, it took a new name from an imperial god."² All of these things, from the city being an open door to both east and west, to the fact that people lived in constant fear of further earthquakes, many people choosing to dwell outside the city rather than in it, as well as the renaming of the city, will be mentioned by our Lord in his commendation of this particular congregation.

Our Lord's letter to the church in Philadelphia contains a number of wonderful promises to a very hard-pressed congregation. And so let us turn to our text this morning, Revelation 3:7-13.

As he has done in each of these letters, Jesus begins by instructing "*the angel of the church in Philadelphia*" to 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.*" Our Lord's reference to the angel of each of these churches probably refers to the angel (messenger) assigned by our Lord to each one of these congregations. As we have also seen, the opening salutation made by our Lord refers back to some particular aspect of Christ's post-resurrection glory which was set forth earlier in the vision of the Risen Lord recorded by John in Revelation 1:12-20. Jesus does this so as to reinforce the point that he is the Lord of his church, who walks among the people and who is, therefore, always present with them. Indeed, Jesus promises his churches blessing for faithfulness, protection from danger, and he warns his people of their need to repent when they are unfaithful.

In this letter to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus begins by speaking of himself as "*holy and true,*" both of which are divine attributes. To use such words of himself is tantamount to a claim to deity. It is important to notice the context in which Jesus uses these self-designations. The prophet Isaiah uses the

² Cited in Kistemaker, Revelation, 156-157.

word “holy” of YHWH nearly twenty times in his prophecy, which is interesting especially in light of the fact that Jesus is about to refer directly to a messianic prophecy found in Isaiah 22.³ But Jesus is not only “holy” as is YHWH, he is also “true,” which is a reference to the fact that he is Israel’s true Messiah. This is an important point given the fact that the persecution facing the church in Philadelphia was largely instigated by the local synagogue. In many of the cities of Western Asia Minor, there were sizable Jewish populations. In Philadelphia, the synagogue was very active in opposing Christianity.

But not only is Jesus Holy and true—therefore both truly God and Israel’s Messiah—Jesus alone holds the key of David. Not only does this recall to mind Christ’s words in Revelation 1:18 when Jesus speaks of holding the keys of death and Hades, Jesus now cites directly from Isaiah 22:22: *“I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”* From this it is clear that Jesus not only holds power over death and the grave but he alone is that one in whom is found salvation from the guilt and power of sin. Since the resurrected Christ alone holds these keys, he is judge of all the earth.⁴

In the Isaiah 22 passage from which Jesus quotes verse 22, we find the prophecy regarding Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, about whom YHWH says, *“I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.”* When YHWH goes on to say of this coming one *“what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open,”* the image is that Eliakim is a type of the Messiah. He is given the key of David, the robe of royal authority and so on. But the Jews of John’s day apparently interpreted this prophecy to refer to their own authority to shut the assembly (the synagogue) to those Jews who became Christians and who were subsequently excommunicated. Since the Jews claimed the authority to shut the assembly to Christians, Christ now cites the same passage to demonstrate that it is he, not they, who determines membership and entrance into the true assembly, which is his church.⁵ Therefore, Jesus is not only aiming these words as words of comfort to those Jews who had been excommunicated when they came to faith in Jesus Christ, but these words are also a word of warning to the Jews in Philadelphia who were persecuting Christians and claiming messianic authority to do so.

In verse 8, Jesus, the Lord of his church and ever-present with his people, reminds them that he knows their situation and how they have struggled. Says Jesus: *“I know your deeds.”* The Lord knows his people have been faithful under very difficult circumstances. Indeed, Jesus goes on to say to them, *“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.”* Since the Jews claimed to have shut the door to the messianic kingdom to those who came to embrace Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, Jesus now tells them that he has placed before the Philadelphians an open door which cannot be shut. This door not only is depicted as the entrance into “the house of David” in verse 7, which is a reference to the messianic kingdom, but in verse 12, we read that this also entails entrance into the city and the temple of God. Since Christ has opened this door through his death, burial and resurrection, no one can shut it. Not Satan, not the beast, not those Jews in Philadelphia who persecute Christ’s church. As the city of Philadelphia was an open door of trade to both east and west, so too the church in Philadelphia will be an open door of sorts, that is,

³ Beale, Revelation, 283.

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 284.

⁵ Beale, Revelation, 284.

an open door to Christ's messianic kingdom.

This is an amazing promise when we consider the fact that this congregation had very little strength, literally, "little power." The church in Philadelphia was probably a small congregation numerically, with little material resources. Nevertheless, this congregation is given an open door by Christ which cannot be closed, because they have kept Christ's word and not denied his name. They have faithfully preached the gospel despite the fierce opposition from the Jews living in the area. Because of this, the church in Philadelphia is an open door to the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ, that one who is the key of the house of David and about whom Isaiah was speaking in his prophecy.

But there is a special context in which the church of Philadelphia will be especially effective as a witness to those around them, namely to the Jews who have been persecuting them. This becomes clear in verse 9, when Jesus promises this church, "*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.*" Several things here require some explanation. When Jesus speaks of the synagogue of Satan, especially in reference to those who claim to be Jews, who are not, and who are liars, I take him to mean that the church is being opposed by Jews who claim to be the true Israel and who regard Jewish Christians as apostates.

From the time of the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90, when the Jews met to formalize their canon of Scripture as well as respond to the spread of Christianity, the Jews prayed the following prayer (the twelfth benediction) when someone converted to Christianity:

For apostates let their be no hope, and the kingdom of insolence mayest thou uproot speedily in our days; and let Christians (*noserim*) and the heretics perish in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of life and let them not be written with the righteous. Blessed art thou O Lord, who humbles the insolent.⁶

In the context of modern anti-Semitism and post-holocaust Jewish theology, people don't like to talk about such things, but the fact of the matter is by the time of the writing of Revelation at the end of the first century, Jews and Christians were deeply divided and hostile to each other as evidenced by the persecution churches in Asia Minor were receiving from the Jews. The issue in this particular letter is that while the Jews claimed authority to shut the messianic kingdom to Christians, the Messiah himself reminds the Jews that it is he who alone possesses such power. Furthermore, Jesus addresses those who claim to be the guardians of the messianic kingdom, but who are not, as those who are, in effect, doing the work of Satan by hindering the work of the gospel and persecuting the true people of God.

Jesus himself will ensure that those Jews who hinder the gospel will bow before the feet of those they have persecuted. This is an allusion to a number of Old Testament passages in which the prophets predict that in the messianic age, the Gentiles will come and bow down before the people of Israel and Israel's God. Ironically, all of these prophecies are fulfilled in the Christ's church, largely made up of Gentiles. Now, says Jesus, the Jews in Philadelphia will be forced to acknowledge that Christ's church, including those Jewish believers who have joined it, are the beloved people of YHWH, something which was foretold in the Old Testament. To the prophetic theme of Gentiles worshiping Israel's God in the messianic age, Jesus now adds the image of Jews will come to worship the God of all nations, YHWH.

⁶ Cited in Kistemaker, Revelation, 160.

Because the Philadelphian Christians have remained faithful, Jesus promises them in 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.*” This verse has been variously interpreted, most notably by the dispensationalists who believe that a secret rapture of the church takes place before the seven-year tribulation begins. This verse is often cited as a proof-text for this erroneous notion, since Christ supposedly promises to remove this church from the hour of trial (i.e., the tribulation period) which is yet to come upon the earth by means of the rapture.

The problem with this should be obvious. According to Revelation 7:14, the great tribulation began with coming of Christ! Therefore, we are in the midst of the great tribulation even now. The church of Philadelphia has not been kept from the trial in the sense of being removed from the earth during the tribulation. In fact, this church is in midst of tribulation of some sort even before Jesus addresses this letter to them!

But what does Jesus mean when he speaks of keeping this church from the hour of trial? In John 17, in his high-priestly prayer, Jesus prays for believers who will remain in the world, even after he leaves them to be with his father in heaven. Jesus never promises to remove his people from the world. Rather, he promises to protect them in the midst of the world. And this is most likely what John has in mind here in Revelation 3:10. Because these Christians have faithfully persevered in the face of persecution, Jesus will keep them—in the sense of protecting them—during an hour of trial which is coming upon the whole world. Notice too that the length of this trial is relatively short (one hour) in contrast to the usual designation for the period of time between Christ’s first advent and second coming in the Book of Revelation: 3 and ½ years, 42 months, or a thousand years. So this particular trial does not refer to the entire inter-advental age (i.e., the last days and the millennium) but to a brief trial which occurs at some point during the present age.

Therefore, this may be a reference to a period of great turmoil in the days immediately before Christ returns at the end of the age. It seems certain that Jesus teaches this trial is yet future when Revelation was written, but two thousand years later, we cannot be sure if this church’s hour-long trial during which they will be protected, has already occurred or is still yet to come. But in any case, I would be remiss if I didn’t point out the fact that this particular church remained faithful to the gospel down through the centuries, even after Islam became the dominant religion in Asia Minor. In fact, throughout the twentieth century the church in Philadelphia has flourished and is the only one of these seven church which continues on into the present age.⁷ God has kept them, as he promised he would.

I would also be remiss if I didn’t point out that the trial which is expected is coming upon the whole earth—not just Jerusalem in A. D. 70, as preterists erroneously insist. This coming trial is universal, not localized. Whatever trial Jesus is speaking about and whether it is yet future or has already passed—he clearly promises to preserve this congregation in the midst of this trial. He never promises to remove this church from the earth through a so-called “secret rapture.” It was Jesus after all, who prayed 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.*” Jesus will not remove his church from the earth to protect them from the hour of trial. But during the hour of trial he will protect and preserve them from the evil one who manifests himself in Revelation through the efforts of the beast and the harlot, as well as in those synagogues which persecute Christ’s church and attempt to hinder the spread of the gospel.

⁷ Kistemaker, Revelation, 157.

Having promised to deliver this church from further suffering, Jesus gives them the following word of exhortation: *“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”* Not only does Jesus promise to come to the Philadelphians quickly to preserve them from the hour of trial, he also encourages them to hold on to what they have, i.e., the gospel which they have heard and believed. By holding fast to the gospel, no one will take from them their crown, probably a reference to the fact that in the Isaiah 22 passage just cited, God promises to take away the evil Shebna’s crown and gives it to Eliakim, who has been faithful.⁸ The image here is that the Jews will not be able to take their crown, since the Philadelphians are like Eliakim—faithful—while the Jews there are like Shebna—faithless.

One again, Jesus closes out this letter with several promises, promises which reflect the historical situation facing the inhabitants of the city. *“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.”* There are a number of interesting points here as we wrap up.

For one thing, Jesus promises to make the overcomer a pillar in God’s temple, a temple which they will never be forced to leave. This promise makes perfect sense against the backdrop of continual earthquakes which rocked the earthly city of Philadelphia. Instead of sleeping outside and living in fear, God’s people will given a permanent residence as pillars in that heavenly temple which even now God is building as the body of Christ. Unlike earthly structures which can be destroyed, this temple cannot be shaken. There is no need to flee from within or to sleep outside. For all those who dwell in this temple dwell in perfect peace and safety. And they will dwell in this temple forever.

For another, Jesus promises to give each of his people the name of his father, as well as the name of the heavenly city. God’s people and his heavenly city bear the eternal name of the true and living God. The idea of naming implies ownership and protection. Unlike their own city, which had its named changed twice to honor pagan emperors who claimed to be divine, the heavenly city is named by the eternal God, and its name will never be changed. Thus we read in Revelation 22:4, those in the New Jerusalem, *“will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”* Bearing God’s name, we will live in that glorious heavenly city named by God. This is what awaits these Christians in Philadelphia who have been faithful and who will be delivered from the hour of trial coming upon the whole world.

Once again the application for us is very simple and straightforward. God knows how to protect all those who are his, even in the midst of the hour of trial. Christ’s promise to us is that he will protect us from the wrath and wiles of Satan, and that he will preserve us in the hour of trial whenever it comes. Indeed, through his own death and resurrection Jesus has given us an open door into the kingdom of heaven, a door which no one can close. And what is more, even now, Jesus is preparing for us that heavenly city which cannot be shaken and where we will dwell in his presence for ever and ever! Therefore, let us hold on to that which we have been given—the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ and all of its promises. For by doing so, we will overcome and dwell in the heavenly temple for ever and ever!

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

⁸ Beale, Revelation, 293.