

Seven Churches of Asia

The Church at Philadelphia

Introduction:

- I. Thus far in our series of studies on the Seven Churches of Asia, we have looked at five of the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira and Sardis.
 - A. Now, we want to turn our attention to the sixth church among the seven churches of Asia -- the church at **Philadelphia. (Rev. 3:7-13)**
 1. Like so many of her sister cities, Philadelphia was a city that sat along trade routes that brought great commercial wealth.
 2. A large part of that wealth came because the region around Philadelphia was known for the production of fine wines.
 - a. Lavish vineyards grew in the rich soil of the surrounding countryside, producing wines that brought immense wealth to those who invested in this industry – everyone from the growers to the exporters.
 3. But along with the production of wine came the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of the vine and drink.

- a. Although other pagan deities were worshipped in Philadelphia, the worship of Dionysus became the chief pagan cult within the city.
- B. Philadelphia also had so many beautiful temples, and held so many festivals to the pagan deities, that the city was often called “Little Athens.”
1. However, in 17 A.D. the city of Philadelphia (along with Sardis and other cities in the region) was destroyed by a major earthquake.
 - a. The emperor Tiberius did the same thing for the people of Philadelphia as he did for the people of Sardis – He allowed the people of Philadelphia to keep their taxes to rebuild the city.
 - b. To show their gratitude, the name of the city was changed to “Neocaesarea” (New Caesar), but the name never caught on with the people who constantly called the city by its original name.
 - c. However, living in Philadelphia was much like living in California – the people were constantly feeling tremors. So, rather than live in the city, many of the citizens of Philadelphia lived in the surrounding countryside, and built their homes of durable materials that would withstand most earthquakes.

- C. Life for Christians living in Philadelphia wasn't all that bad.
1. From certain remarks the Lord makes in this letters, it appears as if there had been some periods of persecution in the past, but the saints in Philadelphia had held strong.
 - a. It was known that the city enjoyed a rather large and prosperous Jewish population, and it's believed that these wealthy Jewish businessmen may have been the source of some persecutions in the past.
 - b. But the saints at Philadelphia had remained faithful, and had kept the Lord's word and had not denied His name.
 2. So, on the surface, it appears as if the Christians in Philadelphia had little to be worried about as far as persecution was concerned.
 - a. Persecution does one of two things – it either drives people away from the Lord, or it draws them even closer.
 - b. But what about the lack of persecution?
 - c. Sadly, the lack of persecution often causes people to take what they have for granted, which leads to the kind of spiritual lethargy we saw in the church at Sardis -- a church that had a reputation for being alive, but which was spiritually dead.
- D. What did the lack of persecution do to the saints in Philadelphia?
1. Let's turn our attention to the letter addressed to the church of Philadelphia, and see what the Lord has to say about them.

(Revelation 3:1-6)

Body:

- I. The Lord begins His address to the church at Philadelphia by using words and phrases we found in the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. After speaking “*to the angel of the church of Philadelphia*” (which is probably a reference to the inner spirit or inner life of the church itself), the Lord identifies Himself as “*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.*” **(Rev. 3:7)**
 1. There are several important things to notice in this self-designation of Jesus Christ.
 - a. The phrase “*He who is holy*” means Jesus is claiming to have the same absolute deity as God the Father has.
 - b. The phrase, “*He who is true,*” means Jesus is claiming to be “*true, dependable, genuine and real.*” Although the Jews denied this claim of Jesus, He claimed to be the real and genuine Messiah who came in fulfillment of the Jewish prophets.
 - c. Furthermore, Jesus claims to have “*the key of David*” which is a symbol of power and authority. Jesus identifies Himself with the rule and throne promised to David’s seed – the Messiah.
 - d. Lastly, Jesus says He alone is the one who “*opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.*” This means He alone has the power and authority to open the doors of salvation to

all who confess the name of Christ, and to shut the doors against those who will not.

(1). No one can open that door of salvation to those who will not do the Lord's will, nor can anyone shut that door in the face of those to whom the Lord chooses open it.

II. As the letter continues, the Lord takes an inventory of the church at Philadelphia, and tells them what He finds. In verse 8, the Lord began His remarks with those familiar words, "*I KNOW!*" **(Read: Rev. 3:8)**

A. When the Lord looked into the inner life of the church at Philadelphia, He immediately took notice of their works.

1. First, the Lord told the saints at Philadelphia that He had opened a door of opportunity for them that no one could shut.

a. The apostle Paul had used the same figure of speech when he said, "*For a great and effective door has opened to me...*" (1 Cor. 16:9)

(1). Paul was speaking of the great opportunities the Lord had opened for him to preach the gospel of Christ to a lost and dying world.

b. Likewise, the Lord had opened the same kind of door for the Christians at Philadelphia – the Lord had opened it, "*and no one could shut.*"

- (1). It's apparent from the way the Lord speaks to these saints, that they had taken full advantage of every opportunity to spread the gospel that the Lord had presented to them.
 - (2). They were a working, evangelistic church – zealous to preach the gospel of Christ to others in their community, and in the surrounding territory.
- c. What about us?
- (1). What doors of opportunity has the Lord opened for the church here, and are we taking full advantage of those opportunities?
2. Second, the Lord took special notice of how well they used what little strength they had.
- a. Even though they had "*little strength*" – even though they were not a large, wealthy congregation -- they faithfully took advantage of every opportunity the Lord had opened for them.
 - b. How about us?
 - (1). What "*little strength*" do we have that we may not be using?
 - (2). I would hazard to guess that most churches today (certainly this one) have more "*strength*" to do the Lord's will than the church in Philadelphia.

- (a). They saints in Philadelphia weren't going to be limited by their own "limitations" – they exercised what little strength they had, and grew stronger in the process.
- c. From the beginning, the church at Philadelphia had probably been small in number, poor in worldly goods, and of little account in the eyes of men.
- (1). But their weakness was not a liability, it was an asset. Like others who were weak, they had learned to depend on the Lord's strength – not their own.
- (a). When Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove his "*thorn in the flesh*," Paul said the Lord said to him, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect (complete) in weakness.*' *Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*" **(2 Cor. 12:9-10)**
- (b). Isaiah said the Lord, "*gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength.*" **(Isa. 40:29)**

- d. The saints in Philadelphia had learned to trust in the Lord to provide them their strength – and they exercised it. But remember, just as a lack of physical exercise can lead to ***muscular atrophy***, so a lack of spiritual exercise lead to ***spiritual apathy***.
 - (a). What about us? If we're not growing stronger spiritually, then could it be because we aren't exercising ourselves spiritually?
 - (b). The answer should be obvious.
3. Finally, the Lord took special notice of the fact that they had kept His word and had not denied His name.
 - a. No doubt, there had been some test of the faith of these saints in the past.
 - (1). Some commentators have suggested the reason they may have had "*little strength*," is that they had become exhausted from constantly being persecuted.
 - (2). Whatever they had endured in the past, they continued to keep the Lord's word, and refused to renounce His name.
 - b. The ***real*** test of a person's loyalty is ***not*** in the daily keeping of God's word and the confession of His name when ***no real danger*** is involved.

- c. The ***real*** test of a person's loyalty comes when we are called upon to give up all we have in the world to remain faithful to Christ.
- (1). That's the kind of test the saints at Smyrna had passed (the poor-rich church), and that's the kind of test the saints at Philadelphia had taken and passed as well.
 - (2). How would we do if we had to take that test -- give up everything we have to remain faithful to Christ?
 - (3). Sadly, most don't realize it, but that's exactly what the Lord requires of ***anyone*** and ***everyone*** who would be His disciple.
 - (a). Jesus said, "*So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake **all** that he has cannot be My disciple.*" **(Luke 14:33)**
 - (b). If you were asked to forsake "*all*" that you have to follow Christ, would you? The saints at Smyrna and Philadelphia did.
- B. Because of their loyalty to Jesus, the Lord promises the saints in Philadelphia, "*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.*" **(Rev. 3:9)**

1. This statement is somewhat similar to what the Lord said to the church at Smyrna (2:9), when He spoke of the influential Jewish businessmen in Smyrna who were persecuting the Christians there.
 - a. In that passage, the Lord called these Jews a “*synagogue of Satan.*” Although they boasted of being Jews -- God’s chosen people and the fleshly seed of Abraham – they were actually under the influence of Satan, representing him rather than the God of heaven.
2. However, the promise the Lord makes to the Christians at Philadelphia is different.
 - a. To the Christians in Smyrna, the Lord promised that the Jews would not be able to defeat the faithful.
 - b. But to the Christians in Philadelphia, the Lord not only promised that the Jews would not defeat the faithful, but that some of their Jewish adversaries would worship before their feet. What does this mean?
 - (1). Some commentators believe it means that some of these Jewish persecutors would actually become converted to Christ.
 - (2). However, the best answer seems to be that these Jewish persecutors would eventually come to see that the Lord has been with the Christians in Philadelphia all along, and

has been blessing and protecting them – and will continue to do so.

(a). In this sense, these persecuting Jews would certainly be forced to recognize, and perhaps even come to respect, God's providential care for the Lord's people and for the church.

C. The Lord makes another promise to the church in Philadelphia – he promises to keep them from the "*hour of trial*."

1. "*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.*" **(Rev. 3:10)**
2. The Lord promised to keep them, as He said – "*because you have kept My command to persevere.*"
 - a. Apparently, the church at Philadelphia had undergone severe trials and persecutions in the past.
 - b. But during these persecutions, the saints at Philadelphia remembered the example Christ left His followers when He also faced persecution – and they imitated that same faith.
3. Because they had followed the Lord's example and commands to persevere during persecution, the Lord promised to continue taking care of them during future persecutions.
 - a. This certainly doesn't mean these saints were going to be spared future persecutions, but that the Lord would be there to

help them during the “*hour of trial*” by sustaining them, and giving them grace and power to endure whatever difficulties they would face.

b. The Lord makes the same promise to His faithful followers today.

(1). He doesn’t promise us freedom from trials, because “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecutions.*” **(2 Tim. 3:12)**

(2). But the Lord promises the spiritual help we need to endure suffering and persecutions. (cf. 2 Tim. 4:18)

4. What is the “*hour of trial*” that is coming “*upon the whole world*?”

a. It cannot be the final judgment – because the Lord specifically promised the saints at Philadelphia that He would deliver them from it.

b. The “*trial*” spoken of here is one that will “*test those who dwell on the earth*” -- and seems to be a reference to the judgment that the Lord will eventually bring against Rome itself.

(1). The Lord fully intended to bring down the Roman Empire.

(2). When that happens, it will bring chaos to the entire civilized world. But those who are Christians will see that “*hour of trial*,” which will “*test those who dwell on the earth*,” as a time of deliverance.

- D. Then the Lord gives one last word of encouragement to these faithful saints – *“Behold I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.” (Rev. 3:11)*
1. The Lord’s judgment against those who are persecuting His saints will come swift and without any warning whatsoever.
 2. However, in the meantime, the Lord exhorts them to, *“HOLD FAST WHAT YOU HAVE!”*
 - a. Trials, tribulations and persecutions have a way of discouraging the faithful, and may even cause some to lose hope altogether.
 - b. But the reward is only given to those who *“HOLD FAST”* – those who don’t quit when things get rough.
 - c. How does this apply to you? Are you able to continue holding fast when difficulties arise before you as a Christian, or do you lose heart and lose hope?
 3. The Lord tells us why it’s necessary to *“hold fast”* -- *“that no one may take your crown”* – which is an obvious reference to the *“crown of righteousness”* Paul speaks of (2 Tim. 4:8), and the *“crown of life”* promised to the faithful saints in Smyrna (Rev. 2:10).
 - a. If we lose the *“crown of righteousness”* or the *“crown of life,”* we’ve lost everything.
 - b. Nothing in this world is worth losing that reward!

III. Finally, the promise to those who overcome – those who remain victorious to the very end. **(Rev.3:12)**

A. To those who overcome, the Lord promises, “*a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.*”

1. This statement seems to be referring to heaven itself -- where those who overcome will be like a **permanent** pillar in God’s grand temple, and will never again have to worry about losing their reward.

a. Heaven itself is like one grand temple, and those who overcome will have a **permanent** place in it.

B. Furthermore, the Lord promises, “*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.*” Let’s notice what this means.

1. First, the name of God will symbolically be written on those who overcome.

a. This means we will be identified as belonging to God the Father – we will be His possession and His heir.

2. Second, the name of New Jerusalem will be symbolically written on those who overcome.

a. This means we will be identified as citizens of New Jerusalem – another name for heaven.

3. Finally, the name of Jesus Christ will also be symbolically written on those who overcome.
 - a. This means we will also wear the name of Christ as belonging to Him in a special relationship, and will abide with Him forever.
4. What more could anyone want than to belong to God, Christ and to be designated as a permanent citizen of heaven – with no fear of ever losing that citizenship because it's permanent!
 - a. But this great promise is made only to those ***who overcome***, not to those ***who are overcome***.

Conclusion:

- I. Did you notice something about this letter that we've seen in only one other?
 - A. The Lord could find nothing in these saints to condemn – all He could do was praise them for their faithfulness and their work.
 1. The church at Smyrna was the only other church where the Lord could find nothing specifically wrong.
 - B. Does this mean they were perfect? No.
 1. As we said before, there are no perfect Christians, and since congregations are made up of individual Christians, there are no perfect congregations.

2. What it does mean is that the saints in Philadelphia were striving to the very best of their ability to be all the Lord expected them to be as His faithful saints.
 - a. They had taken full advantage of the “*open door*” the Lord had set before them in preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ.
 - (1). They were a working, evangelistic church – zealous to engage in good works, and in preaching the gospel of Christ to others in their community, and in the surrounding territory.
 - b. They used what “*little strength*” they had to do whatever the Lord expected of them – never once complaining that they were too small, or too poor to work for the cause of Christ.
 - c. They had faithfully kept the Lord’s word and had not denied His name.
 - d. And they had endured persecutions in the past and came through them victoriously.
- II. How do we compare to the members of the church at Philadelphia?
- A. What does the Lord see when He looks into our hearts?
 1. If the Lord looked into your heart and mine at this moment, would He find that we are:

- a. Taking full advantage of the “*open door*” the Lord had set before us in preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ.
 - (1). Are we a working, evangelistic church – zealous to engage in good works, and in preaching the gospel of Christ to others in our community, and in the surrounding territory.
 - b. Are we using what “*little strength*” we as individuals have to do whatever the Lord expected of us -- never once complaining that we don’t have what we need to work for the cause of Christ.
 - c. Are we faithfully keeping the Lord’s word and not denying His name.
 - d. And finally, are we willing to endure persecutions for the Lord’s sake, and be willing to face whatever may come our way?
- B. If we have to honestly say “*no*” to any of these things, there is still time to change.