

# The Church at Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13 – by Dr. Craig P. Scott

A Committed Church

“What does God think of His church?” In Revelation 1, the disciple John, was living on an island off the coast of Turkey, writing about AD 95, some 65 years after Jesus died and rose again. He was given a vision of Christ where Jesus gives John this message for seven churches in Asia Minor, the area we know today as Turkey. In it, Jesus has words of encouragement and words of rebuke.

We are looking at these churches to see what message God might have for us as well.

1. **We saw the church of Ephesus was a CARELESS church.** It a large active church. They were well-taught and were able to weather hard trials. Along with various commendations Jesus issues a harsh rebuke.

**We often look at large, active churches as healthy churches,** but often they are not. Jesus told the church at Ephesus **they had lost their passionate love for God.**

A passionate heart for the LORD is often more important than what we DO.

2. When we looked at the church at Smyrna. **It was a CRUSHED church and a CROWNED church.** They faced pressure and poverty and putdowns, but they faithfully endured, and so they received commendation from the Lord.

The Lord tells them that persecution will come, but to continue to live faithfully and He would reward them greatly. We want to be faithful, even when life gets difficult.

3. Then we looked at the church at **Pergamum. It was a COMPROMISING church.** It was a city where Satan had set up camp; but the church had tolerated Satan’s presence. We want to make sure that we do not compromise or tolerate evil.
4. We are then awed by the church at **Thyatira.** It was a generous church, filled with good works, but internally **it was a CORRUPT church.**

The people were following a self-proclaimed prophetess who taught them to deny the biblical practice of the Word of God and the people accepted the teaching.

We learn the lesson that we cannot allow ourselves to follow any false teaching that would lead us to embrace sin, but rather we need to lead holy lives, in the world, but not of the world. Instead, we are to live as a witness to the world.

5. Last week we looked at the church at **Sardis. It was a CRIPPLED church.** This was a church that looked good from the outside, in fact it had a great past, but Jesus saw them as they really were, dying and almost dead.

Today we want to look at one of the best of the seven churches, the church at Philadelphia. **It was a COMMITTED church.**

### **REVELATION 3:1-6**

Imagine being the man who delivered these letters to the churches. He has a lot of walking to do. After he left Sardis, he had to walk about 28 miles southeast to come to the city of Philadelphia. The city was about 75 miles from the Aegean coast. He no doubt travelled on an ancient highway linking routes to the east and west. Philadelphia stood on the border of three nations, Lydia, Phrygia, and Pisidia.

It was founded about 140 BC, making it one of the youngest of the seven cities in these two chapters.

**Philadelphia was named after Attalus II, the king of Pergamum.** He had a great love for his brother Eumenes, and so he nick-named his new city Philadelphia meaning, “brother lover” or “brotherly love.”

But it is important to understand the purpose of this city. Attalus founded this city in this spot to be a missionary outpost to the uncivilized regions beyond Lydia, to show them the splendor and glory of Greece. And the city succeeded so well in its mission of spreading the Hellenic culture, that by AD 19, the native language to that region had been replaced by the widespread usage of the Greek language.

King Attalus’ desire to spread the Hellenic culture to the world is much like God’s desire for us to be a witness for Christ, a city on a hill, a people uniquely loved by God.

God's missionary plan remains the same. 1 Peter tells us,

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; **that ye should shew forth the praises of him** who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” – 1 Peter 2:9.

Far too many Christians think that God's plan is to bless them, so they are happy and well off and successful. That is what we often pray for. We love to pray for blessing and freedom from pain. **But how many of us are willing to pray for God to use us, no matter the cost?**

The city of Philadelphia had succeeded in its missionary endeavors to convert a Lydian culture to adopting the Greek lifestyle. Now God comes to this missionary city and calls the church to do the same: to be a missionary people, who model to their community the love of God in such a way that others are drawn to believe the gospel and turn their lives over to following the one true God.

### **Jesus Presents Himself to the Church of Philadelphia**

As Jesus comes to these Christians, we see how He presents himself in Revelation 3:7,

“These things **saith he that is holy, he that is true**, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.”

To these early Christians they would have identified Jesus as the only person who fits this description. For only Jesus is holy and true: their God.

As Jesus speaks to this church, **He again reminds them of His deity**. Isaiah 43:14 states this truth:

“Thus saith the LORD, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

Jesus gives His message as the supreme authority in their lives. **He writes to them as the One who holds the key of David**. The reference to David reminds them that He is the Messiah, the righteous branch who springs from David's line. Jesus is the king of the Jews.

## **The Story Behind the Key of David:**

A key indicates control or authority; therefore, having the Key of David would give one control of David's domain, i.e., Jerusalem, the City of David, and the kingdom of Israel.

**In Isaiah 22:21-22** we find the story of a corrupt Jewish leader, named Shebna. He was the palace secretary. God promises to replace him with an honorable man by the name of Eliakim. It says in that passage:

“I will commit your government (Shebna) into his (Eliakim's) hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And the key of the house of David I will lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”

Jesus now holds this key. It shows that He is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, the ruler of the New Jerusalem, and the Lord of the kingdom of heaven. He is supremely in charge of opening and closing all doors.

And so, as we continue in our reading Jesus says.

Revelation 3:8 – “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.”

**What are some of the closed doors of life?** couple struggles with the pain of childlessness. An athlete striving to qualify for the Olympic team, only to be disqualified by a technicality. The feelings of rejection after being passed over for promotion. The pain of those who are not hired because they are “too qualified.” These are some of the closed doors of our lives.

**But if we truly believe that God is in control, we will believe that He has the power to open and close doors of opportunity for us.** As Christ speaks to the church at Philadelphia, He reminds them He is the one who opens and closes doors. Whether these are open doors for salvation or open doors of ministry, or open doors of service, one thing is clear. God is the God who places opportunities in our path.

In the Greek, the term “open door” could be translated, “**a door having been opened.**” The fact is that God has already created the open door for us. But we often fail to see it.

We go to the store, and we are in such a hurry that we fail to notice the troubled look of hurt on the face of the cashier. We want to get to our car quickly, so we briskly rush past the widow struggling to carry her bag of groceries to her car.

A friend calls up with a burden, but we are so busy that we put them off with some pat answer so we can get back to work, or often, so we can get back to watching the TV show we are in the middle of. We value our pleasure and comfort above the needs of others. And as a result, we miss the open doors that God has given us.

**Jesus tells them they have an open door -- no one can close that door of opportunity.** And then Jesus says,

**I know that you have little strength.** Apparently, the church at Philadelphia **was not a big church**, they did not have a lot of resources, there probably weren't a lot of wealthy patrons giving large amounts to the church. They only had little strength. But Jesus does not rebuke them for being small.

Jesus told the church in **Ephesus that He knew their works**, to the church in **Smyrna that He knew their worries**. He told the church in **Pergamum that He knows their whereabouts**, He knows where they live. He told the church at **Thyatira that He knows the woman in their midst**. He knows her immoral practices. He told the church at **Sardis that He knows their withering** and He told the church at Philadelphia that **He knows their weakness**.

But even though they were small, **He knew their FAITHFULNESS**, and Commitment!

**There's no shortage of open doors, but there is a shortage of Christians that will enter them.**

In Luke 10:2 Jesus says,

“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. The church at Philadelphia was small, but they were doing what they could for the Lord.”

The reality is that Calvary is a small church. We have little strength. We can't put on big theatrical productions like some of the larger churches in the country. We don't have a big bus ministry, or a deaf ministry, or a big

counseling ministry. There are MANY things we CAN'T do; but **we should never forget that there ARE many things we CAN do.** God has opened a door for us. Will we step through that open door?

**Far too often we focus on the things we can't do, and we use that as an excuse to do nothing.** Maybe you can't reach people in the way larger churches do, but there IS someone that you can reach for Christ. But we often allow ourselves to think that somebody else will reach them.

Fred Somebody, Thomas Everybody, Susan Anybody, and Joe Nobody were neighbors, but they were not like you and me. They were odd people and most difficult to understand. **The way they lived was a shame.**

All four belonged to the same church, but you would not have enjoyed worshipping with them.

EVERYBODY went fishing on Sunday or stayed home to visit with friends.

ANYBODY wanted to worship but was afraid

SOMEBODY wouldn't speak to him. So, guess who went to church –

NOBODY.

Really, NOBODY was the only decent one of the four.

NOBODY did the visitation. NOBODY worked on the church building. Once they needed a Sunday school teacher. EVERYBODY thought ANYBODY would do it, and ANYBODY thought SOMEBODY would do it. And you know who did it? That's exactly right . . . NOBODY!

It happened that a fifth neighbor (an unbeliever) moved into the area. EVERYBODY thought SOMEBODY should try to win him for Christ. ANYBODY could have made an effort. You probably know who won him: NOBODY!

This little parable brings to focus again the fact that each of us is personally responsible in doing God's work. If we leave it for somebody or everybody or anybody, nobody will end up doing it.

The church at Philadelphia had little strength, but they did what they could. They were committed. And they worked faithfully.

Jesus said, I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. **In the day when other churches, many of them**

**larger and more active, were compromising with the world, trying to justify sacrificing to Caesar and saying Caesar is Lord** - these Christians at Philadelphia stayed true to the word of God. They did not try to fit in and blend with their surroundings. Instead, they were willing to be identified by the name of Jesus Christ.

Think about how easy it is to hide your identity. At work, when someone is telling a story filled with sexual innuendo's, you just smile and say nothing. When the boss wants you to do a little extra work, you give out a few choice expletives. When a co-worker of the opposite sex is near you, you let them know you are attracted, but you try not to be too obvious. And the result is that those we work with have NO CLUE that we are Christian. Because they see nothing different about our lives! We are just like them! But these Christians at Philadelphia had a faithful testimony. They followed the word of God.

I heard of a church that has this motto: "His Word, Our Walk. We live according to what the Word of God says."

## **Opposition**

But the passage here is clear that these Christians did not have it easy. Revelation 3:9 tells us they faced opposition:

"Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee."

The church at Philadelphia faced opposition from the Jews. Just like the church at Smyrna.

Some scholars think that the church started out meeting in the Jewish synagogue, and then the Jews locked the doors on them - keeping them from meeting there. That may be why Jesus refers to giving them an open door that no one can shut.

Often it is religious groups who offer some of the greatest attacks.

**The church at Philadelphia was faithful, and so Jesus told them He would give them three things.**

- **Recognition:** He would make the Jews admit that the church was loved by God. We don't know what all transpired in that church, but we remember the

truth of Proverbs 16:7 – “When a man’s ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.” Then God promises

- **Relief:** Revelation 3:10 – “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.”

This may be a deliverance from a trial the church faced in the first few centuries. There were many earthquakes in Philadelphia, and possible this was a short-term deliverance.

It may have to do with the lifespan of the church. Of all the seven churches, the church at Philadelphia lasted the longest.

The church had such an impact in Philadelphia that long after the rest of Asia had fallen to the Muslims, Philadelphia remained a Free Christian City amidst a sea of pagan people.

Philadelphia was the last bastion of Asian Christianity, standing firm throughout the Moslem invasion, until the city fell to the Turks in 1392 AD, long after the surrounding area had succumbed to the militant forces of Islam. It is one of only two cities that still remains today, and here we can see ruins that date back to when this letter was written alongside of relatively modern apartment buildings.

But the most likely interpretation of this, consistent with many other passages of scripture, is that this trial coming upon the whole world is a future time of tribulation, a time of the outpouring of the wrath of God upon the world in the days when the antichrist rules on the earth. What is God’s promise? He will keep the church FROM the hour - these Christians will not go through the tribulation. This is a picture of the rapture of the church - God taking the Christians out of this earth before He pours out His wrath. We may talk about that some more in the weeks ahead. But God promises recognition, relief, and

- **Reward** - Look at Revelation 3:11 – “Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy 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.

Jesus says faithful Christians will be like pillars in His temple. When the earthquakes hit the city, often the only thing standing were the pillars of the different temples. Jesus promises security to these faithful believers.

But even more than this, in the first century when a prominent citizen did something noteworthy and worth memorializing, they would inscribe this on a pillar in one of their temples. Jesus says HE will take note, He will make these faithful Christians pillars. Jesus said in Mark, If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I assure you, that person will be rewarded. Jesus assures us that He will reward us for our faithful service.

### **Summary:**

Why aren't we active in serving the Lord? Because we really don't believe that our God is a generous rewarder. We have to take it on faith. Hebrews 11:6 - And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he is *exists* and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

If I said, I'll give you \$500 if you call an unsaved relative and share the gospel today - probably everyone here would do it. But if I said, "If you call an unsaved relative and share the gospel today, God will reward you - we probably wouldn't do it - because we don't really believe God is faithful to reward us.

But notice one last thing about our reward. Jesus says 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. To those Christians who are not ashamed to identify with Jesus, Jesus is not ashamed to identify with them. He places his seal, His stamp, His mark of identification on them. Everyone will see that we belong to Jesus.

Today, it is easy to say I don't have a lot of gifts; I can't preach; I'm not good at sharing the gospel; Our church is small. But let's learn a lesson from the church at Philadelphia. Even though we have little strength, when we use the little that God has placed into our hands, He is pleased.

Shamgar had an ox-goad, David had a sling, Dorcas had a needle, Rahab had a string, Samson had a jawbone, Aaron had a rod, Mary had some ointment, but they all were used for God.

Today, make a commitment that you will look for the open doors that God has given you, and that you will use what God has given you faithfully for His glory.