Philadelphia – The Missionary Church

Revelation 3:7-13

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Scripture Passage

* Body Text

# Introduction

* Philadelphia was named for its founder Attalus Philadelphus, the King of Pergamum, who died in 138 b.c., and who was named Philadelphus because of his love for his brother. Located at the junction of roads to Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia and at the borders of these provinces, the city was called the “gateway to the East” and was founded to serve as a missionary center for the spread of the Greek language and culture (Mounce, 1977:114–15). The success of its missionary endeavor is evidenced in Ramsay’s indication that in Lydia the local language was completely replaced by Greek (1904:392). Later, Philadelphia became a great city—so much so that, by the fifth century a.d., Philadelphia was called “little Athens” (Mounce, 1977:115).
* Philadelphia was the newest of the seven cities addressed. An area of frequent earthquakes (Strabo, ﻿Geog.﻿ 12.8.18; 13.4.10; Tacitus, ﻿Annals﻿ 2.47; Pliny, ﻿Nat. Hist.﻿ 2.86), almost its entire population along with the city of Sardis was destroyed in 17 b.c. Emperor Tiberius was especially generous in the rebuilding the city, so it was renamed Neocaesarea. It was again renamed Philadelphia during the reign of Nero, only to be changed during Vespasian’s reign to Flavia, the family name of the current emperors (Ramsay, 1904:397–98, 409–12). Evidently, the city was intensely loyal to Rome (Mounce, 1977:115).
* There was also a weak but faithful Christian church in Philadelphia. Of all the churches, the one in Philadelphia receives the most praise and no criticism. To the mid-twentieth century there were about a thousand Christians in the city of Philadelphia (Barclay, 1960:1.160). Indeed, it remained Christian in a surrounding Muslim context until the fourteenth century
* Jesus identifies himself as “the holy one, the true one” (3:7), an expression not found in chapter 1 and elsewhere used only for God (6:10; cf. Isa 65:16). Indeed, the use of “holy” here anticipates the threefold declaration of God as “holy” in 4:8. Jesus will identify himself to the church as Laodicea as “the faithful and true witness” (3:14). He continues with an allusion to the “key” of 1:18, but rather than speaking of the “key of Death and Hades,” as there, he speaks of “the key of David” in an allusion to Isa 22:22. The passage in Isaiah is part of a larger oracle against Shebna, the king’s steward who controls access to the king (Isa 22:15–25). God tells Shebna that he will replace the steward with Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah. Eliakim is described in glowing terms, including those cited here about possessing the key to the house of David and having authority to open and shut. John has already described Jesus in Davidic terms (1:5) and will mention David two more times, both in connection with Jesus (5:5 and 22:16). The promise about no one being able to shut what he opens anticipates the next verse.
* The church at Philadelphia is the second church (the other being Smyrna) to receive no criticism from Jesus. Jesus acknowledges that the church at Philadelphia has little power, yet it has kept (cf. 1:3) his word (3:10: word of endurance; cf. 2:2, 3) and has not denied his name (3:8; cf. 2:13). As a result, he has set before the church an “open door” (3:8).
* Like the church in Smyrna, the Philadelphian church receives praise from the Lord. The city was known for its commercial and agricultural importance, particularly its grape crops. Its patron deity was Dionysus, god of wine. The city received permission to build a provincial temple, earning it the name Neocoros (meaning “keeper of the temple”)
* It is unlikely that the expression refers to a missionary opportunity (cf. 2 Cor 2:12); Revelation shows little interest in such matters. More likely is that the expression has to do with access to God. The same expression is used in 4:1, where John, seeing an open door in heaven, is caught up (presumably through that door) into heaven. The other use of “door” in Revelation is in 3:20, where Jesus refers to a door through which he will enter to eat with “any one” who opens it. The church at Philadelphia has little power; hence, Jesus himself has opened the door that enables its members to fellowship with God. Since he has the key of David, no one is able to shut the door (3:7–8).
* Jesus’ self-identification as the keyholder may well be relevant to the first promise he makes to the church. Once again Jesus speaks of a group of Jews. By characterizing them as “the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews” and affirming that they “are not, but lie” (3:9), Jesus combines his previous descriptions of the self-proclaimed Jews (2:9) and the self-proclaimed apostles (2:2). Further, he gives a strong indication that the Jews in Philadelphia are creating problems for the Christians. It is possible that (1) some of the Philadelphian Christians were Jews and were experiencing excommunication from the synagogue (e.g., John 16:2; cf. John 9:22; 12:42) or that (2) the Gentile Christians were encountering the argument that true salvation was to be found in Judaism (cf. Ignatius, Philadelphians 6:1; 8:2). But perhaps there is a more likely scenario. Judaism was a protected religion in the Roman Empire. As long as Christianity could claim an association with Judaism, it was exempt from emperor worship. But the Jews in Philadelphia were now officially repudiating the church, setting the Christians adrift to face Roman persecution. Against such a “shutting out,” Jesus opens a door. Jesus’ promise is that he will make the Jews “come and bow down before your feet” (3:9), a clear allusion to Old Testament promises given to Israel about Gentiles coming and bowing down before them (e.g., Ps 86:9; Isa 45:14; 49:23; 60:14). The irony is clear. Gentiles will not come and bow down before the Jews; rather, the Jews will come and bow down before the true Israel—i.e., the Church. Once again the reader encounters the theme that the Church is the true Israel (see on 2:9). Jesus adds that the reason for this reversal lies in himself: they will “learn that I have loved you” (3:9; cf. 1:5; Isa 43:3–4).

# Philadelphia - The Dedicated Church

* The church in Philadelphia is the sixth of the seven churches addressed in this book of Revelation. It was an unusually dedicated church.

## The Church (Revelation 3:7)

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write” (Revelation 3:7).

* Dr. Clovis Chappell said,

‘Were it my privilege to go back across the years and attend a service at one of these seven churches, I think I should choose the church at Philadelphia’ ” (Strauss).

* Philadelphia was located some thirty miles southeast of Sardis towards Laodicea (the city of the seventh church).
* It was located near Mount Timolus which was in an area that had a devastating earthquake in the first century which completely destroyed Sardis and severely hurt Philadelphia
* but it was rebuilt and a testimony for Christ was established.
* The church in Philadelphia and Smyrna are the only churches that have nothing condemnatory about it in these seven letters in Revelation.

## The Christ (Revelation 3:7)

“These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth, and shutteth, and no man openeth”   
(Revelation 3:7).

Two things are said about Christ here which are related to what was said of Him in the first chapter of Revelation.

### His character.

“He that is holy, he that is true” (Revelation 3:7).

* This speaks of sterling character which is represented by the “white” of his hair (“*as white as snow*” [Revelation 1:14])
* and by the appearance of His eyes and feet
* and countenance
* all of which not only spoke of judgment
* but spoke of His holiness which demanded judgment.
* Christ is wholly without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) and Christ is truth (John 14:6).

### His control.

“He that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth” (Revelation 3:7).

* This statement compares to Revelation 1:18

“I … have the keys of hell and of death.”

* Having the key of David indicates
* the earthly lineage of Christ
* which entitled Him to the throne of David
* which also speaks of control.
* Christ controls the eternal destiny of the sinner.
* Once they are in hell, they cannot get out.
* He has locked them in hell.
* What a horrible thing to be without soul salvation.

## The Cognizance (Revelation 3:8)

“I know thy works” (Revelation 3:8).

* In every letter we are reminded of the omniscience of Jesus Christ with the words “*I know thy works*.”
* This is good news for the righteous
* but bad news for the wicked.
* For the church in Philadelphia it was good news.
* They were **suffering**, but they were **steadfast**.
* Christ knew about both situations **and would act accordingly**.

## The Circumstances (Revelation 3:8)

“Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it” (Revelation 3:8).

* Christ is speaking of service here and describes it as an “*open door.*”
* There is a fivefold message in this “open door” statement.

#### The Power In The Open Door.

* The wickedness in Philadelphia made it a difficult place in which to live for the Lord
* and to serve the Lord,
* but the Lord had opened a door for service in Philadelphia.
* The Lord can provide opportunities in the most unsuspecting places
* because He is powerful,
* and if He wants you to serve in some impossible place,
* He will open the door for you to serve.

#### The Prompting in The Open Door.

“I have set before thee.”

* Among other things, that open door brings responsibility.
* Christ opens the door,
* but we must go through the opened door
* which means we have a responsibility to act
* when opportunities come for service.
* Every opportunity should prompt us to act with dispatch.
* While “*no man can shut it*,”
* the Lord may shut the door if the opportunity is not used promptly and properly.

#### The Priority Of The Open Door.

“Behold, I have set before thee an open door.”

* The word “Behold” speaks of importance and of priority.
* When God opens a door of service, that service should have a very high priority in our life.
* Many folks do not serve the Lord because they have not put much priority on serving Him
* but have put more priority on their own pleasures and interests.

#### The Privilege Of The Open Door.

“I have set before thee an open door.”

* It is a privilege to serve the Lord.
* That He would set before any of us an open door of service is a privilege of the highest order.

#### The Problems In The Open Door.

“No man can shut it”

* …tells us that there will be opposition to the opened door.
* Satan does not like opened doors for God’s work.
* Paul spoke of this when he said,

“A great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Corinthians 16:9).

* Just because the Lord gives you an opportunity to serve does not mean opposition will disappear.

## The Condition (Revelation 3:8)

“Thou hast a little strength” (Revelation 3:8).

* The Lord would keep us humble to serve.
* It’s interesting that, right after telling the believers that He had opened a door for them, He then says they have “*little strength.*”
* T seems sure that the emphasis on the saints’ condition helps them to look to Him for strength to help in serving Him and in entering the open door.
* It is not our strength that is important; it is His strength that matters.
* He will keep the door open.
* He will enable us to serve.
* Look not at your own strength—that can be very discouraging—but look at His strength.
* Be sure of your calling, then let Him take care of the needed power.

## The Consecration (Revelation 3:8)

“Thou … hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8).

* Two things are mentioned here which emphasize the consecration of the Philadelphian church.
* Loyalty to the Written Word.

“Thou … has kept my word.”

* They obeyed the Word of God regardless of circumstances.

“In order to ‘keep’ the Word obedience to it must be prompt and unqualified … To keep Christ’s Word at all costs may involve the forfeiture of social and civil distinction” (Scott).

* Loyalty to the Incarnate Word. “Hast not denied my name.” The name of Jesus is not the favorite name of the world. Many despise it. When I was in college, I remember hearing the testimony of a man who said he left the Masonic Lodge because they would not let him pray in the name of Jesus. He had been asked to pray at one of their meetings and closed his prayer in the name of Jesus. That so upset the members of the Lodge that they told the believer to stop praying in Jesus’ name. He would not deny the name and so left the Lodge.

## The Counterfeits (Revelation 3:9)

* Counterfeit Jews were a problem in Smyrna also. Both Smyrna and Philadelphia are the two churches of the seven which had no condemnation from Christ. The counterfeiters feigned faith but were phonies. Here it is portrayed as feigning belonging to the Jewish race which race was especially known as God’s people. Two things about these phony believers.
* Their character. “Of the synagogue of Satan … say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie” (Revelation 3:9). Two things are pointed out about these phony believers. First, their mouths. “Lie.” They claim to be God’s people but they are not. They are pretenders, fakers, frauds, and impostors. They are not truly saved. They simply lie. Second, their membership. They may claim membership in the finest of fundamental churches, but the Lord says they are really of the “synagogue of Satan.”
* Their condemnation. “I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee” (Revelation 3:9). Some of their condemnation will be seen in their worship of Christ. First, the practice of worship. “I will make them to come and worship.” Paul said, “Every knee should bow … every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10, 11). Some will bow and confess to their salvation. Others to their damnation. It depends on when you bow—before or after death. These pretenders will ultimately have to acknowledge Christ as Lord, but to their condemnation. Second, the place of worship. “Worship before thy feet.” They are not worshiping the faithful but will do it before the faithful which acknowledges that the faithful were right. Condemnation shames. Third, the praise in worship. “To know that I have loved thee.” Those who were despised in this world will be acknowledged and praised by the fakers as being right. The ungodly, to their shameful condemnation, will one day recognize that believers were the ones who were right. The day is coming when the Lord will show what is right and who is right.

## The Compensation (Revelation 3:10)

“Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

* Those who have been chosen to be on the Lord’s side and have been faithful to the Lord will be exempt from the Divine judgment which the world will experience. Some believe “the hour of temptation” refers to the great tribulation period because of its wide application. But regardless of the period of time it refers to, it means judgment for unbelievers which God’s people will not experience.

## The Coming (Revelation 3:11)

“Behold, I come quickly; hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” (Revelation 3:11).

* At least five things are said about the coming of Christ here.
* The priority of the coming. “Behold.” This word arrests our attention and puts a priority on His coming. This is important. It should be prominent in our thinking.
* The Person in the coming. “I come.” Jesus Christ Himself is coming back to earth (Acts 1:11). The literalness of the coming of Christ is true or the idea of His coming is fraudulent.
* The pace of the coming. “Quickly.” If “quickly” refers to a time period, we have to acknowledge that “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). It has only been a couple days since Christ left. More likely the “quickly” refers to the pace of the actual event. When Christ comes back it will be speedy in action. Evil will be overcome quickly and sinners will not have time to repent.
* The preparation for the coming. “Hold that fast.” The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is faithfulness. Stand true to Him and you will be ready for His return.
* The prize at the coming. “That no man take thy crown.” Being prepared assures one of obtaining the reward. The fact of a crown at His coming says when the Lord returns, it will be a time of honor for the believer. Not so for the unbeliever; it will instead be a time of horror not honor no matter what his status in the world is. The same is true when a person dies. The believer experiences honor, the unbeliever horror.

## The Conqueror (Revelation 3:12)

“Him that overcometh” (Revelation 3:12).

* Again, as in each of the letters to the churches, is a message of encouragement to the overcomer—the one who swims against the current, who overcomes the evil prevalent in his day, who stands against the evil in his church, who refuses to go along with the evil crowd. He is the conqueror and will be duly rewarded. The reward in this text is basically twofold.
* The pillar for the conqueror.

“Will I make a pillar in the temple of my God and he shall go no more out” (Revelation 3:12).

* The figure of the pillar in God’s temple shows at least two things about the reward for the overcomer.

#### First, Power. “Pillar.”

* A pillar holds up part of a building. When we think of a pillar, we think of strength and of power. God’s people will have power in eternity. They will help Christ rule in the millennium.

#### Second, Permanence.

* A pillar in a building is permanent. Heaven is permanent; earth is temporary. God’s people will be rewarded in heaven where the rewards are permanent unlike earthly rewards.

#### The Prestige For The Conqueror.

“I will write upon him the name of my God … the name of the city of my God … my new name” (Revelation 3:12).

* The names of God and Christ and the city of God written on the believer makes the overcomer a person of importance in eternity. The world despises the overcomer, but in eternity the overcomer will have written on him the important names of eternity, and they will be written on him by none other than Jesus Christ. All of this will give the overcomer much prestige/honor, something he did not have on earth.

## The Charge (Revelation 3:13)

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 3:13).

* This charge, which is given to all the churches, is a charge of stewardship that involves three things.

#### The Capacity To Hear.

“He that hath an ear.”

* Use the ability, assets, advantages given you by God to honor God.

#### The Character Of Hearing.

“Let him hear.”

* Be attentive, interested, respectful.

#### The Communication For Hearing.

“What the Spirit saith.”

* “*What the Spirit saith*” is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17).
* Too many use their ears only to hear defiling things.