

Revelation

*Part Fourteen
Philadelphia
(Revelation 3:7-13)*

With Study Questions

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And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”:⁸ “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.⁹ Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie – indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.¹¹ Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.¹³ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’ (Revelation 3:7-13).

Introduction

A former elder of our church moved out of state and had a difficult time finding a church. For a number of years, he and his wife attended churches with dear brothers and sisters in Christ, but there was always some discomfort with the doctrinal commitments, liturgies or other dynamics. If we’re serious about picking a church (which we should be), it can be challenging.

One morning this elder attended a political meeting in his city where a pastor offered a prayer. The content of the prayer piqued the elder’s curiosity. He sought out where this pastor’s church, and he and his wife visited. Interestingly enough the church was part of a denomination that my elder/friend did not view as entirely orthodox. But this pastor, though

in his seventies, was a sincere, hardworking student of Scripture. As time marched on, his understanding of God's word, God's grace, God's love, God's law continued to grow. It was a blessing to their small church. The elder and his wife joined the church.

Sadly, the pastor recently succumbed to cancer. Since he had been retired (and apparently had a pension from another career) he cost the church very little in terms of salary. This is making it difficult to find a replacement. They do not have much to offer a new pastor. Add to this, they are considering leaving their denomination and joining one with a more orthodox understanding of the faith.

Last week I had the blessed opportunity to preach at this church. It is a very small church of mostly elderly saints. Yet, as a result of the grace of God working through their faithful pastor, they have a fresh joy and excitement about the love and grace of God in Christ. It's precious. The angel (pastor) of that church was faithful.

I open with this because having just preached at that church, then returning to my study of the seven churches in Revelation, I noticed a striking similarity between that church and the church in Philadelphia. By worldly, measurable standards, their little church is unimpressive. My elder friend and his wife spoke of mega churches in their new city that had the appearance of being so much more dynamic, but were lacking true, biblical content and commitment.

It can be said of this little church in Arizona that they **"have a little strength."** Yet as someone once said, they serve "the God of disproportionate results." None of this an argument for churches remaining small. But it is an argument against pure pragmatism-against determining your success or pursuing your ministry apart from an unwavering commitment to the word and name of Christ.

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens" (Revelation 3:7).

Philadelphia

Apparently founded by Attalus the Second, Philadelphia was named out of loyalty and love for his brother, hence the name, which means 'brotherly love.' It was called the Gateway to the East, as we see it near the

bottom east end of our little horseshoe of churches on this Roman Postal Route in Asia Minor. The city was founded to promote Hellenism and in 17BC it was all but decimated by volcanic activity. It was rebuilt with help from Rome and was, similar to other cities, beholden to Rome for their generosity.

Similar to Smyrna, we see very little, if any, blame given to Philadelphia. Only praise. Both cities suffered at the hands of the Jews and the Romans. Both had opposition from Satan. Both were faithful.

The designation we see in this introduction highlights that Jesus is **“holy”** and **“true.”** Perhaps it seems obvious, the but true Head of the church must be characterized by supreme sanctity (holy, innocent, unstained-Hebrews 7:26) and unadulterated **“truth”**. These are attributes of God, attributes of Christ (who is God) and must ever be that which governs His church.

We read here a reference to the **“key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.”** If we had time, this would launch us into a study in Isaiah, where this term is used (Isaiah 22:20-22). Briefly, we would learn of the evil Shebna being replaced by a faithful Eliakim (thought to be a type of Christ and the deposing of Satan). That earthly kingdom was designed to instruct regarding a heavenly kingdom. Keys and doors signifying the power, authority, entrance and protection (things that doors and keys allow or prohibit).

Perhaps the most well-known reference to keys in the New Testament is when Jesus, speaking of building His church, tells Peter that he (as the representative apostle) is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19). So, who has the keys, Jesus or the church? It is a frightening question. The church only has the keys to the extent that it heralds the true Christ. It’s daunting. And it should be.

At the same time, if Jesus has prepared a place for you in His Father’s house, no one can lock you out! If you belong to Christ, you are secured in Christ.

I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name (Revelation 3:8).

It’s not as if this little church is on God’s backburner. He is familiar with their trials and labors. Though small in numbers and small in

strength, they have **“kept”** His **“word”**. Churches are to be faithful to the word of God. If we’re not opening it, wrestling with it, it’s like being on a journey with no map. As someone once said, “We’re lost, but we’re making good time.”

Inevitably, if you are true to the word of God, you will be confronted with the **“name”** of Christ (by name is meant the totality of who Christ is). Now churches must decide if they will placard the name of Christ or dismiss the name of Christ. It’s one thing to be confronted with the truth. It is quite another thing to broadcast it.

What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. ²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:27, 28).

This little church was faithful in this capacity. When Jesus mentions the **“open door”** it can mean one of two things, or both. It was a door opened for them to into the kingdom, or an open door of ministry for them (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12). It makes me wonder how many times God has opened doors and we have just walked on by. Many churches, our included, seek to offer ministerial opportunities (fellowship, serving, prayer, study, evangelism, etc.). Let’s be careful not to seek to constrain God based upon our list. Let us keep our eyes and hearts available to open doors.

Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie – indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Revelation 3:9, 10).

These are two very loaded verses! The **“synagogue of Satan”** is a religious community of Jews who have rejected the Messiah. As Jesus forcefully announced, their father was the **“the father of lies” (John 8:44)**. The Scriptures do teach of Jews coming to faith in Christ and what a glorious thing that is (Romans 11:15). But it is a gross error to assign favor

to God to a people based upon heritage or ethnicity. People are to be loved and evangelized. In the meantime, let us recognize the darkness of bad religion.

Due to our general lack of understanding of the Old Testament, we lose the irony of this passage. Some take that they will “**come and worship before your feet**” to mean the conversion of the Jews. Though that is theologically accurate, this verse doesn’t seem to be saying that. In the Old Testament God had promised Israel that their enemies would be subdued (Isaiah 45:14; 49:23; 60:14).

Those who had afflicted Israel would find themselves in a subservient position. This verse turns that on its head. It is the false Jew who would find themselves on the wrong side of this promise, revealing who is truly the beloved of God.

This should not be understood in some bizarre, proud, bow at my feet sort of way. Peter recoiled at such an act (Acts 10:25). It should more be understood as the general recognition of the glory of Christ. “**Every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord**” (Philippians 2:10, 11).

Due to the persevering faithfulness of this church they will be kept from “**the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.**” What could that be? Here is one of those places where otherwise erudite scholars seem to slide into the proverbial ditch. It would appear that the majority report coming from modern ‘end-times prognosticators’ is that this is the rapture.

If that is the case, then clearly, this promise was not kept to this little church, for the rapture (according to this view) would not happen for thousands of years. Add to this that Jesus, in the very next verse, indicates that He is “**coming quickly.**”

There are a couple of things we need to learn here both ministerially (how God watches over His church) and exegetically (how we are to read our Bibles). First, tough times are coming, and God is going to see His church through it. The message to us is that we are to remain faithful, in the midst a bizarre and dark world. Second, the term “**the whole world**” *tes oikoumenes*, does not, in Scripture always mean every last place or person on earth. Luke uses it in when Caesar called for a census of the “**whole world**” (Luke 2:1). There are numerous other examples where the term could not possibly be referring to every last person or place on the planet (Acts 11:28; 17:6; 19:27; and 24:5).

Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹² He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. ¹³ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Revelation 3:11-13).

The most natural, literal understanding for the members of the church in Philadelphia, when they hear that Christ is **"coming quickly"** would be for them expect something to happen soon (as many other verses in Revelation so indicate). It seems most reasonable to understand this to mean the cataclysmic end of the Old Covenant which had become obsolete and would soon vanish (Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:2). It would be the changing of the age. The world would know it as BC to AD, the church would know it as Old Covenant to New Covenant. Let us not downplay the significance of this!

Though the **"crown"** is promised to those who finish the race (Revelation 2:10; 2 Timothy 4:8), in a certain sense the faithful members of that church (the faithful members of all churches) already have a crown. In a world striving for identity and meaning in life, the believer, at least in one seldom-thought-of sense should view him or herself as enlisted, crowned and serving for, and with, Christ.

We will read in the Scriptures of small groups of warriors (which might be especially significant to this small church of **"little strength"**). David's small group of **"mighty men"** who would fight like a **"bear robbed of her cubs in the field"** (2 Samuel 17:8). We might recall Gideon's 300 warriors defeating the entire Midianite army (Judges 6, 7). Or, at the risk of melodrama (it may be just the opposite), we think of Tolkien's wonderful Christian allegory, *The Lord of the Rings*, where nine warriors are called upon to rescue all of Middle-Earth.

We are in a battle, and there are those who would seek to derail us, to woo us to worldly systems, empty philosophies, charming personalities and **"greater goods."** They would have us, just for a moment, give up that crown, pinch a little incense to Caesar, utter words of allegiance (even if you don't entirely mean it) to your human, well-meaning sovereign!!! We

are called to **“hold fast”** what we have, lest while enchanted by their ungodly sweet melodies, we look up only to find the crown displaced. Hear the recurring theme, **“He who overcomes.”**

The glorious promise to the one who overcomes, says Jesus, is that they will be a **“pillar in the temple of My God.”** Directing our hearts to the reality behind our observations, the temple would most certainly be destroyed, but also rebuilt. But contrary to the emphasis today of another structure of stone, the rebuilt temple (the only mention in the New Testament of a rebuilt temple), would be the body of Christ.

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body (John 2:19-21).

This, of course, speak initially of the resurrection. But it also speaks of every believer who will share in that resurrection. Every believer is part of that body, part of that temple. We are (though individually temples of the Holy Spirit-1 Corinthians 6:19) also **“living stones are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5).**

It has been observed that though a **“pillar”** we are not pillars which support the temple. A heavenly temple needs no support in that manner. It has been more compared to the stately pillars erected in honor of the Roman emperors. Yet this is eternal and impossible to deface. We spoke earlier of our quest for an identity. We are in His house and His name is upon us. The name of His city is upon us. A holy citizenship under a wise, sacrificial King. And this extends into eternity, the new heavens the new earth, the New Jerusalem.

Jesus would have His church, as they battle on this side of glory, to ever be mindful of the battle that has already been won. He would have us know that our labors in the Lord are **“not in vain”** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Consider both the humanity and hope found in the testimony of Paul:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not

driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you. ¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence (2 Corinthians 4:7-14).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:13).

Questions for Study

1. Describe the city of Philadelphia. What does it mean that God is a God of disproportionate results (pages 2-4)?
2. How should we understand the “key of David?” What does this mean to today’s church (page 4)?
3. Discuss the commendation given by Christ in verse 8 (pages 4, 5).
4. What does it mean when they are told that their detractors will “come and worship before your feet?” How does the Old Testament help us understand this (page 6)?
5. A trial was about to come upon the whole world. Does the “whole world” always mean every last person and every last place? Explain. What do you suppose this trial is (page 6)?
6. How would the church of Philadelphia be kept from that trial? Do you suppose this is the rapture? Why or why not (page 6)?
7. How does having a crown speak to our identity (page 7)?
8. Can you come up with modern movements or efforts designed to take your crown (pages 7, 8)?
9. How do you understand being a pillar in the temple of God (page 8)?