
Philadelphia: An Open Door

Revelation 3:7-13

Come to Philadelphia. We are known as the Gateway to the East. We sit at the cross roads between Rome and the Orient. Trade passes through our city in a massive river of humanity and products. We are a large city and second only to Athens for the number of our patron gods and temples. We are swank, sophisticated, pluralistic and powerful. Our people were ethnically diverse, our religion pluralistic and our culture rich and full of all kinds of pleasures and pursuits. What goes on in the city of brotherly love stays in the city of brotherly love.

But Philadelphia's culture was sagging and slipping, weary with worldly-wise sin.

The Character of Christ

(v.7)

The character of Christ is communicated to the elders of the church at Philadelphia against the backdrop of the culture and community in which they ministered.

⁷ "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.'

To the church ministering in this city, Jesus reveals Himself.

Pure in His Holy Character

That Jesus Christ is holy is a claim to Divinity for here He is the *Holy One*. Over against the all the idols of man's imagination and creation with their failures and follies, Jesus stands as absolutely and intrinsically holy. They may cavort and carouse, Jesus' character is pure and unstained and unblemished.

How we need to uphold the holiness of Christ against the sinfulness of our world and time. If we are going to be a church with the opportunities and the obstacles that Philadelphia had, we must give more time to meditate on and to live out the holiness of God.

Perfect in His Divine Truth

Satan has many chains by which he binds men. Some are bound by the paralyzing fear of powerful idols. Other are bound by the pernicious folly of pluralistic ideas. Our world, just as the world of John's day, has bought into the idea that there is no truth and that all religious and philosophical systems are equally valid. No one can claim absolute truth to which all other systems must bow. There is simply no place for truth, to borrow David Well's title.

Jesus comes to this church and declares that He is the truth. This must have impacted on the church in two ways.

Truth resides in a Person. As Christians, we had better think more deeply about this. Our world views are only as true as they conform to the Person of Christ and to that final revelation of Him in His Word. Loved ones, this sounds arrogant in our world but I declare to you that Jesus Christ in His Person and in His Word is the Truth. All false systems,

philosophies, world-views are simply errors and deceits propagated by the enemy of our souls to enslave our minds. That is why the Truth sets you free.

You see, the great danger of images of Christ about which we feel sentimental and which we feel communicate aspects of Christ is that they cause us to focus on the attributes of Christ *with which we are most comfortable*. And there is a subtle temptation to be drawn to think of that image when we worship and pray. That is why the idolatry of image making of the Godhead is utterly forbidden.

Jesus Christ is the real, the genuine. This is a bit more difficult for us. But if you go into any pagan temple or Orthodox or Catholic Church, there will be the counterfeits in the form of images. There will be idols. They will be treasured, worshipped and prayed to. Against all this wood and plaster and marble stands the great genuine reality of the resurrected and living Christ.

Let us not miss the connection here as well. Jesus Christ is both the Truth and the only authentic, genuine, real God. Since this is so, our thoughts of Him must also be true, genuine and real. Otherwise, our own worship is little better than a bowing before an idol, not of wood, or marble, but of our own imagination.

Powerful in His Sovereign Authority

Here is an interesting phrase. Jesus Christ is the One who has the Key of David. Now what does that mean? And why is it significant? Let's consider those two questions.

The allusion here is to Isaiah 22:22. In that text, Israel was relying on Egypt to defend them from the invasion of Babylon. They were going to be overthrown. They were not relying on the Lord (v.11), they were pursuing carnal pleasure instead of holy grief (v.12). God was going to remove Shebna, the false and sinful steward of the Royal household (v.15-17) and replace him with God's true servant, Eliakim (v.20). He will be given the authority over the household. This authority was symbolized by keys which were used to open the doors to different rooms in the palaces. God would establish this one to such a degree that he would be honored for his faithfulness (v.22-23). Jesus Christ is the reality of which that was the shadow. He, for the church, has the sovereign authority over all things, having been given the keys of death and hell (Rev. 1:18).

Having the *key of David* is significant because of the opposition of the Jews. Christ has received the Messianic authority, which is now exercised universally over every tongue and tribe and people group. He is the One who will open and close the doors through which the gospel goes and by which the kingdom grows. The Jews of their day and the religions of ours may stand against the gospel. But they can never stand against the sovereign, omnipotent supremacy of the High King.

“How great Thou art!” the hymn writer exclaimed. And so do we. Jesus Christ speaks to His church as the One who is pure in His holy character, perfect in His divine truth and powerful in His sovereign authority. What does this one say to His church?

The Commendation of the Church

(v.8-10)

Here is a church with no condemnation. Of all the qualities that mark the sterling character of this church, here is one that is easiest to miss. Jesus had nothing bad to say about her, no word of correction to her. Now stop and think about that (Selah). If the Lord singled us out as a church and wrote to us a letter, would there be things to be condemned? Would the Lord be able to pass over that part of His divine outline and move immediately to commendation? I think not.

But to the church at the city of “brotherly love”, there is no condemnation, no correction.

⁸ “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

Her Commended Qualities

She is a small church stretching toward great opportunities. The phrase here is that “she has a little power.” In other words, she is not “super-church” or a “mega-church”. Yet in her weakness and smallness, she is moving in the strength and power of God to do great things in the Kingdom. Why is this so? Because this is at the heart of the way God does things. Corinth had become a “super-church”. So Paul writes the words of 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 to remind them corporately and 2 Corinthians 12:9 to remind them individually that divine strength is displayed in human weakness. What Sardis thought she was and wasn’t, Philadelphia was in truth.

She has kept or obeyed God’s Word. The sense here is both of holding onto and carrying forward. They treasured the Scripture so much that they obeyed it. Have we valued God’s Word like hidden treasure? Have we hidden it in our heart so as not to sin against God? Is the Word really a lamp that gives us light at each turn in our path? Do you love God’s Word so much that you read it, reflect on it and live by it? How many of you even came to church today without your Bibles?

She was a church who had stood for the fame and reputation and glory of Christ. The commendation is stated in the negative, “not denied my Name” because that was the pressure they were under and the persecution they faced. They had such a sense of the greatness and majesty and supremacy of God’s worth and glory that they would rather die than deny it. What about us? Do we, like Peter did three times, deny Christ? Does everyone you know, know that you are a Christian? If we fear to own the Name of Christ to someone who at best can slam the door in our face, what will we do when someone may put us in prison, or more likely, an insane asylum? And what about all the subtle ways in which we lower the worth of Christ in our own estimation? And what about our spreading His Name and fame to our neighbors?

Her Challenging Opportunity

Jesus said that He put before them “an open door which no one can shut.” What does that mean? In Acts 14:27 Paul reported how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Later, he related in 1 Corinthians 16:9 that at Ephesus a great door of effective ministry was opened to him. In 2 Corinthians 2:12, a door was opened for ministry while he was at Troas. Paul asks the church in Colossians 4:3 to pray that a door for the gospel might be opened. Therefore, we conclude that this opened door is the opportunity for the effective ministry of the gospel by the Sovereign providence and directive will of God.

So here she was, a small church in a metropolitan, gateway city. Her holy, true and Sovereign Lord whose Word she treasures and obeys and whose fame and worth are more satisfying

than life, opens a door for effective ministry for the gospel *and no one can close it*. Make no mistake about it: the opportunity here is spread, in the gospel, a passion for God by calling on people to treasure, trust and bow to Him. This is evangelism.

Have we been so gripped by the glory of Christ that we will do all we can, in the strength of the Lord, to spread the good news of that glory to our neighbors? We profess that we believe in the supremacy of God—but do we believe it enough to spread it around? I pray with all my being that God’s Holy Spirit will fuel the fires of your passion for the glory of God *for all peoples* including your neighbor, your grocer, your friend, your family.

But this is not the whole story for a church of this character and with these opportunities. They face large **obstacles** as well.

Her Conquered Opposition

(v.9)

⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie— behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰

They faced religious opposition. Judaism has been declared by God to be finally and irretrievably apostate. God’s people are those who bow to Jesus as the promised Messiah and King. Twice now on the book of Revelation, Jewish synagogues have been called synagogues of Satan (2:9; 3:9). The Jews asserted that they were the people of God, loved of God and having the Law of God. Paul writes that a true Jew is not one who is Jewish outwardly but rather inwardly (Romans 2:28-29). It is a matter of the heart not the flesh. Like the Jews of John 8:31-27, these lost Jews were actually of their father the devil (John 8:44). Now, they either attacked the church from the outside, using Rome’s power as a sword to attempt to destroy the church or from the inside, using legalism to try to enslave the church. God responds to them at three key points:

God will sovereignly save. He will *make them come*. How marvelous the grace of Christ that He reaches with a mighty, sovereign hand even into the synagogues of Satan that look like legitimate places of worship and saves people in them.

They will bow down. The point here is that a Jew must be willing to give up his Judaism and bow to Christ and recognize the church. There as one new man, we are all in true union for the middle wall of division, the Law, has been taken down in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22).

God loves them. The loved of God are the elect from *every* people group, not just from Israel. It is the challenge given to every ethnic and national church to recognize that *there is no special favor on them because of these external distinctions*.

What then are we to make of this for us today?

If God gives us the challenging opportunity to evangelize, He moves with sovereign authority to save.

Churches who claim to be the people of God but who deny the truth of the Word and the Lordship of Christ are modern day synagogues of Satan.

True Christians, those who come to trust in Christ alone and obey Him, *must* leave apostate churches and religions and in bowing to Christ, gather with believing people in Biblical churches.

If God has given special dispensations of His providence to us as a nation (or to any nation) it is only in His concern for the spread of the gospel. Christian Americanism (Britishism, Koreanism) is elitist, provincial and wholly devoid of Biblical support.

God has purposed to spread the fame of His glory by the good news that the great God loves people from every neighborhood and all nations. From every nation, out of every false house of worship, God calls His own by the proclamation of the gospel.

Her Coming Ordeal

(v.10)

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.

What an amazing text this is. Because these believers had followed the model of Christ's endurance in their obedience and defense of the Word, they would be delivered out of a coming time of testing, sent to try the inhabited earth.

The language here points to a world-wide "testing" or "temptation" which is going to come on "all the inhabited world" and from (possibly through) which they will be "kept" (defended).

How are we to understand this? In my opinion, in some measure, all of the following three ways:

The church at Philadelphia would be defended by God during a coming time intense trial and persecution unleashed by the Roman emperors on the believing church. This gives the promise substance and makes it related to them directly.

All churches can expect to endure, defended by Christ, through times of national or universal testing or judgment. This makes the promise applicable throughout church history and explains the amazing ability of the believing church to avoid extermination.

The church as the Body of Christ, can expect to be defended or kept from the day or hour in which the great wrath of God is poured out on an unbelieving world. Though we may endure through tribulation, we are delivered from wrath. This makes the particulars and the principles of this text accord with the larger prophecies in the Word.

Whether we are delivered in, through or out of times of testing and trial, we are still delivered and defended. Are we keeping His command to patiently endure?

The Challenge to the Church

(v.11-13)

In this church's opportunities and obstacles there are hidden three promises: the promise of an open door, of defeated opponents, of protection through trial and of enduring security. Now here are her obligations.

Their Responsibility

(v.11)

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

I want you to imagine with me a terrible battle. The enemy is engaged. The treasures and crowns won for the Lord are at risk by the advance of the enemy. The soldiers of the Lord seem to be weary at times. At other times they seem to be making great headway. The bombs are bursting. The guns are firing. Many are falling. Just at the moment we think we have to retreat because the pressure is too great, we hear this sustaining word, "Hold on. I am coming quickly." Suddenly, hearts beat faster. Vision clears. Weary arms and legs move with re-

newed vigor. The enemy is more stoutly resisted, for the great Commander is coming quickly with reinforcements. The battle may be great, but the Victor, the Lord of hosts, is on His way.

So, dear ones, hold on. It may seem dark. The enemy may be pressing hard. But Jesus is coming quickly.

God's Promise

(v.12-13)

To true believers, Jesus makes these promises.

¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and 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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Workmanship - They will be pillars in God's house. In a region where an earthquake had destroyed the city and many cities around it, the idea of being a pillar in God's house would strike home. We, the church, the Body of Christ, are the true Temple of God. We are being built up living stone by living stone, strong pillar by pillar, to be the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God. The word points to a huge, strong pillar made of consummate workmanship.

Ownership - The true believer will have God's Name written on them. This is a powerful image of ownership. What a privilege it is to be owned by God.

Citizenship - The true believer is not a citizen of this world—his citizenship is in heaven. We are aliens and strangers. We are passing through on our way to our heavenly residence.

Relationship - True believers will have an enduring relationship. When we marry, we give to our wives our names. To them it is a new name. To all it should speak of the enduring joy of oneness.

Reflect and Respond

Lest you think I have taken this too far, turn, in closing to two exhilarating texts that brightly illuminate verse 12. First, turn to Revelation 21:1-3 and 9-11a.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

⁹ Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

Do you see something here? "I will show you the Bride. What we see is the City." And this as a part of making all things new (v.5).

Now to Isaiah 62:1-5. Listen to the Word of God.

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch.

² The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴ You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.

⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Do you see it now? O, precious privilege. God delights in us. God will rejoice over us just like newlyweds.

In the midst of the great darkness of this world, with the opportunities, obstacles and obligations, how we long for the King. But, O loved one. He is coming, and coming quickly. For He delights in you.