



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### To the Church in Philadelphia

#### Revelation 3:7-13

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February 6, 2022

Forty-five kilometres further inland from Sardis lay the city of Philadelphia. It was not nearly as ancient as the other cities addressed by Jesus in Revelation. At the time John's courier arrived it was just a little more than two-hundred years old. The city had been established by Eumenes II, King of Pergamon, and was named for his beloved brother, Attalus II Philadelphus, with whom he shared his throne. Eumenes built the city strategically on the main route between Greece and the barbarian east. It was to be a missionary city, carrying Greek culture and civilisation to the country of Phrygia. Sardis had been a similar outpost centuries before and had been so successful in Lydia that the people there had all but forgotten their native language. But if Philadelphia was a door through which Greek culture would be spread, it failed. The obstinate Phrygians held tightly to the culture and to their language. That door was shut.

Keep that in mind as we look at Jesus' message to the Christians in this city, beginning at Revelation 3:7:

**“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.**

**“ ‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.**

Through Philadelphia the Greeks had tried to spread their gospel to the barbarians, but those barbarians had shut the door. The gospel of the

Greeks had failed. Not so the gospel of Jesus. Jesus places before these faithful brothers and sisters a door and a promise.

Jesus comes to them as the one who is holy and true, who has the key of David. He is the one who can promise that when he opens a door, no one can shut it. Throughout these letters to the churches of Asia, Jesus uses images that draw on both the identities and histories of these cities and, at the same time, on the story of Israel. That's true here. The people of Philadelphia, knowing their own history, would think of Eumenes' plan for their city—a doorway to the east, a mission of Greece to the barbarians. And now this little church in the middle of a wide pagan world, given the task of proclaiming the gospel. It might seem impossible, but Jesus assures them that this time he's opened the door. This is his mission to which he's called his church, the mission for which he's empowered that church with his own Spirit. This door won't be shut by the opposition. But Jesus also quotes from Isaiah's prophecy when he says this.

In Isaiah's day a man named Shebna served as royal steward to King Hezekiah. Scripture doesn't spell out precisely what his failure was, but what we do know is that he was unfaithful in carrying out his duties—some kind of shady double-dealing, maybe he was a traitor. But he was a rich man and very sure of himself. He built a grand mausoleum in Jerusalem, to preserve his name forever. And through Isaiah the Lord spoke to him:

**Behold, the LORD will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you and whirl you around and around, and throw you like a ball into a wide land. There you shall die, and there shall be your glorious chariots, you shall be your glorious chariots, you shall be your glorious chariots, you shall be your glorious chariots. I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your station. (Isaiah 22:17-19)**

Shebna's days were done. He would die in a foreign land, leaving his grand tomb for others. The door was closed for Shebna. The Lord would put a faithful servant in his place. The Lord goes on:

**In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house. (Isaiah 22:20-23)**

Notice the Lord's promise to faithful Eliakim. He will give him the key of David. What he shuts will remain shut. What he opens will remain open. And, too, the Lord's promise is that he will be firmly established in this position, not of his own accord, but by the Lord.

So Eliakim becomes an Old Testament pointer to Jesus. He holds the keys of David. What he shuts remains shut. What he opens remains open. Why? For a lot of reasons, but here Jesus come to the Christians in Philadelphia as the one who is holy and true. In other words, he is the one who has been set apart—he is the Messiah, the King, the Lord—and he is the one who is true. The sense of “true” here is that he will fulfil his word, that he will do what he promises. I've said that Revelation is about tribulation, about perseverance, and about kingdom. Clearly the Philadelphian Christians already knew that Jesus is faithful to his promises, but in light of the difficult situation in which they lived, he comes to them anyway as the one who is ultimately faithful. It's as much a promise to them as it is an exhortation and praise for their faith in him.

Jesus says to them in verse 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.**

Jesus knows their works. That was bad news for the church in Sardis. They were proud of themselves. They were doing all the right things. Their church was alive—or at least it was to all outward appearances. But Jesus said to them, “I know your works,” which meant, “I see what you do, but I know your hearts and your hearts aren’t in the right place. You look alive, but the reality is that you’re dead.” Again, we don’t know the specifics. Jesus’ doesn’t condemn them for idolatry or sexual immorality as he does some of the other churches. They weren’t doing anything overtly wrong, but at the same, because their motives were wrong, everything they did was wrong. Brothers and Sisters, I said last week that Jesus has to be our motive for everything. His cross stands behind driving us forward full of love and thankfulness for his mercy and grace. And his kingdom stands before us, drawing us forward in hope and in joy. Jesus is our centre. Jesus is our reason. Jesus is our motive. For everything. That wasn’t the case in Sardis, but it was in Philadelphia.

Jesus says four things about the church in Philadelphia. First, again, he knows their works. They’ve done well. They’ve been faithful. Second, he acknowledges that what they have done, they’ve done despite having little power. Third, they’ve kept the Lord’s word. And finally, they have not denied Jesus’ name. They’ve faced opposition, persecution, and tribulation and despite having little power—consider that this church was probably no bigger than ours and likely smaller, despite being social outcasts for the sake of the gospel, despite perhaps many of their number being slaves—they’ve accomplished

something. We don’t know what, but Jesus uses the same language he does of Sardis. They were known for their works, even though those works were dead. It sounds as though the Philadelphians have accomplished something comparable, but they have done so in weakness—and they’ve managed this through their faithfulness of Jesus. Think of Paul’s words to the Corinthians:

**For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Or the Lord’s word to Zerubbabel through the prophet Zechariah:

**Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.** (Zechariah 4:6)

Brothers and Sisters, the work of the church is not about numbers, it’s not about money, it’s not about cultural or political clout. We don’t accomplish our gospel calling through pragmatic, worldly, or human means. The faithful church accomplishes its calling by God’s Spirit and by faithfulness to Jesus and Jesus alone. It’s very easy to forget. It’s easy to think we can’t accomplish anything without money or lots of people or cultural and political clout. And when we forget, these other things inevitable become our concerns and Jesus is no longer our centre, no longer our reason for being and our motivation for doing.

This is important for the church—any church—to remember in difficult times. Persecution puts pressure on the church and, as we’ve seen through these two chapters, it often leads to compromise. We take what looks like the easy way out rather than trusting Jesus and staying faithful to him. The church patting itself on the back for a long list of works isn’t really alive if those works aren’t centred in Jesus

and faithfulness to him. Brothers and Sisters, don’t trust in appearances. Don’t take the easy way. The wide and easy way leads to destruction. If the Scriptures teach us anything, it’s that God is faithful to his promises—that Jesus is the one who is true, who does what he says and will accomplish God’s purposes for both his church and for the entirety of his creation. We are fools to disregard his promises.

The main source of persecution in Philadelphia seems to have been the Jews. Both Sardis and Philadelphia had large Jewish communities. It wasn’t just an issue of there being a big synagogue across the street from the church and causing trouble. The Jews were part of a large community with ties into social and trade circles. It’s more than likely that, as in other cities, they shut out Christians from the life of the city and were more than happy to rat them to the Roman authorities when the opportunity arose. Jesus addresses them in verse 9:

**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.**

Jesus’ words here about the Jews are harsher and take things further than in his letter to the church in Smyrna. Who was and was not a true Jew was topic of great controversy in the First Century. The Pharisees condemned everyone who didn’t keep the law as they did. The Essenes—the community that preserved the Dead Sea scrolls—took an even more extreme view of things. They were the only true Jews and they left and built their own little community in the desert to preserve themselves from defilement. Jesus makes it clear here that those who are truly of Israel are those who have aligned themselves and who have trusted in Jesus the Messiah. Anyone who claims to

follow the Jewish scriptures, but denies that Jesus is the Messiah—well—that person has completely missed the point of the Jewish scriptures. Anyone who claims to be a Jew, but denies that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus says quite bluntly is a liar. A synagogue that denies Jesus and persecutes his people isn't a synagogue at all. It's a synagogue of Satan.

And where the Christians in Smyrna were facing similar persecution at the hands of the Jews and Jesus urges them to stand firm as it intensifies for a short while, he assures the Christians in Philadelphia that in short order he will be compelling those same people to bow at their feet as they acknowledge that Jesus loves his church—that Jesus will bring these Jews to acknowledge that it is Jesus' people who are the true heirs of the covenant and of Israel's promises. The very Jews who had persecuted them will, in the near future, be bowing before them—not in the sense of worship, but in awe of what God has done for them and maybe even with a measure of remorse.

Those words of Jesus, "I have loved you," are loaded with meaning. They speak of God's election of his covenant people quoting the Lord's words through Malachi: "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau." In other words, the Lord had chosen Jacob and his family to be his people, not Esau and the Edomites. This was core to Jewish identity, but that promise is now inherited by the church, by those who are in Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus' words here are also an ironic reference to the Lord's promise through Isaiah, where God makes a promise to his covenant people who were being persecuted by pagan nations.

**The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you**

**shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.**

Jesus classes apostate Israel with the pagans who once persecuted her. She has been pruned from covenant tree while those who trust in Jesus the Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile, have been grafted in. But I can't help but wonder if what we see here in these Jews bowing before the Christians of Philadelphia is another ironic play, this time on Zechariah 8:23.

**In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'**

And here we see the apostate Jews, now more like the nations in their rejection of the Messiah, coming to the Church as they see that in Jesus, the Lord is with them.

Jesus promises further:

**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. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.**

Because these brothers and sisters have been faithful to Jesus' call to perseverance, he promises to keep them from the "hour of trial that is coming on the whole world". Jesus isn't saying that he's going to rapture these folks out of the world before things get bad—which is what a lot of popular modern theology teaches. No, he's looking forward to a time of trial soon to come—soon from their perspective. Apostate Israel is soon to be judged, destroyed, and exiled. Rome will be thrown into tumult and an evil emperor who thinks of himself as a god will lash out at the Church with the help of the Jews. The devil,

through his Jewish and Roman minions, will do his worst to destroy Jesus' people—and they will be tempted to give up, to compromise, to deny their Lord. And so Jesus gives them a promise that he, himself, will see them through this time. He will be with them. He will strengthen them. And they will persevere and come through this short hour of trial into a reign of a thousand years, wearing crowns, and sharing in the kingdom rule of Jesus. Jude gives a similar a promise:

**Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.**

Tribulation, perseverance, and kingdom. Brothers and Sisters, we cannot do it on our own. Jesus is the one who will keep us from stumbling, who will present us blameless to the Father, and in whose dominion we have been promised and given a share.

Jesus finishes with another promise to the one who conquers. Look at verses 12-13:

**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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'**

Jesus' promise here draws again on images familiar from both the history of Israel and the history of the city. The temple in Jerusalem was fronted by two pillars, one named "He shall establish" and the other "In him is strength". That temple stood condemned and in a few years it would be destroyed. By his death and

resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, Jesus has established a new temple—this one not built of stones, but of his people indwelt by God’s Spirit. And here, as they face persecution he promises to those who conquer that they will stand firm in this new temple like those pillars in Jerusalem. The names are key. They remind us that the church stands firm not on our own strength. Jesus is our strength and he shall establish us—he and he alone. Once again Jesus promises a name to his people who overcome, meaning that we have a share in him, in his life, and in his dominion.

I said this imagery draws on the history of Philadelphia as much as it does the history of Israel. Hearing these words the Christians there would have been thinking about the reality that their city was built in the middle of a volcanic plain. Earthquakes were common and a massive one had destroyed their city just fifty years earlier. The great temples of the city had fallen. And so Jesus promises them something better. This new temple of which they are a part will stand firm. When he says that he will make them pillars in the temple and inscribe his name on them, I think they’d have been thinking of a common practise in many Greek cities like theirs. Having done many years of faithful service to the gods, priests and sometimes civic leaders, would be honoured with a pillar in a temple, inscribed with their names. And as Jesus speaks of giving them the name of the new Jerusalem, come down from heaven, I suspect they may have been thinking about their own history. When the earthquake destroyed Philadelphia, the Emperor Tiberius, had waived their taxes and even contributed funds for the rebuilding of the city. To honour him the city renamed itself Neocaesarea. The name didn’t take and not long after, Neocaesarea was once again Philadelphia. A couple of years later I think these brothers and sisters would be remembering this promise as the

city fathers once again renamed the city, calling it “Flavia”, to honour the Emperor Vespasian (“Flavius” was his family name). This name wouldn’t take either. Fickle names to honour earthly kings and their false claims at divinity. In comparison Jesus’ promise stands out all the more, “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.”

Brothers and Sisters, tribulation, like an earthquake, exposes the shaky and worthless foundations of earthly kings, earthly gods, and every other earthly source of security. But it also exposes both the faithfulness of the people of God and reveals his faithfulness to us. The letter to Sardis we read last week reminded us that everything we do must be about Jesus, his cross behind us and his kingdom before us. But this letter to the Philadelphians assures us that if we do keep Jesus at the centre, we can be sure of his faithfulness to us—to his church. It is he who has called and chosen us, it is he who has given us our calling to go into the world to baptise and to make disciples, and it is he who has given us God’s own Spirit that we might be his temple that stands forever and his people who accomplish his purposes. He has opened the door that no one can shut. Stand firm in Jesus, Brothers and Sisters, remembering that in him the faithfulness of God is revealed. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, keep your household the Church continually in your true religion; that those who lean only on the hope of your heavenly grace may always be defended by your mighty power, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*