

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

The Message to the Church in Philadelphia: (3:7-13)

The Faithful Church

The Commission to Write to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7a):

The City of Philadelphia:¹⁵⁷

Geographically: "From the Hermus River valley, where Sardis and Smyrna were located, a smaller valley (that of the Cogamis River) branches off to the southeast. A road through this valley provided the best means of ascending the 2,500 feet from the Hermus valley to the vast central plateau. In this valley, about thirty miles from Sardis, was the city of Philadelphia."¹⁵⁸ Philadelphia lay on the path by which trade and communication from the harbor at Smyrna and from Lydia and the northwest regions was maintained with Phrygia and the East. This was a great trade route which rivaled the road from Ephesus to the east. In addition the Imperial Post Road coming from Rome by way of Troas, Pergamum, and Sardis passed through Philadelphia and went on to the east. The site for the city was on a broad hill which slopes gently upward from the valley toward the mountains of Tmolus. This hill was cut off from the mountains and the site could easily be made into a strong fortress against military attack. The site of Philadelphia also left it open to conspicuous disaster, because it was situated on the edge of the Katakekaumene (the burned land). This was a district in Lydia which was previously volcanic resulting in very fertile soil. It was also a region highly susceptible to devastating earthquakes.

Historically: Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities addressed in Revelation. It was founded sometime after 189 B.C. by Pergamenian rulers. It derived its name from Attalus II (Philadelphus meaning "brother lover"). This was a nickname applied to Attalus II because of his loyalty to his brother King Eumenes. Philadelphia was founded not as a military outpost, but more for consul dating, and regulating and educating the central regions subject to the Pergamenian kings. The intention of the founder was to make it the center of Graeco-Asiatic civilization and a means of spreading the Greek language and manners in the eastern part of Lydia and Phrygia. In A.D. 17 an unusually severe earthquake destroyed twelve cities in the Lydian valley including Sardis and Philadelphia. While Sardis clearly suffered the most immediate destruction, Philadelphia suffered both immediate and long range effects. Frequent aftershocks were experienced for a long time following the initial quake because Philadelphia was nearer the epicenter. "Many of the inhabitants remained outside the city living in huts and booths, while those remaining in the city used various devices to support and strengthen their walls and houses against the recurring shocks. The habit of going out into the open country had probably not disappeared when the seven messages were written. In later history during the time of the struggle between the Turks and the empire, the city rose in heroism. Long after the surrounding country had passed under Turkish power, Philadelphia held up the banner of Christendom. During the 14th Century it stood practically alone against the entire Turkish power as a free, self-governing Christian city. At last, about 1379-1390, it succumbed."¹⁵⁹ The city of Philadelphia was known under various names through the Roman period such as Neokaisareia under Tiberius and Flavia under Vespucian.

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Culturally: Higher education and the spread of the Greek language and culture were the goals of the builders of the city. To this end they were successful. Literature from this area is sparse and coins furnish little information, however they do reflect a more Greek oriented culture. Greek became the primary language when the Lydian tongue ceased to be spoken by A.D. 20.

Economically: "The city prospered due to its location and its rich fertile valley. Along with its large grape industry, Philadelphia was noted for textiles and leather goods." ¹⁶⁰ Philadelphia benefited from its location because it lay on major trade routes between the east and west, and from its location agriculturally because this valley was fertile due to previous volcanic activity.

Religiously: Little is known about the religious aspects of this city except for what has been found on coins and in inscriptions. Coins reveal a variety of Greek gods and goddesses of other cities such as Artemis and Asklepios. The inscriptions reveal that the Greek religion was confined to show and festivals, whereas the religion in Philadelphia was primarily Anatolian in character. Many of the formula of the religion practiced in the Katakoma district of Lydia included confession of sin, punishment of sin by a god, and thanks to god occur in Philadelphia. A later cult of Germanicus (the adopted son and heir of Tiberius) was founded in Philadelphia.

The Church in Philadelphia:

"Little is known about the Philadelphia church apart from this passage. Like most of the other seven churches, it was probably founded during Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). A few years after John wrote Revelation, the early church father Ignatius passed through Philadelphia on his way to martyrdom at Rome. He later wrote the church a letter of encouragement and instruction. Some Christians from Philadelphia were martyred with Polycarp at Smyrna. The church lasted for centuries. The Christians in Philadelphia stood firm even after the region was overrun by the Muslims, finally succumbing in the mid-fourteenth century." ¹⁶¹

The Picture of Christ to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7b):

"The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine author of the seven letters, always introduces Himself with a description reflecting His character. In the previous five letters, those descriptions had come from the vision recorded in 1:12-17. But this description of Him is unique and not drawn from that earlier vision. ¹⁶² "This description of the Lord is drawn primarily from Old Testament aspects. The picture of Christ here is given in four titles:

He who is holy:

The first title used of Christ is an attribute. Jesus is referred to as He who is holy. The verb form of the Greek term *hagios* means *to be set apart*. It speaks of one who is utterly set apart from sin, and possesses a character that is unblemished and flawless. The Old Testament repeatedly describes God as the Holy one: (2 Kings 19:22; Job 6:10; Ps. 71:22; 78:41; Isa. 43:15; 54:5; Hab. 3:3). The most familiar passage to us is Isaiah 6:3, "*And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.'*" The Old Testament clearly says that God is the holy one. In the New Testament this description is used as a messianic title for the Lord Jesus Christ: (Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35, John 6:69, Acts 3:14). "The Lord Jesus Christ possesses in undiminished, unaltered essence the holy and sinless nature of God." ¹⁶³ Since Christ is holy, His church is called to be holy: "*but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all*

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[your] behavior; (1 Peter 1:15). Christ is described to the faithful church in Philadelphia as *He who is holy*. Since there will be no condemnation to follow in this message, this picture of Christ is an encouraging one and one that speaks well of the church as a whole.

He who is true:

"Not only is Jesus Christ the Holy One; He also describes Himself as *He who is true*. Truth is used in combination with holiness to describe God in Revelation 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2,11. *Alethin*os (true) denotes that which is genuine, authentic, and real. In the midst of the falsehood, perversion, and error that fills the world, the Lord Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6).¹⁶⁴ John also refers to Christ as He who is true in 1 John 5:20, "*And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*" Christ is no counterfeit, no shadowy outline of the truth, He is the real thing! He is the true God!

He who has the key of David:

"Third Christ describes Himself as the One *who has the key of David*. As is clear from Revelation 5:5 and 22:16, David symbolizes the messianic office. A key in Scripture represents authority; whoever holds a key has control (cf. 1:18; 9:1; 20:1; Mt. 16:19). The term *the key of David* also appears in Isaiah 22:22, where it refers to Eliakim, the steward or prime minister to Israel's king. Because of his office, he controlled access to the monarch. As the holder of the key of David, Jesus alone has the sovereign authority to determine who enters His messianic kingdom (cf. John 10:7,9; 14:6; Acts 4:12). Revelation 1:18 reveals that Jesus has the keys to death and hell; here He is depicted as having the keys to salvation and blessing."¹⁶⁵ Christ has described Himself as **Holy** (utterly set apart from sin, and possesses a character that is unblemished and flawless), **True** (that which is genuine, authentic, and real in the midst of the falsehood, perversion, and error that fills the world), and now here describes Himself in **sovereign authority** to determine who may enter His future messianic kingdom.

He who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens:

This description stresses the **omnipotence** of Christ. There is no one who can overturn or reverse what Christ does. The Lord declares in Isaiah 43:13, "*I act and who can reverse it?*". "No one can shut the doors to the kingdom or to blessing if He holds them open, and no one can force them open if He holds them shut."¹⁶⁶ It is also possible in regards to the context of verse 8 that this could be referring to opening and shutting the doors for service. Whatever the case the point is clear, that Christ is omnipotent and in complete sovereign control over His church.

The Commendation to the Church in Philadelphia (3:8-11a):

The commendation to the church in Philadelphia can be broken down into three parts. First there is an affirmation where Christ commends the works of the church. Second there is a section of vindication where Christ pronounces judgment upon the enemies of the church. The third section is a promise of protection given by Christ to the faithful church in Philadelphia.

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AFFIRMATION: The Works of the Church: (v.8)

1) A statement of encouragement: Before Christ moves to affirming the good works of the church, He offers a statement of encouragement. He says, *Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut.* There does exist some disagreement as to what this open door refers to. *One view* suggests that this is a reference to expanded missionary service. And interprets that Christ has left an open door to the faithful in Philadelphia to spread the gospel. This view is supported by Paul's use of the term in 1 Cor. 16:8-9, 2 Cor. 2:12, and Col. 4:2-3. It is also supported by the fact that Philadelphia was in a prime geographical location for missionary outreach. The *second view* suggests that this speaks of a certain entrance into the Messianic Kingdom. This position is often favored because of the eschatological context of Revelation, is seen as a reinforcement of the preceding verse, and could be supported by the promise given in verse 9. Whatever the case this can clearly be seen as a statement of encouragement to a church which has strived to remain faithful to Christ.

2) Spiritual Power: After offering a statement of encouragement to the believers in Philadelphia, Christ moves on to commend their works. He begins by commending their spiritual power, *you have a little power.* From the world's perspective the church at Philadelphia may have appeared weak, it may have been a small church in comparison to some of the others. From the world's perspective it was not a church that was significantly impressive. But from God's perspective it had a little power. This was not intended to be a negative comment or it would not have been placed with the deeds of the church. This was in fact a commendation on the spiritual strength of the church. They could identify with Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 12:9-10, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*" "Spiritual power flowed in the Philadelphia church. People were being redeemed, lives being transformed, and the gospel of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed."¹⁶⁷

3) Obedience to the Word: Christ moves on to commend the church at Philadelphia for their obedience to His Word, *"you have kept My word."* The Greek word for keep, is from *tereo*, which means to keep watch over, guard, preserve, *give heed* to or *observe*. The church at Philadelphia observed and obeyed God's Word. Jesus said in John 14:23, *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."* The apostle John also instructed in 1 John 2:5, *"but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected."* Because of their obedience to His Word the church at Philadelphia had proven the genuineness of their love for Christ. They could say as Job said, *"I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food."* They were effectual doers of the Word, and would thus receive blessing (cf. James 1:25).

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4) Commitment to Christ: Lastly they maintained a commitment to Christ. The Lord says, "*you have not denied My name.*" "They were eager to be openly known as Christians. They were not secret Christians. They did not fear possible consequences for their faith, so they were not afraid to acknowledge the One in whom they believed." ¹⁶⁸ They heeded Christ's instructions in Matthew 10:32, "*Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.*" Despite the pressures they faced the church in Philadelphia remained loyal to their Lord.

VINDICATION: The Judgment on the Enemy: (v.9)

"As was the case in Smyrna (cf. 2:9), Christians in Philadelphia faced hostility from unbelieving Jews. Ignatius later debated some hostile Jews during his visit to Philadelphia. Because of their rejection of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, they were not at all a synagogue of God, but a Synagogue of Satan. Though they claimed that they were Jews, that claim was a lie. Racially, culturally, and ceremonially they were Jews, but spiritually they were not. Paul defines a true Jew in Romans 2:28-29: *>For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God*" (cf. Rom. 9:6-7). Amazingly, Christ promised that some of the very Jews who were persecuting the Christians at Philadelphia would come and bow down at their feet, and know that God had loved them. Bowing at someone's feet depicts abject, total defeat and submission. The Philadelphia church's enemies would be utterly vanquished, humbled, and defeated." ¹⁶⁹

PROTECTION: The Promise from Christ: (v.10-11a)

After affirming the church's works and vindicating the church from its enemies, Christ pronounces a promise of protection to the church in Philadelphia. He says, "*Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that [hour] which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. 'I am coming quickly.'*" The believers in Philadelphia had patiently endured many trials. The phrase is rendered in the NIV as, *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently.*" It was for their patient endurance that Christ has offered them this glorious promise. The promise offered here is a promise that extends to all faithful churches of all time. This is an eschatological promise to be kept from the period of the Tribulation. John MacArthur lists several aspects of this promise in his commentary on Revelation 1-11:

- 1) First, the test is yet future.
- 2) Second, the test is for a definite, limited time; Jesus described as the hour of testing.
- 3) Third, it is a test or trial that will expose people for what they really are.
- 4) Fourth, the test is worldwide in scope, since it will come upon the whole world.
- 5) Finally, and most significantly, its purpose is to test those who dwell on the earth, a phrase used as a technical term in the book of Revelation for unbelievers (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8).

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This *hour of testing* is none other than Daniel's Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:25-27), The Time of Jacob's Trouble (Jer. 30:7), and the Tribulation (Rev. 6-18). The phrase *keep from* in the Greek is *Tereo* with *ek*. This phrase implies a continuous existence outside. The only other place this phrase occurs is in John 17:5 where it takes the meaning to be kept completely out of and thus argues strongly for the same meaning here in Revelation 3:10. Some have attempted to distort the meaning of this phrase by saying that it refers to being preserved through. If that was the case a different Greek preposition would have been used rather than *ek*. The significance of this promise is that it is referring to a pre-tribulation rapture in which the church will be removed from the world and will be kept from going through the hour of testing. The coming that Christ refers to here in verse 11 is different from the one promised to some of the other churches. Those were warnings of impending judgment. The coming promised to the church in Philadelphia is Christ's coming just prior to the hour of testing in which He will deliver the church out of the world at the time of the rapture. Christ emphasizes that this coming is quickly. The Greek word *tachu* translated quickly here is best understood as referring to the imminency of Christ's coming. He could come at any time!

The Condemnation to the Church in Philadelphia:

NONE! "That Jesus Christ, the holy, true, sovereign omnipotent Lord of the church, found nothing to condemn in the Philadelphian church must have been a joyous encouragement to them."¹⁷⁰

The Counsel given to the Church in Philadelphia (3:11b):

Christ's counsel to the church in Philadelphia is brief. Unlike many of the other churches they are not commanded to repent. They are commanded to "Hold Fast" what they have! The members of this church had remained faithful, obedient and loyal to Christ and He exhorted them to remain so. The verb for hold fast, *krateo* is in the present tense emphasizing a continual action of holding fast. It is also in the imperative mood revealing that it is an urgent command. They were to continually hold fast remaining faithful, obedient and loyal to Christ through trials and persecutions. They were to hold fast for two reasons. One has already been mentioned. The Lord's coming is imminent. No one knows when He will come and He could come at any time, therefore hold fast what you have. They were also to hold fast so that no one would take their crown. The crown here is a reference to reward. It is not speaking of losing salvation but losing some of their reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:15; 2 Cor. 5:10). John makes a similar statement in 2 John 8, "*Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.*"

The Challenge to the Overcomers in Philadelphia (3:12-13):

Remember that this challenge to the overcomers is a promise given to the true believers. John identified the true believers as overcomers in 1 John 5:5. And in each message the promise highlights some aspect of eternal life. The promise given to Philadelphia is basically two-fold.

I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore. This is a promise of security. A pillar represents stability, permanence, and immovability. Pillars can also represent honor. The marvelous promise Christ makes to believers is that they will have an eternal place of honor in the temple of God (Heaven). To people used to fleeing their city because of earthquakes, the promise that they will not go out from heaven was understood as security in eternal glory."¹⁷¹

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I will write upon 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 My new name. The promise of the signature of God, the city of God, and that of Christ's new name depicts ownership and citizenship. All true believers belong to God and have an intimate personal relationship with Him. They will be ensured an eternal citizenship in heaven. As usual Christ closes the letter with an exhortation for the churches to heed the truths found in the seven letters. 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.