

Studies in Revelation
The Message to the Church in Philadelphia – Pt. 1
Rev. 3:7-17

Introduction: This morning we are going to be looking at the message to the church in Philadelphia. We find it in chapter three, verses seven through seventeen. As Bill was reading these verses during our Scripture Reading, I don't know if you caught it or not but there are some parallels between the church in Philadelphia and the church in Smyrna. Both churches received no word of condemnation, only praise. Both churches suffered from the Jewish element in the city, both were reminded that their suffering was Satanic in its origin, and both churches are promised a crown as a reward for being steadfast.

There are two curious things about Philadelphia that play into our understanding of this passage. First of all, Philadelphia had undergone several name changes in its short history. Around 17 AD, the city was pretty much destroyed by a powerful earthquake. Philadelphia was located in a volcanic area which made for very fertile soil, but it was prone to earthquakes and weekly tremblors. So for several years after the quake, most of the people lived outside the city because of the instability of the buildings still standing, and the ones who did venture to live in town were constantly fleeing to the fields every time the earth trembled and caused stones to fall out of the buildings. Because of the level of the devastation, the emperor Tiberius sent them a large stimulus package to rebuild the town, so in honor of Tiberius and in appreciation of his generosity, the town was renamed Neocaesarea. Several generations later, the town changed its name again, this time to Flavia, in honor of the family that the emperor Vespatian came from.

Something else that is curious about Philadelphia is a tradition that was practiced when they wanted to honor a prominent person in town. In our culture, it isn't uncommon to name town parks after philanthropists, or to name a stretch of highway

after a famous person who was born there (in Asheville, NC there is the Billy Graham Expressway and in many other cities you have the Martin Luther King Highway). In Philadelphia, you had a column placed in the temple with your name inscribed on it. That way, everyone who would come into the temple to worship would see your name and remember what you had done.

So with that little bit of introductory information, let's get into verse 7 and look at how Jesus presents himself to the people of this church. He starts by reminding them that He is "*holy and true*," which is understandable. These are two of the most prominent attributes of God. But then His self-description gets curious. What is going on with this reference to having "*the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one will open?*" We were introduced to the concept of "keys" back in 1:18 where we see that Jesus holds the "*keys of Death and Hades*." I told you then that a "key" in the book of Revelation was symbolic of authority. If you have a key to something that is locked up, your possession of that key gives you the authority to do whatever you want with that object. When you have the key to the abyss, you have authority over whatever goes into that abyss and whatever come out. When you have the keys of the kingdom, you have authority over who enters and who is kept out of the kingdom.

In our verse, Jesus makes reference to a key, but He mentions that it is the "*key of David*." What is going on with this description? The reference to David reminds the church in Philadelphia of Israel's warrior king. King David represents the pinnacle of Israel's military might. The nation grew under his leadership. The nation's enemies were defeated under his reign. David was a military man who expanded the boundaries of the nation, which is why God didn't allow him to build the temple. In 1 Chron. 28:3, God says to David, "*You shall not build a house for My name because you are a man of war and have shed blood.*"

But why does Jesus refer to himself like this? How many of you have ever heard the terms, “the church militant and the church triumphant?” We don’t use these phrases very often like previous generations used to, but they refer to the church on earth (militant) and the church in heaven (triumphant). To refer to ourselves here on earth as the church militant reminds us of the nature of our existence here on earth – we are engaged in battle. This is why Paul exhorts us to “*put on the whole armor of God.*” You don’t put on armor to go on vacation, you put on Bermuda shorts and tanning lotion. Armor is for battle, and what this description of Jesus tells the church in Philadelphia is two things. First of all, they have a battle ahead of them – this is a militaristic designation. Secondly, the boundaries of the kingdom are about to expand. So it is both a warning as well as a promise.

Now starting in verse 8, we see how Jesus assesses the church, and grammatically, this verse contains a parenthetical statement. The thought is, “*I know your deeds [now skip the next few phrases] . . . I know you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*” Jesus commends them for their fidelity and acknowledges their lack of strength. In other words, they weren’t a strong, large, influential, powerful church. But they were faithful to God’s Word and the name of Christ. And because of that faithfulness, God gives them a great opportunity.

Look at the parenthetical part of the verses with me. It says “*Behold, I have set before you a door, standing open, which no one is able to shut.*” This speaks of a tremendous opportunity for service and ministry that God has given to the church in Philadelphia. We don’t know exactly what it entailed, but there is a very good chance it involved some kind of missionary activity since the city was situated so strategically on the edge of the empire. Throughout its history Philadelphia was called the “Gateway to the East.” In addition to this, it was located on the major East / West trade route of the empire, as well as being a major postal route for Rome. So in a very real sense the church had the entire area of Asia Minor at it’s doorstep.

Jesus' use of the word "door" is significant. A door is often used in the NT to describe opportunity. Let me give you just two examples. In Acts 14:27 we read, "*And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.*" In 1 Cor. 16:8-9 we read, "*But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.*" Jesus is telling this church that there is a tremendous opportunity ahead of them to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom of God.

I want to pause for a moment here and ask you a question, because I think there is something we can learn from this. What kind of people does God use? What kind of a church will God use to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom? We often think that it is the highly trained people, or the cutting edge church that has lots of resources at its disposal that God uses, but that isn't what we see here in the message to the church in Philadelphia. They were obviously in a minority in their town, they were being persecuted and vilified by the Jewish element, yet God says to them, "I am opening a door of opportunity for you that no man can shut, because you have been faithful to me."

Now in verses nine and ten Jesus makes two promises to this church. "*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 *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 we have in these two verses is a promise of **vindication** (v. 9) and **preservation** (v. 10). The *vindication* comes about because the church was being harassed and persecuted by the Jewish element in the city. In all probability, these church members had been excommunicated from the Synagogue because of their faithfulness to Jesus. We saw this same thing happening to the church in Smyrna. But what was probably going

on is that the Jews of the city were telling the church that the church didn't consist of God's true people, that God didn't really love them, that they were followers of an imposter that had been executed and thoroughly discredited. See, the Jews had the multi-thousand year history of being God's special, chosen people – not the church. The church was the upstart. The church was the new kid on the block. The church didn't have the history and the tradition the Jews did. This is why Jesus comes to the church and says, "Listen, not only are these Jews Satanically inspired, one of these days they are going to bow down at your feet and see the truth that I do love you. You are my sons and daughters." And what makes this statement even more caustic is that in the OT, the teaching was that the Gentile nations were going to come and bow down at the feet of Israel (Cf. Isa. 60); now, Jesus is turning the whole situation around and saying that the Jews are going to bow at the feet of the church. That is vindication.

The *preservation* is seen in the promise to deliver them from a specific period of tribulation that was coming – "*I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.*" There is quite a bit of debate over what this refers to. Was it a particular wave of persecution that went through the area that Philadelphia was miraculously preserved from, or was it something else?

The vocabulary John uses here answers this for us. Note the phrase "*the whole world*" and the phrase "*those who dwell on earth.*" This tells us that the hour of testing, or trial, was not a localized thing – it involves the whole world. And the term "earth-dwellers" is very significant. It is used many times in Revelation and every time it is a reference to unbelievers, the enemies of God who not only worship and follow the beast but also persecute the believers. This is why we know the "*hour of trial*" is not something that is going to test the church in Philadelphia.

So what is Jesus referring to here? What we see happening here is actually somewhat rare in that Jesus leaves the immediate, historical context of what is going on in

Philadelphia and addresses an event still many years in the future. He doesn't do this with any of the other churches, but here He is referring to that period of time yet in the future, even for us, when He is going to pour out His wrath in final judgment against this world. So even though in the rest of the messages to the seven churches everything spoken of has already taken place, that is not the case with the promise to the church in Philadelphia. Why Jesus does this we don't know, but based on the vocabulary of the passage, we can't conclude anything differently.

Now, the next issue to wrestle with is that little preposition "from" in the phrase "*I will keep you from (or out of) the hour of trial.*" Both translations are legitimate. But the question that comes up is this. "Since this is a promise yet to be fulfilled, is God promising the church preservation through the trial, or deliverance from the trial itself?" If you hold to a pre-tribulational position on the rapture of the church, what you see here is Jesus promising the church "*I will keep you out of the hour of trial.*" If you hold to a post-tribulational position, what you see is "*I will preserve you through that hour of trial.*" Which is it? Well, you are going to have to wait until next week to find out.

Unfortunately, we are out of time for today and we still have three more verses to look at. So next week we'll start by addressing this concept of how God deals with His children when persecution takes place. I think it is important for us to know what the Scriptures teach about this matter because I believe we are in for some stormy weather ahead. And then we'll look at the final three verses of this passage and make our final points of application. The message to the church in Philadelphia has some wonderful truths that are relevant to us today, so we will spend some time there.