

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

*Introduction:* This morning we are going to be back in Revelation chapter 3. This is going to be the third and final message taken from the church in Philadelphia. In the first message, we looked at Jesus presentation of Himself to the church as the one who holds the key of David, and who opens and shuts doors in such a way that no one can undo what He has done. What a powerful picture of Jesus that is, and it holds great implications for the follower of Christ. In the second message, we looked a little more deeply at verse 10 where Jesus promises this church that He will “*deliver*” them from the “*hour of trouble*” that was going to test the “*earth dwellers*.” In this message we reviewed terms like “tribulation” and “rapture,” and I told you the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation is a matter of much debate in Christianity. The three basic positions are that the rapture will happen **before** the tribulation (pre-tribulation), **half way** through it (mid-tribulation, or as some have labeled it, “pre-wrath”), and at the **end** of the tribulation (post-tribulation).

The reason we got into this is because Rev. 3:10 is one of the primary verses pre-tribulationists use to support their view. They see this phrase, “*I also will keep you from the hour of testing,*” as a promise that when God pours out His wrath on the world at the end of the age, they will be in heaven and not have to go through that period of time. This is what prompted me to take an entire message to give you an overview of a biblical theology of suffering. The Bible has a lot to say about this matter of suffering, and so I ended the message by telling you that I hold to a post-tribulation view of the rapture.

After the message, I had several people question me about this because port-tribulationism is not the prevalent position in evangelicalism. In fact, there are many Christian schools, colleges, and mission boards that make this an issue of such great

importance that you have to hold to pre-tribulationism to be a part of the organization. I also had someone say, “You can’t just give your position and scriptural support for it without also giving equal time to the other two positions.” That is a good point, and so next Sunday, that is what I’m going to do. What I want to do this morning is finish the last three verses of this message to the church in Philadelphia, and then make some points of application. And then next Sunday we’ll look at the biblical support for pre-tribulationism and mid-tribulationism.

So read along with me in verse 11 where Jesus says, *“I am coming quickly. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.”* As I mentioned early on in the series, this promise of “coming quickly,” or “returning quickly,” is mentioned almost a dozen times in Revelation, and the way we understand it is that it is not intended to convey chronology. This is where I differ from the preterist – he looks at these promises literally, and believes all of Revelation has already happened. My viewpoint is that these repeated reminders that Jesus is coming quickly are designed to keep us alert and in a sense of expectation for the return of the Lord. Since we don’t know exactly when Jesus is returning, we live as if He could return this afternoon! If Jesus had said, “I’m coming at some point in the distant future,” human nature is such that we’d all probably relax and have no sense of urgency about living for the Lord.

Jesus then goes on to say, *“Hold fast what you have so that no one may seize your crown.”* This command further emphasizes the need for alertness and diligence, and it holds special significance for the church in Philadelphia because as a church, they didn’t have a lot. They weren’t large and influential and powerful. We see this back in verse 8 where Jesus says, *“I know you have but little power.”* And the human tendency is to not give a lot of thought to or be concerned about the last little bit of anything. The last few bites of a meal or the last swallow in your cup usually gets tossed out. We have a tendency to attach importance and significance to large things. But in God’s way of

thinking, the little things are important. *“He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful in much.”* We sing the song, “little is much, when God is in it.” That is the attitude Jesus is advocating when he tells them to hold on to that little bit you have and don’t let anyone take it away from you.

Now, when we get to verse 12, Jesus starts to deal with the promises to the one who overcomes. As with all the previous promises to the overcomer, this one also focuses in a general way on our eternal state in heaven. Jesus could have said, “If you will be faithful to me, you will spend eternity with me,” but instead, we see Jesus using these picturesque phrases that all had special meaning to the specific church being addressed. So He says, *“The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.”*

As I mentioned in the introduction to this church, in our culture, when we want to honor someone, we name the town park after him, or maybe some stretch of the interstate. Sometimes we name a building after him or put a brass plaque on the wall with his name on it. In their culture, you had a pillar erected in the temple, and your name was chiseled into it so that everybody coming in could see it. That is the imagery Jesus is invoking here when He says, *“I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God.”* But I believe there is more implied here when you think about the concept behind a pillar.

What are pillars used for? Nowadays, they are primarily decorative, but there was a time when pillars were primarily functional. They were the equivalent of the steel I-beams that support the weight of the entire structure. So what we see in this reference to being pillars has the idea of stability. Something else interesting about pillars is the concept of endurance. How many of you have ever see pictures of the ruins of these old Bible-era cities, and all you see is pillars? So when Jesus tells the overcomer that he will be a pillar in the temple of His God, He is invoking images of stability, permanence, and

endurance. All of which, if you will recall, were not characteristics of the city of Philadelphia with their regular earthquakes and tremors.

And then Jesus promises them safety in the phrase *“never shall he go out of it.”* The people of Philadelphia were used to running out of the city on a weekly basis because of the aftershocks. Most of the buildings still standing had all been compromised in the great earthquake. Not only was it dangerous to be there during a tremor, it was inconvenient and disruptive to have to drop everything and head for safety. So Jesus is telling the overcomer that his eternal state was going to be one of peace and safety and even serenity.

When we get to the last few phrases of verse 12, we see more descriptions of what awaits the overcomer when he gets to heaven. Continuing with the imagery of the pillar that will be erected, we see that unlike the pillars in Philadelphia, these pillars have three things inscribed on them. Jesus says *“(1) I will write on him the name of my God, (2) and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and (3) my own new name.”* This tells us that heaven isn’t really about us. The pillars in the temples of Philadelphia drew attention to the person whose name was chiseled into it. The pillars in heaven appropriately draw attention to God.

And then in verse 13, Jesus ends this message to the church the same way He ends each message – an exhortation to really take to heart what He is saying. *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* *“Hearing”* as used this way is much more involved than simply allowing some sound waves strike your ear drum and register something in your brain. It carries the idea of “perceiving,” or “understanding.” When the Bible talks about having “dull ears,” it doesn’t mean that the person hasn’t cleaned out his ears recently, or that physically he has lost his hearing. It means he isn’t taking the message seriously. Sometimes it is associated with active rebellion, as we see in Ez. 12:2 – *“Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see, but they see not,*

*they have ears to hear, and hear not. They are such a rebellious house.*” Jesus is admonishing the church in Philadelphia to genuinely take to heart what He is saying.

**Conclusion:** So that is the message to the church in Philadelphia. Let me give you three points of application we can take from it.

1) The first lesson we can take from the church in Philadelphia is that we are at war. It might not feel like it to you, but we are, and things are going to heat up for the true follower of Christ! Because of this, we need to remember who our Commander-in-Chief is, and that He holds the keys of David. In the same way that King David was the most militaristic and successful of the Kings, Jesus has the power and authority and might to successfully and decisively defeat our greatest enemy – Satan. So no matter how tough the battle is, remember that you are on the winning side.

2) The second lesson we can take from the church in Philadelphia is that God is more impressed with faithfulness than He is with facilities. The church in Philadelphia was a small church without a lot of influence. But God uses the church that humbly depends on His power and His strength to get the job done. It is very interesting to note as you go through the Bible that God often uses the small, or the weak, or the powerless to accomplish great things for His glory. It doesn't matter if it is Gideon who had to whittle his army down to just a few men, or small David to take down Goliath, or Elijah to take down 300 prophets of Baal – the NT principle applies:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; <sup>27</sup> but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, <sup>28</sup> and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> that no man should boast before God.

3) The third lesson we can learn from the church in Philadelphia is that if you are growing weary in the battle, remember that the day of your vindication will come. You just have to patiently wait for it. You may be the only one in your family who claims the name of Jesus, you may be the only one in your workplace that does the same, and that can be wearing. Jesus promised a day of vindication to the church in Philadelphia when those who had cast them out of the Synagogue would come and bow down in front of them and acknowledge that God did indeed love the people in the church in Philadelphia.

So what we have in this message to the church in Philadelphia is a message of hope and optimism. Jesus doesn't have a single word of condemnation for them, which is rare. Only the church in Smyrna enjoys this same status. And this stands in great contrast to the message to the church in Laodicea, as we are going to see in two weeks. So let's take to take to heart the message to the church in Philadelphia.

*Prayer:* Father, what a model this church in Philadelphia is for us to aspire to. Help us to remember that as long as we are here on the earth, we are the church militant – we are not the church triumphant yet – and as such, there are boundaries that need to be enlarged and frontiers that need to be conquered. Help us to always keep in mind exactly who our Commander-in-Chief is, and may this give us courage and optimism. Help us to be faithful until that day you return or call us home to be with you, help us to remember that our reward, our vindication, is yet to come, and that when it does, it will all be about You. Thank you for choosing us to carry out Your great work here on the earth. Amen.