

## The Conquering Church: Philadelphia

7 *“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,*

*‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”:*8 *“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. 9 Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.10 Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.11 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. 12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no 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 out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.*

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

In October 1983, an American marine base in Beirut was bombed. One of the soldiers was critically wounded in the revamped hotel where he and the other marines had been staying. Several marines were killed, but he survived.

General Paul Kelly, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, came to visit him in hospital. He was completely covered in bandages and tubes, and he was unable to speak. But when General Kelly was in the room, he indicated that he wanted to write something. Very slowly, and painfully, he wrote the words to his general *Semper Fi*, a short form of *Semper Fidelis*, which is the Latin motto of the Marines, and it means “Always Faithful”.

Always faithful. If we were to take these seven churches as representative of churches, the picture is not great because 5 of the seven were in some respects, or even in all respects, unfaithful. Two of the churches, Smyrna, and Philadelphia could be characterised as faithful.

Maybe there are seasons in the life of a culture, or a civilisation when it is more conducive for a church to be faithful than at other times. I suspect however favourable, it is always hard. But which born-again believer, which truly saved person does not desire faithfulness? Which of us would not exchange all our earthly goods to hear Christ tell us as we enter eternity “Well done, thou good and faithful servant”?

We would do well then, to study this church at Philadelphia, for it is a model church.

Had you been a member of the Philadelphian church you would have lived in a city about 65 kilometres south of the last church we looked at, Sardis. And your city was surrounded by rich and fertile lands, with many vineyards. But unfortunately for you, you lived in a dangerous place, because there were many earthquakes in the region. Shocks were an everyday occurrence, and a few times the city had been completely destroyed.

It was also a missionary city. Not for Christianity, but for the Greek language and the Greek culture. This city sat on the borders of three areas. The city was deliberately built here at a strategic place, so that the Greek language and culture could spread to the neighbouring provinces of Lydia and Phrygia. They were successful - by A.D. 19, the Lydians had forgotten their language. So, if you'd lived in this city, you would have been used to the idea of being the hub for sending out emissaries, representatives to other places, to spread your beliefs and culture.

As usual, we'll see Christ's commendation, comforts, counsel, and challenge to this church.

## I. The Commendation

7 *"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,*

*"These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens":8 "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.*

Out of these seven churches, Jesus spoke only words of commendation to two of them: Smyrna and Philadelphia. To Sardis and Laodicea Jesus had no words of commendation, but to this church, Jesus had no words of condemnation. They were a faithful church, and Jesus speaks only words to commend them for their faithfulness and to comfort them for what lies ahead.

Look at why He commended them:

*...for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.*

Jesus says that they have a limitation, but that did not stop them from being and doing what pleased Him. They were little in strength, which I don't believe is a criticism, it is simply a statement of fact. In a large city, in a culture where they did not hold the keys of power, they were weak, by the world's standards. Just a small group of people, given the size of the whole population.

But in spite of their weakness, or smallness, they did two things: First, they kept Christ's Word. In verse 10 Jesus says they kept the command to persevere. This church knew and loved God's Word. There is nothing more foundational to being a faithful church than to cherish and love God's Word. Jesus said once to a group of people, "Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say?" A faithful church calls Jesus Lord, and then displays that by hearing and obeying His will. A faithful church wants to read the marching orders from its General, the constitution from its founder, the instructions from its Designer, the love letter from its Bridegroom. The reason for an intense hunger for God's Word is driven by the desire to know and love and then please God in heart and life.

Though a church be small in size, though a church be limited in financial resources or people resources, if that church is deadly serious about hearing and obeying, it will receive a commendation from Christ. If it is not slothful or apathetic or careless about God's Word, but longs to hear it, and makes sure it is hearing it whenever it is taught, reading it, meditating on it, studying it, memorising it and applying it, Christ will regard it as faithful. Quality over quantity: first the quality of the believers in the church, then the quantity of believers.

The second commendation is this: they did not deny Christ's name. They faced the same cultural pressures the other churches faced: pressures to sacrifice to idols, pressures to participate in idol feasts, pressure to deny the exclusivity of Christ out of loyalty to Rome, or out of economic pressure. But this church, unlike the compromising church at Pergamos, unlike the corrupt church at Thyatira, unlike the corpse-like church at Sardis, was a conquering church. They had remained faithful and had not denied Christ. They had not compromised.

I believe that much of this could be said of this church. From the first, we have desired to proclaim His Word, and nothing else. Those faithfully coming have displayed an appetite for God's Word and nothing else. And as God's Word has shaped us, we have lived lives more like Christ, lives that are counter-cultural. We have lived lives that refuse to accommodate the pluralism, the relativism, the moral indifference, the entertainment culture, the narcissism, the humanism, the individualism and the

consumerism. As you have done that, you have had to live differently financially. You have had to refuse certain jobs, and certain promotions. You have perhaps alienated some who might have been useful to your advancement. You have said no to relationships that would have denied your Lord. You have said no to some associations that would have compromised your testimony. You have had to speak out about the Gospel, and about holiness, and receive criticism and even hostility, but you've been faithful.

And when a church does this, Christ has three comforts.

## II. The Comforts

*See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it;*

Jesus promises this church ***guaranteed opportunities***. I have put before you an open door which no one can shut. Who is speaking here? The One who says in verse 7: I am the “*He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens*”

The key of David reminds us that this is royalty speaking. Messiah is the Lord and King over the kingdom promised to David. The Lord is probably quoting from Isaiah. Here the allusion seems to be to Isaiah 22:22 “the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” During that very difficult time in Israel's history, there was an unfaithful man over the treasury of David. He was removed and replaced by a faithful man named Eliakim. Eliakim had the key to all the treasures of the king, and when he opened the door it was opened, and when he closed the door it was closed.

Jesus says, “I have in my hand the kind of power that when I open it is open and no one can shut it, and when I close it, I close it, and no one can open it”. What sort of doors is He referring to? Most likely, opportunities of service. Opportunities for the spread of the Gospel. Often this kind of language is used to speak of ministry. Acts 14:27, Paul tells the church “how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”. In Acts 16:6 we see an illustration of this when they planned to minister in Asia, but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. And again in verse 7 they wanted to minister in Bithynia, but were not permitted there. They were called to Macedonia instead. In 2 Cor 2:12 “When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord...” Colossians 4:3; “At the same time, pray also for us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ.”

For any faithful church, God says, I am going to open doors of opportunity to you. When they come, seize them, take them with both hands. Don't worry about them shutting on you, because I'm going to create and sustain the opportunity. On the other hand, some areas of service are not for you. Some communities I am simply not going to give you access to. Some kinds of ministry are not going to be for you. And no matter how hard you try to get that door open, I will not let you in. Philadelphia was a church that obviously used its strategic position, that had been used to spread Greek culture, as a place to spread the Gospel. And Jesus says, go on, because I am with you, opening and closing.

There's a real comfort in that. For the faithful church, our Lord has particular ministries for us. No church can do it all, nor should it try. A church needs to follow through on the opportunities God sends its way. How do we know what those are? Well, we start by asking, who has God sent into our church? Who do they know? Where do they live? What are their desires for ministry? We ask, what vision and mission has God placed on the heart of the leaders He has called to the church? We ask, what kinds of gifts are present? We ask, what geographical area has God placed us in? Who has He allowed us to

become associated with?

In church history, this church reminds one of the church from around 1600 to 1900 – the great Awakenings, the Missionary movements, the revivals. Imagine meeting one of the saints from that time period and explaining what kind of a door was opened to us.

If we are faithful with the Word, this is the comfort: our usefulness will not decrease, but increase.

Second, Jesus promises them *ultimate vindication*.

*9 Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.*

Here in Philadelphia, there were, like in the other cities, people who attended the synagogue and persecuted the Christians. Now whether these were ethnic Jews, or Gentiles who had converted to Judaism isn't clear. But they were not Jews in their heart. Romans 2 and 9 describe the Jewishness that God desires.

These people were liars. And Jesus, who describes Himself as the One who is True, will let the truth come out in the end. He will vindicate this small, seemingly weak church. Those that accused them, those that persecuted them, those that hated them will, in the end, have to come and admit that they were wrong, and these believers were right.

It's tough to be a faithful church when the whole world says you're wrong. The secular culture tells us we're crazy for believing in eternity. The false religionists tell us we are a sect for calling on faith alone in Christ. And while you are doing God's work, you will be blamed, falsely accused, slandered, maligned and vilified. If there is such a thing as reputation insurance, get the best policy you can, because you'll be needing it. But God says to the faithful church, there is coming a time, when I will actually make your accusers come and humble themselves before you. I will vindicate you.

That tells us something else. If we are going to be a faithful church, we have to forget about trying to defend ourselves from every accusation. That's just a delaying tactic by Satan. It is important to be blameless, it is not important to be criticism-free. Carry on, do God's work, leave your critics on the sidelines and in the stands, which is where they always are. Run your race.

Third, Jesus promises them *complete preservation*.

*10 Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.*

Jesus calls Himself the Holy One. Only God is Holy, so Jesus is rightly calling Himself God. But a Holy God tests and judges and purifies. Jesus promises this church deliverance from the hour of testing. What is Jesus speaking of here? It is possible that this was referring to one of the Roman persecutions of Christians that broke out across the empire. But the wording is quite clear: this is a tribulation which is going to test every single earth-dweller. So, I believe we can build a fairly strong case that this is the Great Tribulation referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24, and described throughout the book of Revelation from chapter 6 through to 19.

One phenomenon of prophecy you need to get used to is the telescoping effect. Often a prophecy refers to something nearby, which is a partial fulfilment, but it telescopes beyond that to an ultimate fulfilment. Some examples would be Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 61, Joel 2 and Acts 2. So there may have been a tribulation in terms of a Roman persecution over the whole known world at that time, but that was only a partial fulfilment of a far greater tribulation, which Jesus says if the days were not cut short, no flesh at all, no one on earth, would have been left alive.

The comfort here is this: you have already kept My Word. You do not need any more testing. You do not need a trial by fire to discover if your faith is genuine. That has already been determined. Therefore, this test coming upon the world, I will keep you from it. That was the promise to the church at Philadelphia.

And it is a valid application to us too. For us, this Great Tribulation is still future. Christ promises true believers: you keep my Word, you don't deny my faith, I will keep you from that awful testing. How will He do that? Amongst pre-millennialists, there are two dominant views. Pre-tribulationism believes that Christ will rapture His church before that Great Tribulation begins, and so keep them from the hour. Post-tribulationism believes that Christ will preserve and protect His people, seal them, as He did Israel during the plagues on Egypt, and keep them from experiencing the true wrath of God during that time. I find Jesus prayer in John 17 curiously similar to this passage, and maybe there is our answer: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."

Now, whichever way you take it, I don't think deliverance *out of* or deliverance *through* is the focus of the passage. The focus of this verse is a comfort - one way or another, when the world faces its most severe trial and judgement, you will not go through it. I will exempt you. I dole out trials, troubles, sufferings, as well as comforts, rewards and ease. I know what you have had; I know what they will have. I promise you ultimate deliverance.

For a faithful church, that is deeply comforting. When you see the way the world is going, you see its mounting problems, you see what is coming economically, ecologically, militarily, climatologically, you can easily fear. Jesus tells us not to. However he does it, when God rings the closing time bell on this earth, and brings upon it the Second Flood, the flood of fire, we will be in the Ark, the Ark of Christ.

### **III. The Counsel**

**11** *Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.*

To this church, Jesus simply says, "Hold fast what you have."

I enjoy watching athletics, particularly the sprints. I've seen enough races where someone was so confident of their lead, that they began to coast and someone came from behind with massive momentum and speed, and took away a medal that could have been theirs.

When a church has been faithful, and it sees the fruit of its labours, and it sees souls saved and missionaries sent, and works published, and children raised for Christ, and communities changed, it must beware of coasting. It must beware of believing that what it has done is like unstoppable momentum.

The Christian life is not like downhill skiing. It is like uphill roller-skating. Stop and coast, and you

will quickly lose your momentum, and soon begin going the other way. The Lord lovingly counsels this church not to allow them to lose their rewards by failing to hold fast.

I think there are two ways we can lose rewards. The first is by failing to seize the opportunities that God gives us. If we are given to other priorities, or are spiritually slothful, or care little about eternal treasures, then those who desire it will take what could have been ours –

*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. (1 Cor 9:24)*

The second way is when we have already achieved a reward, but then lose it through deliberate persistent disobedience. Ben Johnson won the 1988 Olympic 100 metres in a world record time. Soon after that, he tested positive for steroids, and was stripped of his medal. He had disobeyed the rules and so he was disqualified of a medal he had held for a short time. The same has happened to others, people who have held honorary degrees, or positions, when it was found that their behaviour violated their status.

Note how the Lord does not want a faithful church to lose its rewards. He wants them to go on and claim a full reward.

#### **IV. The Challenge**

*12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no 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 out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.*

Jesus promises true believers some glorious future, he promises permanence. Pillars were not only beautiful, they were symbols of solidity, strength, and permanence. We still use the term pillars as a metaphor for what is foundational and enduring. And for a church that experiences frequent earthquakes, who continually went in and out of their dwelling places, fearing it might collapse on them, Jesus says, I promise you a future without that instability. Now Revelation 21:22 tells us that the New Jerusalem has no Temple, for the Temple is the Lord God Almighty. So the promise to believers is, you yourselves will be permanently settled and dwelling with God and in God forever.

Our world and sadly, many in the Christian world, care only about relevance. God wishes to bless us with permanence. It is worth asking, am I living for what will be permanent, for what will outlast this world, or only for what is transient, relevant.

Not only permanence, but pre-eminence. Pillars were outstanding and visible. To be counted a pillar is to be given reward, a position of honour, a position of responsibility.

How we strive for the praise of man here on earth; how we fight for respect. Jesus had to say to the Pharisees: “How can you believe, who seek honour from men..” Take the ambition to be honoured, consecrate it to God's glory, and trust Him to give honour where it is due in eternity.

Then **prominence** - Jesus promises that every true believer will have three names: God's name, the name of the city, and Christ's own, new name. This speaks of God fully identifying Himself with you, fully identifying your reward with you, honouring and blessing you. You have the keys to the city as it were, blessed with God's personal signature, as it were, on you.

Think about those three: permanence, pre-eminence, and prominence. If you are going to be faithful in this world, those are about the three things you need to give up as far as the world goes. If you chase what they chase, you've got to give up on permanent things. If you seek to be prominent in their eyes, you have to deny Christ. If you seek to be pre-eminent among men, you cannot keep God's Word.

But be a Philadelphian church, and Jesus says, your day is coming. Keep my Word, don't deny the faith, go through the doors I open for you, and hold fast till I come.