

Series Revelation

This Message #8 Revelation 3:7-13

Jesus is very concerned about the spiritual status of all church fellowships. He purchased the Church with His blood shed on Calvary. He is the Head of the Church, so He, of course, wants all people who place faith in Him to be loyal to Him and to act and think in ways which are pleasing to Him and His heavenly Father.

The Apostle Peter summarized the conduct that Jesus expects of His followers this way: “Be self-controlled, set your hope fully on the grace to be given to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, but just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (*I Peter 1:13-15*). Peter also gave additional instructions with these words: “I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (*I Peter 2:11-12*).

As we previously learned, Jesus revealed Himself to the Apostle John in a vision, and instructed John to write what he saw and heard on a scroll to be distributed to seven specific fellowships in Asia Minor. In the first part of the vision, Jesus gave His assessment of the spiritual condition of these seven fellowships⁵. Jesus had significant criticisms about the conduct and attitudes of most of these fellowships. They had “forsaken their first love,” and “had people who held to false teaching” and were patterning their lives after the ways of the world.

In four of the fellowships, the general spiritual conditions had deteriorated from some higher level. To these four fellowships, Jesus issued stern warnings, such as “Remember therefore the height from which you have fallen,” and “Repent, or else I will come” in judgment against you. The purpose of these warnings was to make the fellowships aware of their spiritual problems. Believers were given the opportunity to purify themselves and to change the direction of their behaviors. Jesus said that failure of believers to do so would have serious consequences.

Jesus had no criticism of one of the church fellowships we thought about previously. The believers in the city of Smyrna were persecuted and impoverished, and their faith was tested by suffering and imprisonment, yet they were faithful and pleasing to God. Today we are going to think about another fellowship which was without fault or rebuke. This fellowship was in the city of Philadelphia. Yes, there was a city by that name in Asia Minor more than 2000 years ago!

Read Revelation 3:7-13.

The name "Philadelphia" means "brotherly love." The city acquired that name because its king showed unusual loyalty and respect to an older brother. The city was located on an important trade route and became a commercial hub. It was located in a very fertile area which was ideal for growing grapes. Appropriately enough, its patron god was Dionysus, who was also known as Bacchus, the god of wine. Dionysus symbolized everything associated with fleshly pleasure.

The unfortunate problem for the city was its location in an earthquake zone. The same earthquake which devastated the city of Sardis in A. D. 17 also leveled Philadelphia. Strong aftershocks lasted so long and occurred so often that much of the populace abandoned the city and moved to open country. The buildings of the city could not be made secure, and the city had a run down appearance for several decades.

The characteristics by which Jesus introduced Himself were uniquely fitted to the needs and problems of the believers in Philadelphia. He presented Himself as "the Holy One, the True One." This was in contrast to the Jews. The harassment of believers did not come primarily from the pagan Gentiles but, rather, from the large number of Jews who lived in the city. There are several statements about these people in verse 9. They are referred to as "of the synagogue of Satan." The Jews thought of themselves as the people of God, but to Jesus they were not. To Jesus, the Jews were neither "holy" nor "true."

The Apostle Paul defined the "true" Jew: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (*Romans 2:28-29*).

The title, "The Holy One," appears in the New Testament in several verses and always links Jesus to the Father, both in His sinless nature and His origin as God in flesh. The title is used of both Jesus and the Father to describe their separation from evil and the world. The title, "The True One," connotes the authenticity and genuineness of Jesus, particularly in regard to His role as Messiah. The Jews did not accept the claims of Jesus as Messiah, but their claims and actions against Jesus did not invalidate Who He was/is. In essence Jesus wanted the believers in Philadelphia to know that they did not have to pay attention to the claims of the Jews. He said that in reality they were the agents of Satan.

Jesus also announced that He held "the key of David." This phrase goes back to an Old Testament passage. The LORD Almighty announced through the prophet Isaiah that a certain unsuitable man would be replaced by His servant Eliakim. The LORD stated that He would "place on Eliakim's shoulder the key to the house of David," and "what he would open no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (*Isaiah 22:20-22*).

Jesus applied these words to Himself. As the Messiah, He had the authority to control the entrance to God's kingdom, what is mentioned in verse 12 as the "city of my God, the new Jerusalem." Jesus' statement about His authority would have reassured the believers of Philadelphia, especially the converts from Judaism. They had undoubtedly been excommunicated from the synagogue and were being shunned by others of their own race. The Jews were doing this because they assumed that the way to God was through them. Jesus assured His followers that He and He alone had the authority to open the kingdom to a person, and when He did this, as he had done to the believers, no one would be able to stand in the way of that outcome. When He closes the door, as He did to the unbelieving Jews, neither would anyone be able to alter that outcome.

This theme continues in verse 8. "See," Jesus said, "I have placed before you an open door that no one who opposes you can shut." This is the first of several promises that Jesus gave to His followers in this letter. This promise is based on the behavior of the believers. Jesus knew about their deeds, and, because He was favorably impressed with their activities, He gave them the opportunity to continue to build the kingdom. Jesus was passing on His authority, as represented by "the key of David," to the members of the church fellowship.

There are several passages which inform us of the delegated authority of believers. For example, when Jesus asked His disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Peter responded, “You are the Christ/Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In His response to Peter, Jesus said, “You are Peter, and on this rock (that is, on the truth of Peter’s testimony) I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. What ever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (*Matthew 16:13-19*). Note what Jesus said: “I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

On another occasion, Jesus repeated the statement, “I tell you the truth, Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” and He followed that statement with, “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (*Matthew 18:18-19*).

After His resurrection, Jesus said to His disciples, “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (*John 20:23*).

Just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus gave two commands to His followers. The first was, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always” (*Matthew 28:18-20*). The second command was, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth” (*Acts 1:8*). In other words, Jesus possessed all authority, and because Jesus would be with those who placed their faith in Him, His followers had, at their disposal, His authority.

Jesus was opening the door of ministry to the believers in Philadelphia and no opposing forces were going to be able to close it. This promise was fulfilled in an interesting way: there are records that the Church of Philadelphia had influence in the region and sent out missionaries for 1200 years. This is remarkable because their work continued for more than 500 years after the forces of Islam gained control of the country of Turkey.

The work of the believers in Philadelphia is a testimony to what can be accomplished by a small group with little strength. The key is keeping the word of Jesus and not denying His name. That means obedience and fearless faithfulness. There is a song which states, "Little is much when God is in it," and that was the experience of the church in Philadelphia.

The second promise of Jesus was to "keep the believers from the hour of trial that was going to come upon the whole earth to test (or afflict) those who live on the earth." Notice that Jesus gave this promise because the believers had "endured patiently." Because the believers had kept His command, Jesus was going to "keep them" (a play on words). There was a connection between what the believers did and what Jesus was going to do for them.

There is a consensus among commentators that "the hour of trial" refers to the final end-time tribulation which will immediately precede the return of Jesus to earth. We have thought about this time in previous messages. This "hour" will "come upon the whole earth" and affect every "earth-dweller." It will be universal in its scope. It is the time in which the wrath of God will be poured out on the enemies of God. Chapters 6 through 19 in this book is an extended description of this "hour of tribulation."

There is consensus about what the "hour of trial" is, but there is a great debate among commentators as to the correct interpretation of the words "keep you from." Does this phrase mean "protection from" or "removal from?" The theological orientation of the commentator determines his/her interpretation. Many scholars connect the interpretation with the prayer of Jesus in John's Gospel, when Jesus prayed, concerning believers, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (*John 17:15*). Other scholars insist that this prayer of Jesus does not refer to the final future battle. It is their opinion that God will remove His people from earth before He pours out His wrath on non-believers.

We won't attempt to solve this difference in opinion today. What we want to emphasize is that there will be a distinction between what will happen to non-believers and the followers of Jesus. He will reward His followers by "keeping them from" the punishments which will afflict evil doers.

However, I want to clarify one important point concerning the physical persecutions to which believers will be subjected at the end of the age. There is a clear-cut difference between the wrath of God which will be poured out on non-believers and the wrath of Satan which will be poured out by the hands of persecutors on the followers of Jesus. Jesus predicted that His followers would suffer persecution. Let me read a passage which summarizes His teaching, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (*John 15:18-20*).

Throughout the New Testament, and, indeed, throughout church history, persecution, suffering, and martyrdom have been the experience of believers. The Good News about Jesus has been shared all over the earth because faithful believers have dedicated their lives to this task, and also given their lives. The New Testament exhorts believers to be faithful, until death if necessary.

Many believers need to revise their thinking about suffering and death. The willingness to suffer and die for the sake of Jesus is proof of love and loyalty to Him. The believer who is faithful until death is actually victorious over evil and Satan. When Jesus died on the cross, Satan considered it to be his great victory, but within three days it was proven to be his great defeat. In the same way, Satan may delight in the death of God’s people, but, in actuality, Satan defeats himself whenever he takes the life of one of Jesus’ followers.

In verse 11, Jesus encourages the believers to “hold on to what you have.” What they had was their desire to keep the commands of Jesus and the open door of ministry opportunities which had been provided to them by Jesus. If they were to lose their desire and fail to persevere through their difficulties, and if they were to not take advantage of the opportunities provided to them by Jesus, then they would lose their reward. The imagery here is the laurel wreath which was given to the victorious athlete. The Bible speaks of such rewards for faithful service.

In verse 12 several additional promises are mentioned for overcomers. Jesus promised to make the overcomer “a pillar in the temple of my God.” A pillar is the very important part of the structure of a building; pillars support the roof. They are a stable and durable part of a building. Spiritually speaking, those who persevere in their efforts to obey the commands of Jesus are like permanent fixtures in the temple of God. Jesus chose this description deliberately because the city of Philadelphia was subject to earthquakes. Genuine overcomers will not be like the residents of the city who had to run to open areas whenever the circumstances were frightening and uncertain. Pillars in the God’s temple will never be shaken or dislodged.

Another promise was that Jesus would “write on him (the overcomer) the name of my God.” The name was a mark of possession and ownership. Next was the promise that the name of the city of His God, the new Jerusalem, would be written on the overcomer. This speaks of citizenship. Jesus stated that the new Jerusalem “is coming down out of heaven.” This city is described at the end of the book of Revelation. It will be a permanent city, enduring forever. Nothing that is associated with evil will be permitted in the city — no sorrow, pain, or death. Overcomers are guaranteed the right to dwell in the new Jerusalem.

The permanent aspect of the city of God would have significance to the members of the church in Philadelphia because the name of their city was changed on two occasions in honor of Roman emperors. Earthly allegiances can be whimsical and changeable due to circumstances, but what is established by God is guaranteed to be permanent and secure.

Finally, there is the promise that the name of Jesus will be written on the one who overcomes. This is possibly a reference to the identification that believers have while they are here on earth. They represent Jesus in this dark evil world. As believers, we need to live in such a way that “the only excuse for who we are and what we do is the fact that Jesus lives within us and expresses Himself through us.” That happens when we carefully obey the commands of Jesus. If we bear the name of Jesus, then we must be Christ-like in our actions. When non-believers see us, they need to see Jesus in us. There should be no doubts about our allegiance and identification.

Summary of Main Points in This Passage

What Jesus knew about the believers in Philadelphia:

- *Their deeds
- *Their strength
- *Their obedience
- *Their patient endurance

What Jesus promised to the believers in Philadelphia

- *To provide an open door for ministry which no one would be able to shut.
- *To “make the hostile Jews come and fall down at the feet of the church members and acknowledge that His love was for the church members.”
- *To keep them from the “hour of trial that was going to come.”
- *To make them “a pillar in the temple of God.”
- *To write on them the name of God
- *To write on them the name of the city of God
- *To write on them His own name.

⁵ I have been looking for an opportunity to explain the format of these letters, and now is the time. These are “form” letters, and all of them follow the same basic outline. First, Jesus calls the attention of His readers to one of His distinctive attributes. In the first three letters He referred to Himself as the One “who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands,” and, “as the First and the Last, who died and came to life again,” and as the One “who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” In every case the attribute begins with the phrase “These are the words of him...”

Next, Jesus mentions some special knowledge He has. This usually includes both a commendation for behaviors done well by the congregation as well as criticisms of the weaknesses and inadequacies of the believers. Jesus knew intimately the qualities of each fellowship.

Thirdly, Jesus gave His assessment of the spiritual condition of the fellowship, with statements such as, “You have forsaken your first love” (2:4) or “You have people who hold to false teaching.” The statements indicated that the general spiritual conditions of the fellowships were deteriorating from some higher level, and that the congregation needed to recover an earlier relationship with Christ.

The assessment leads into the fourth step in the format: Jesus gives a warning or command, such as “Remember therefore the height from which you have fallen;” and “Repent, or else I will come” in judgment against you. The purpose of the warnings were to make the fellowships aware of their spiritual problems. Believers were given the opportunity to change the direction of their behaviors and to purify themselves. Failure of believers to do so would have serious consequences.

Toward the end of each letter there is a promise: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life,” and “I will give some of the hidden manna, and a new name.” Jesus is the Source and Granter of every gift. The promises are given in metaphorical and symbolic words, and are echoes of Genesis chapters 2 and 3, describing what was lost originally by Adam and Eve but later regained by Jesus. The promises are also linked to information in the last two chapters of this book, which describe the reinstated privileges which were originally enjoyed by Adam and Eve.

Finally, there is an invitation, a call for obedience: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The invitation is always addressed to the “churches” (plural). Each fellowship was to benefit from the circumstances of all the other fellowships. However, at the same time the invitations were personalized to individuals: “He who has an ear,” meaning “each person who is willing to listen.” Congregations are only as spiritually healthy as the collective obedience of its members, and Jesus wanted each believer to submit to His instructions.