

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 11 The Church at Philadelphia

Revelation 3: 7-13

Date: Sunday, December 13, 2009

⁷And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. ⁸"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹Behold, 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. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and 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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Philadelphia

This city, the name of which means “brotherly love”, is now the site of modern day Aleshir, and was located in Lydia 25 miles SE of Sardis in the valley of the Cogamis River.

At some point after 189 BC, it was founded by a Pergamian king – either Attalus II or Eumenes II. It is situated in an excellent geographical area, giving it a good path to ascend the Hermus Valley and reach the plateau 1,500 ft. above the valley floor. It was a busy commercial path from Smyrna & Lydia to the east; even better than the trade route through Ephesus. It was also on an imperial postal road from Rome to that region. In Byzantine times it became the greatest trade route of the whole country¹. Although it had an excellent militarily defensible location, it had been established to be a hub for Greco-Asiatic education and to foster unity & loyalty. It eventually became a Greek dominated city with Greek as the only language by about AD 19.

Geologically, the city sat on a dangerous spot, as it was on the fringe of an area of active volcanoes. The ash from these volcanoes made for fertile soil, but the volcanic activity was intense at times. In AD 17, an earthquake destroyed 12 cities in the Lydian Valley, including Sardis & Philadelphia. Philadelphia was almost leveled and the aftershocks continued for years, creating fear in the people there which forced them to live for many years outside of their city in huts. Small quakes and aftershocks were common, and the large earthquake which decimated Laodicea in AD 60 would certainly also have had an adverse effect on Philadelphia.

Tiberius, Rome's emperor, provided substantial assistance to rebuild the city and in return, the city erected a monument in Rome to show their gratitude. Many other cities did the same. They also started a cult – to Germanus (Tiberius's son & heir) – who had been in the area spearheading the relief efforts. For a period of about 25 years, Philadelphia voluntarily changed the city's name to Neocaesarea. The economy & prosperity of the city was severely restricted as a result of the earthquakes.

During Vespasian's reign (AD 70-79), the city became known as Flavia, and was known by 2 names for the better part of 2 centuries.

As a result of the earthquakes & volcanic activity, the main commerce of the city by about the mid AD 90's had become farming & especially vineyards. But in AD 92, Domitian ordered that ½ the vineyards in the province be cut down and corn be planted – due to famine conditions. By then, Philadelphia had become a major wine producer so this new law was not received happily.

Not a lot is known about the religious practices of this city although they would have been mostly Greek-influenced. There is as yet no archaeological evidence of a Jewish synagogue, but one must have been there according to Rev. 3:9.

I. The Speaker

v. 7

⁷"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. This is the only title of Christ to a church that does not refer back to Rev. 1. The Holy One is a title used in Rev. 4:8; 6:10 of the Father, but usually in the NT it refers to the Messiahⁱⁱ, and also in the OTⁱⁱⁱ. Since Christ is characterized as Holy (set apart), His words are also seen as being Holy.

He is also the "True One", emphasizing His genuineness and reality. When we come to Christ, He is no shadowy or surreal image but He is the real deal – the Truth incarnate. Coupling these 2 titles together, we are presented with a Saviour who can be relied upon & trusted. He cannot lie & His promises will surely come to pass. This church was undergoing severe persecution and their only hope was found in a Messiah whose promises would be fulfilled.

He has "the Key of David". This is significant, Jewish flavoured truth and presents real eschatological information to this church (and ours) which they needed to hear. They were apparently under attack by those who claimed to be Jews and were arguing that they, not Christians were going to be allowed into the Messianic Kingdom. This proclamation by Christ instead promises the hearers that it is Christ who holds the key – meaning the authority - to allow or deny entrance into His Kingdom, not the Jews. Notice how the kingdom is tied to David. This is extremely important and consistent because Jesus, as a descendant of David is rightful heir to the throne of David – cf. Rev. 5:5; 22:16; II Sam. 7:8-16; Ps. 89:3, 27-37. ②

In Isaiah 22:20-22, Eliahim was given the key to the Royal treasury, but in the end, Christ holds this key, along with the keys of death & Hades – He has total authority – cf. Matt. 28: 18. He alone opens the door (He is the Door – JN 10:7) to His children and closes it to whom He wills in absolute sovereignty. David died and Solomon took the throne, and after a number of years, David's descendants no longer had the throne – for centuries. Yet, in Luke 1:32-33, Gabriel declared of Jesus Christ – "the Lord God shall give Him the throne of His father, David." Although the throne of David had been inactive, it had not been permanently dissolved, but is reserved for Christ to reign from it in Jerusalem in the Millennial Kingdom on earth.

II. The Commendation

vv. 8-11

This church's works are not defined right away. Only after Jesus interjects words of encouragement to these people who were being battered from the outside, does he mention them. It is clear that He knew what their works were, and they will be noted,

but first, He proclaims that He has set before them “an open door”. Some take this to mean Him as that door (cf. JN 10), but in this context, that is unlikely. More to the point, this door should be seen in an evangelistic - opportunistic sense, as in I Cor. 16:9; II Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3; & Acts 14:27. This better fits the context & the geography of Philadelphia. Due to its’ location, it had been set up as an educational hub for the region. Christ is not presenting them with a challenge then, but is offering a promise of entrance into His Kingdom. Hence the mention of the key. The key opens the door of entrance and it is being offered to them.

Their works were faithful works. Nothing bad is said about this church (see also Smyrna) so the open door offers an opportunity for escape from their persecutors – a promise to be fully realized at Jesus 2nd Coming. No one is able to shut this door either – cf. Rom. 8:29-39. The works they were being commended for were 3-fold:

- You have but a little power
- You have kept My word
- You have not denied My name

“Little power” refers to the church’s limited influence as a result of its’ small size. Even as small as it apparently was, the people had been faithful to keep Christ’s word and had not denied His name. This church had recognized the true source of power – God’s Gospel. It appears that this references some specific event where some had been pressured to do just that – deny Christ – and had stood firm. They had passed through some terrible trial and had been victorious.

The Holy One, the True One, the sovereign key holder, the controller of the door – had seen them, observed their works and approved them as faithful. Though they were small in number and thus in influence, within their sphere of influence they had made a powerful impact. God does not need size or superior numbers to accomplish great things – cf. Gideon – Judges 7:1-25 & II Cor. 12:9 (Paul). We have to realize that the volume of work is not what pleases God – but rather faithfulness in whatever role He gives you, even if it’s a minor role. ③

We know that people aren’t perfect, and that people make up the church, so no church is perfect either – even this one. But apparently, there were no glaring sins or improper practices going on at Philadelphia because none are mentioned.

They were also obedient, because they had kept His word. Note JN 14:23-24; 15: 13. As a result of their power in the gospel and their obedience to Christ, they were faithfully loyal and did not deny His name. This implies that there was pressure for them to deny His name, but they had stood firm. In v. 10, He says they had kept His word “about patient endurance” – meaning they had persevered, and again the implication is of some sort of pressure, persecution or spiritual / physical testing.

In v. 9, we see from where all or most of this pressure has arisen – a “synagogue of Satan” – IOW, a Jewish synagogue who thought they were serving God by persecuting Christians. In reality, they were followers of Satan – cf. the Pharisees in JN 8:38-44.

Look at what Jesus says will happen, though – “behold, I will make them lie down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you.” They will be humbled & defeated and in the context of the church, especially a faithful church like this one,

these Jews who oppose are going to get saved. We know it means that by the last part of v. 9, “they will know that I have loved you.” I am reminded here of I JN 4:19; 4:7.

The Promise to be Kept From the Hour of Temptation v. 10

In v. 10, Jesus makes a very interesting promise to the church @ Philadelphia. This church has been found genuine, obedient, faithful and had endured times of testing, and stood firm. As a result, Jesus would spare them from a coming time of testing. In order for this promise to be of relevance to this particular church, there had to have been a localized event coming which they would avoid, which has now been lost to history; but this promise may have implications of a much broader nature when we realize that these 7 churches are representatives of all churches. I believe this promise has far reaching implications for all faithful churches & is referring to being kept out of the final 7 year tribulation. One reason I say this is the wording of the verse – “the hour of testing that is coming on the whole world.” That does not describe a local event, and “to try those who dwell on the earth”. This is a common phrase used throughout Revelation to depict the wicked on earth, the unbelievers^{iv}.

This time of testing which is coming (the promise is not that it won't be sent, but that they will escape it) will have a 2-fold purpose: 1.) to judge the wicked world & punish the sinners who refuse to repent; and 2.) to bring Israel to repentance in order to usher them into the Millennial Kingdom at the end of the Tribulation.

Some who undergo this testing will be saved and will then be martyred – cf. Rev. 7:9-14; 13:10; 14:4; 14:12; 17:14. So some will pass the test and be saved, and even if they die at the hands of the wicked, they will live eternally. However, most will not pass the test and will die horrible deaths and will spend eternity in Hell – Rev. 6:15; 9:20; 13:7; 16:11, 19; 19:19-21. ④

It is this time of testing that Jesus is referring to here in the longer view of the promise. Whatever this future time of testing Jesus refers to here is, He will keep them “from it”, ie.) out of it, per the Greek word “*ek*” which only means “out”. Some try to say He means “I will protect you in it” or “through it”, but that would necessitate the use of the Greek word “*en*” which means “in” or “*dia*” which means “through”.

Would the promise mean to preserve them in it or through it when so many will be killed in it? It is not a meaningful promise that one will be kept through it or in it if it means they will die, alongside friends or loved ones. Others will hide where they can or survive somehow against all odds during the cataclysmic judgments to come.

He does not mean that He will keep them saved – that promise is already attached to their salvation, and it can't mean that He'll keep them from God's wrath, because that too is also promised in Rom. 8:1 & I Thess. 1:10; 5:9 for example. All believers have been saved from God's wrath – it is what we are saved from chiefly. Compare Rev. 2:19 where the sinful church does go into His wrath. Thus, this promise to Philadelphia has to do with avoiding the fate of the unfaithful, such as those at Thyatira.

Notice some other uses of “*ek*” or “out of”: JN 12:27 – “kept from this hour” – Jesus wanted to be spared (humanly speaking) from experiencing it, not enduring it; and JN 17:15 – “keep them from the power of the evil one” – outside of Satan's influences, not thrusting them directly in his path. Jesus' promise to keep this faithful church (and

thus all faithful churches) from the hour of testing coming on the whole world then, means they will be kept out of it / in a completely safe place, not tested within it. This is the most natural way of interpreting what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is Coming Soon

v. 11

From our perspective, “soon” seems to have been by-passed and we’ve been waiting as a church for 1,914 years for Him to return, but from God’s perspective, barely a day has passed. He is telling the church this to encourage them to continue to stand fast. He is coming again – Rev. 22:7,12,20 & v. 12 here says His reward is with Him, so this is not His 2nd coming as described in Rev. 19, but is His return to snatch His faithful church out of the way before His wrath falls on the world. This is the II Thessalonians 2:1 coming to gather together His children, His bride. It is not a threat, but a glorious, precious & magnificent promise.

He adds here that, in the meantime, while the church awaits His arrival, “hold fast what you have”, and by this He means “be faithful, truthful, holy...continue to do those very things He has just commended them for. Cf. II Pet. 1:1-11.

Now we know that God preserves His own. Once you are truly saved, you cannot lose your salvation. On that note, the Bible is very clear. It is after all, eternal life that Jesus gives us. Here are some clear verses on that: Rom. 8:28-39; JN 10:14-16; 27-30; Eph. 2:8-9; 1:13-14. It is clear that God preserves us, and it is also clear that we are commanded to make our calling and election sure; to work out our own salvation in fear & trembling. See also James 1:22-26; 2:18,20,26; Col. 1:22. We are not to work in order to be saved because that is fruitless & impossible; but our works after salvation (Eph. 2:10) are evidence of the veracity of that salvation and that is to what Jesus refers here.

The result of “holding fast what you have” is that “no one can seize your crown.” What is meant by “your crown”? See James 1:12. The crown in James 1:12 is eternal life. See also II Tim. 4:8; I Pet. 5:4 – righteousness, glory, eternity – all represented by these crowns. A lot of people mention these crowns throughout the NT & think we will receive a bunch of literal crowns when we are glorified. I believe there is one crown – eternal life – and that crown is all those things represented by those crowns^v.

What about those people we know who were ‘believers’ and have now abandoned the faith? They were never saved – cf. I JN 2:19 & Matt. 13:1-8.

III. The One Who Conquers

vv. 12-13

The one who holds fast to the end, who remains faithful, even in the face of great pressure, who proves their faith to be real – that one will realize the hope of their faith (I JN 5:1-5) and will be made a pillar in the temple of God. This is a hugely encouraging promise to those who overcome or conquer. The idea of being made a pillar is obviously symbolic, because Christians are not going to be turned into marble to hold up the roof of the temple in heaven. It has to mean stability, permanence, immovability, eternity. It represents a great honour to be so in heaven. Remember that this church in this city experienced a lot of earthquakes and volcanic activity in its’ history so be told you would be stable as a pillar in God’s temple would have glorious ramifications.

There will be names written on those who conquer as well. God’s name, God’s city’s name (the New Jerusalem) which comes down from heaven – Rev. 21:1-7 - and Jesus’

own new name – will all be written on the conquerors. This is referring to our citizenship in heaven – note Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12: 18-24 – our home, the city Abraham sought (Heb. 11:8-10); a place we will call our eternal home. This is the capital city of heaven. We will be owned by God (His name on us signifies ownership after all) and we will have Jesus’ name upon us.

His name means all that He is to us. It is His name that God has jealously guarded throughout history. We see verse after verse in the OT & NT where God’s name is equal with His glory^{vi} and the new name given to Jesus – the name above every name is LORD (Phil. 2:5-11) and this name is of extreme importance in God’s redemptive plan. His name is all that He is. So what does this new name signify? That he is not ashamed to call us His brethren.

When we come to be with Him, according to I JN 3:2-3, we shall see Him as He is, but now, we only faintly see Him, as Paul says, as through a glass darkly (I Cor. 13:12; II Cor. 3:18). But when we get to heaven, a whole new vista of sinless, perfect sight will overtake us and we will know Him as he really is and we will be overjoyed to have His name written on us! What an immense promise of encouragement is given to this faithful church.

Jesus signs off as He has in each of the preceding 5 letters, with what is, by now the very well known formula, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Are we listening to what He is saying?

Next lesson – Rev. 3: 14-22 The Church at Laodicea

ⁱ Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; pg. 270.

ⁱⁱ MK. 1:23-24; LK 1:35; 4:34; JN 6:69; Acts 3:14; 4:27,30; I JN 2:20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 16:10; Hab. 3:3; Isa. 40:25

^{iv} cf Rev. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 14:6; 17:2,8.

^v I Thess. 2:19 – rejoicing; Phil. 4:1 – souls won by evangelism; II Tim. 4:8 – righteousness; James 1:12 – crown of life; I Pet. 5:4 – glory; Rev. 2:10 – life; 3:11 – crown; 4:4 – gold crown; 4:11 – cast before the throne to signify that all were won by Christ!

^{vi} Cf. Ps. 23:3; Isa. 43:7; 48:11; 66:5; Ezek. 20:9,22,44...etc.