

Revelation 3:7-13 A Healthy Church The Message to Philadelphia

Introduction:

The Bible has 66 books, 39 OT and 27 NT. We've gone through 65 of them and we're now in the last one.

Chapter 1 of Revelation is an introduction that sets the stage for the rest of the book. John the apostle, a Roman prisoner on the island of Patmos sees a vision of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. As part of that vision, Jesus gives John seven letters to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. Today we will look at the 6th of those seven churches.

Each of the letters in Revelation 2 & 3 of follows a pattern.

1. Christ introduces Himself and emphasizes certain characteristics, mostly related to His appearance to John in Chapter 1.
2. Christ commends the church for its strengths.
3. Christ points out its problems.
4. He encourages them to correct things – usually calling the church to repent.
5. He gives one or more promises to the overcomer.
6. He gives an invitation to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

For three of the churches Christ has both good and bad to say.

For two of the churches, Sardis and Laodicea, Christ has nothing good to say.

Put these together and Christ needs to call five of the seven churches to repentance.

That means for two of the seven churches, there is no repentance needed. In other words, Christ finds nothing seriously wrong. This is not to say these churches were flawless – they were made up of people not much different from us – but Christ sees no need to correct them.

The first of those churches was Smyrna. That church was suffering badly. Christ sees more need for sympathy and strengthening than correction. This church in Philadelphia is the other church with no correction needed. It is not suffering as badly as the church in Smyrna so it might make a better model for us. The church is healthy and so it provides a good example.

A Look at the Passage:

3:7 Philadelphia The name Philadelphia, you might already realize, means “brotherly love.” The city also went by the name of *Neokaisareia* – or *Neocaesarea*, that is “New Caesar-ia”. Thus, the choice of this name and not the other by Jesus is intentional.

Outside of Revelation, when this word appears, it is actually describing the love that brothers and sisters somewhat have for one another – the love that exists within families. This is the kind of love that Christians ought to have for one another,

*Romans 12:10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with **brotherly love**, in honor giving preference to one another;*

*1 Thessalonians 4:9 But concerning **brotherly love** you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to **love** [agapeō] one another; [The two are set as synonyms.]*

*Hebrews 13:1 Let **brotherly love** continue.*

*1 Peter 1:22 Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere **love of the brethren**, love [agapeō] one another fervently with a pure heart, [Synonyms again.]*

He who is holy Warren Wiersbe says of this statement,

This is tantamount to declaring that He is God, which, of course, He is. Jesus Christ is holy in His character, His words, His actions, and His purposes. As the Holy One, He is uniquely set apart from everything else, and nothing can be compared to Him.

He who is true The world is full of false gods that are completely unworthy of worship. Jesus Christ claims to be true. In John’s Gospel, He even claimed to be truth itself. That is a wild statement which begins to impose itself on our ultimate view of reality. Consider this:

What’s at the bottom of everything? If the universe popped into existence out of nothing and we’re all just the products of blind chance, then our existence is utterly meaningless. It’s all going to crash and burn eventually. Your life and mine are worth the same as dust particles flying through space. Jesus dares to imply that life has meaning – but only in relation to Him.

key of David, who opens ... and shuts Back in Isaiah 22, we read of a man named Shebna who was the royal steward in Judah. He was in charge of the king’s household and the one who could admit people into the royal presence. All of this went to his head. He was so impressed with himself that he had built himself an elaborate tomb while he was still alive. The Lord announced that He was removing Shebna from his privileged position and giving his office to a man named Eliakim. So God spoke to Eliakim saying,

Isaiah 22:22 The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; So he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open.

Again Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 23:13 *But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*

Christ is asserting His own ultimate authority as to who comes and goes in His kingdom.

It's likely that some of the members of the Philadelphian church were Jews who had been expelled from the synagogue. Men similar to the hypocrites in Jesus' day had closed the door of fellowship – the door of the kingdom of heaven, it would seem – to these followers of Jesus. Jesus had the power to keep that door open.

Sometimes in the Bible an open door refers to opportunities for ministry.

1 Corinthians 16:9 *For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.*

3:8 **I have set before you an open door** Chuck Smith applies Paul's usage to this picture here and says,

I believe that the Lord often leads us by opening and closing doors. When we are seeking God's guidance in our lives, we should look for doors that He may open for us, but we also need to pay attention to doors that He may close. When God opens a door of opportunity to me, I always want to go through it. But I also want to be sensitive to the fact that He closes doors, as well, and I don't want to force any doors open or break them down if He has closed them.

Positives about this church:

You have a little strength This might sound like a criticism, but it isn't. It's not exactly the same, but similar to when Jesus says to the church in Smyrna, *"I know your poverty."* It's not due to any problem for which Jesus will hold them responsible.

Kept my word and not denied my name These were strong points. There was no false doctrine running through this church as in some others. And there was always the risk of denying Jesus in an environment where being a Christian could have adverse consequences.

3:9 Two similarities with the church in Smyrna.

1. Christ has nothing bad to say.
2. They faced the **synagogue of Satan**, who Christ says are false Jews.

Synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews but are not. Compare **2:9**.

In some cities the Jews were very influential. In Philadelphia that does not seem to be the case, so the persecution was not as bad as in some other places. Still this synagogue could have been the source of some pressure to deny the name of Jesus – but this church didn't give in to it.

As to worshipping **before your feet**, we can assume if there is any real worship going on, then God the Father or Jesus who are receiving it. Nonetheless, there is this from Isaiah:

Isaiah 60:14 Also the sons of those who afflicted you Shall come bowing to you, And all those who despised you shall fall prostrate at the soles of your feet; And they shall call you The City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

3:10 You have kept my command to persevere Each and every one of us should want to hear this from Jesus. Perseverance is an active endurance. It's a quality of strength, not weakness.

One of the more controversial doctrines of Christianity concerns the Rapture of the church. This is the catching up and transforming of believers at the moment of Christ's return. Some churches don't deal with the question of the Rapture at all. Of those who do, the question is when will it happen in relation to the judgments we read about with Revelation 6. The Rapture could come before, during or after these judgments.

It would be incorrect to say that this verse teaches directly a pre-tribulation rapture, but some Bible teachers think it points to it in an indirect kind of way. In other words, it points to a promise for those who hear what the Spirit is saying here, that they will not be here on earth during the time of judgment that we will read about in the upcoming chapters of Revelation.

I'd say I'm in agreement with them. There is no convincing historical fulfillment of this promise that we can find which applied to the church in Philadelphia at this time. If there is one we simply don't know about it.

Further, the promise is to be saved from out of the time of trial, not kept safe in the midst of trials. We can think back on what Jesus said regarding His upcoming sufferings when He used a similar phrase.

John 12:27 "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, **save Me from this hour**'? But for this purpose I came to this hour."

Now with that said, it's important to remember that a pre-tribulation Rapture does not exempt the church either now or in the future from suffering or persecution. Both are actually guaranteed. One of the chief criticisms of a Pre-Tribulation Rapture view is that it is escapist and misleads people into thinking that Christ will save them from their difficulties. So please understand, we are not saying the church will not have to endure suffering or persecution. Christians are suffering severely in some places even now. This will not change. When the Rapture finally arrives, there will be Christians suffering right up to that moment.

those who dwell on the earth Robert L. Thomas points out,

This is a company of people constantly in view throughout the Apocalypse as objects of God's wrath because of their rebellion against Him. ... This phrase is used ten other times in Revelation and always in a bad sense. These are men given up to evil and hatred of God's saints.

Revelation 13:8, 12-14 ⁸*All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb ...* ¹²*And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes **the earth and those who dwell in it** to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed.* ¹³*He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men.* ¹⁴*And he deceives **those who dwell on the earth** by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling **those who dwell on the earth** to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived.*

After this chapter, the word “church” will not appear until the end of Revelation. These earth-dwellers, however, appear repeatedly and they are the objects of God’s wrath.

3:11 I am coming quickly A key theme in Revelation. See also **1:7**. Jesus doesn’t tell them to become stronger. He tells them to hold on. Having Jesus, having kept His word, having not denied His name, they had everything they needed. The point was not to find greater power, but to hold on to that which they had till Jesus comes.

Personal Illustration: Years ago in Warsaw, Poland, I was meeting a musician friend at the airport. He came to Poland to do a series of concerts as form of outreach for our church. So I got off the train downtown and went to the bus which went out to the airport. This bus was always crowded and as usual I had to stand. And the ride was never smooth, so if you were standing you had to use one hand to hold on. I forget what I had in my other hand, but it wasn’t on my wallet. These two guys got on the bus after me and were behind me as I was riding along. As the bus was coming to a stop, one of them “accidentally” fell into me, while the other one picked my pocket. They then both got right off the bus. I instantly realized what happened, but it was too late. All I could do was watch them on the street as the bus drove on toward the airport. Fortunately, my friend came to Poland with money so that we could get home.

You may feel weak and sinful and pathetic as a Christian. Just hold on tight to what you have.

3:12 At the time of this writing, this city of Philadelphia would have still remembered a relatively recent destruction by an earthquake. These promises to the overcomer speak of stability and strength. They would be especially meaningful to these people.

Revelation 21:22 *But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*

In other words the whole city is a place of worship.

The name of my God This speaks of God’s ownership.

The city of my God This speaks of citizenship.

Philippians 3:20-21 ²⁰*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* ²¹*who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*

Conclusions:

1. Brotherly love – what every Christian needs to have for every other Christian.

Most Christians are probably familiar with these words of Jesus.

John 13:34-35 ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Most of us would also probably have to acknowledge that we fall far short of the ideal Christ has placed before us to emulate. We fail to love as Jesus loves us. The world we live in is terribly disjointed and we have taken too many of our cues from this world. We’re a disjointed church, disconnected from one another, in the midst of a disjointed society.

I believe the world is crying out for an authentic Christianity – one in which people love one another with the self-sacrificing love of Christ. My prayer is that we as a church would rise to that challenge and allow people to see Jesus in us through our love for one another.

2. Open doors – opportunities to serve, or to engage in some kind of productive ministry

The Apostle Paul asked the church in Colossae to pray in this way.

Colossians 4:2-4 ²Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; ³meanwhile praying also for us, **that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ,** for which I am also in chains, ⁴that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

Paul knew what his calling was from the Lord and prayed for specific opportunities to fulfill it. Jesus is coming quickly. It’s clear from this letter that He wants all of us to be engaged in productive service until the moment that He comes.

What open doors has the Lord placed before you? Are you even looking for them? Often they come in the context of the church, but sometimes they also come as opportunities to reach out in ways the church has yet to explore. You may be the first one to walk through into certain opportunities.

3. A promise of stability and certainty in a place we can finally call home.

We just mentioned that the world we live in is disjointed and unloving. It’s also unstable. Relationships are unstable. Families are unstable. Jobs are unstable. The economy is unstable. Where can we finally find some stability? Jesus offers just that in His promises to the overcomer.

Be an overcomer and what awaits you is infinite stability, with a God and a people that you will eternally belong to, in place you will forever be able to call home. How’s that for a promise?