

To the church in Philadelphia Revelation 3: 7-13

The seven letters all follow a pattern.

1. Salutation

⁷ *"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

2. Christ's self-designation

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

3. Jesus' Commendation

⁸ *I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

4. The Lord's condemnation

None!

5. Christ's warning-promise

⁹ *I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.* ¹⁰ *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

6. Jesus' exhortation

¹¹ *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

7. The Lord's promise

¹² *The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.*

8. Motif:

¹³ *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches*

Context:

So what else do we know about Philadelphia? Not a lot. It's not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. So it was not on Paul's route through the area. What we do know is it was in a volcanic region. In AD17 an earthquake destroyed it and 11 other cities. Philadelphia was rebuilt and received a lot of aid from the emperors so was renamed several times Neoceasaria, Flavia and so on. It was a fertile region suited to vineyards. Due to the repeated earthquakes it was not much populated which may explain the implication that the church was also small – here described as '*having little strength*'. About A.D. 110, Ignatius of Antioch, who was under arrest and being escorted to Rome, stayed briefly in Philadelphia and later wrote a letter to the church there which you can read in translation online if you wish.

So **what has Jesus to say** to this small struggling fellowship of believers?

First, he reminds them who he is. He is the holy and true an expression which only appears in Revelation 6:10 *“Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”*

Our Jesus is Holy and True, he is set apart from everything else in creation and he is utterly reliably true. And we are to reflect his glory, so we must be holy and true. Jesus in John 14:6 described himself as *the way, the truth and the life*. You can't have truth without Jesus. And he goes on to say:

who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

This is a direct quotation from Isaiah 22:22: *“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.”* It was a prophecy about Eliakim who would be promoted to Palace Administrator under Hezekiah. So he was the key holder for the palace of King Hezekiah who was of the House of David. So, as in Isaiah, he is claiming the authority of David and the right to decide what is allowed or not allowed.

In the context of the gospel, first and foremost are the gates of heaven. Wrongly we are told that they are shut and Peter is there with a list. The gates of heaven are actually described as open and Jesus is there to welcome those who have received him. But they are shut to those who have not received him. No one but Jesus can open the door. As he said in John 14:6 no one comes to the Father but by me. He is the door to

heaven. Secondly, an open door is a metaphor for the freedom to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Why does Jesus describe himself like this? Because this is a church with little strength but has '*kept my word and have not denied my name.*' They have been faithful and true in difficult circumstances.

What he says about the church is *I know your deeds.*

And there is no criticism of the church but the application of the self-declaration to them. He is the one who opens doors and he presents them with an open door. You see, we are Jesus' church and when he declares he is holy and true, we must be holy and true. When he says he has authority to open doors then he will open doors for his chosen people. The way may be hard and narrow but it is an open door, an opportunity to share the Good News now and the certainty of free entry into heaven when Jesus returns or promotes you to glory.

The particular problem the church was facing was in relation to the local synagogue.

Although it is not clear what the problem was, the church was persecuted by the synagogue at this time because it offered salvation by grace without the trappings of Judaism. You didn't need to be circumcised, attend the temple, go to the synagogue, wear a prayer shawl, observe the feasts to get to heaven. Salvation was by grace alone through faith. You simply have to repent of your sins, seek forgiveness, accept Jesus' death in your place and you are saved. And not just saved but given the Holy Spirit living in your heart and the promise of eternal life with

Jesus. The Jews resented this so much they endlessly tried to infiltrate the church and re-introduce the Jewish traditions. Paul and other church leaders were constantly battling with this problem. Jesus, here, describes the local Synagogue as the synagogue of Satan. The Jews in Philadelphia had moved from being God's representatives on earth to be his enemies. They believed everyone should bow to them.

Jesus says they would bow to the weak, struggling church in Philadelphia. Much more they will *acknowledge that I have loved you.*

Get that? The ultimate measure of this church is that Jesus loved them. Look, we are a small church with limited resources, but we are loved by God. That makes us rich by grace. God loves you. And a holy and true church is very precious to him. You want to know the blessings of the Kingdom, then endure the struggles of life, be faithful to Jesus and true. You are in a very special place, you are loved by Jesus.

He goes on

¹⁰ *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently,* so they still had great difficulties to endure. Being a Christian does not make life easier, quite the opposite, but remember you are loved by God. But there is a significant promise here.

I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

Large scale persecution was about to break out throughout the Roman Empire as the Good News of Jesus threatened the very fabric of the empire with its Emperor worship, multiple deities and evil worship of its

gods. Persecution by Nero, through to Diocletian, that only ended around AD 313 when Constantine, a Christian himself, became emperor. During that period Christians were subject to regular outbreaks of imprisonment, torture and execution. Much like the church in China. Or more recently North Korea, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, to name but a few.

What is meant by *I will also keep you from the hour of trial* is not clear but we know they were not immune from the persecution around them. Maybe their faithfulness protected them because they were able to fear no evil even though evil was all around them.

We must understand that Jesus has already said in John 16:33 *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

This is Jesus, who could sleep in an open boat in a storm that terrified experienced fisherman. He does not offer wealth and health and security like we have in this country, he offers peace in the crisis. That is a difficult concept to grasp. I know. But even in the chaos of Ukraine, a follower of Jesus can have peace. The security that even having lost all their possessions, their home and maybe their country, they are on their way to a place that far exceeds anything they or we have ever had. Eternity with Jesus.

To this church, Jesus says:

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

Does that not have a thrill about it? C.S. Lewis in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' attempts to capture

the excitement when the rumour arrives, “Aslan is on the move”.

“They say Aslan is on the move- perhaps has already landed.” And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different.

The idea is repeated at the end of the book.

22:7

“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this Book”

22:20

“The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

Jesus is active not passive in South Ruislip. The God who loves you and gave himself for you is coming soon. Coming by his Holy Spirit to be with you in every time of trial but also he has promised , that one day he will return in power. Listen to the general letter to the churches in Revelation1 :4-8

⁴ *John,*

*To the seven churches in the province of Asia:
Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷ *“Look, he is coming with the clouds,”
and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”
So shall it be! Amen.*

⁸ *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God,
“who is, and who was, and who is to come, the
Almighty.”*

Revelation is a book that covers a vast expanse of time and action, but the theme of the book is *the time is near*. Revelation 1:3.

2000 years have past and it is too easy to think that the return of Jesus Christ is distant. But Jesus was quite clear. It is always about to happen. In hour when you think it can't happen, Jesus will return.

So the message is ‘**Hold on!**’ don't give up, stand firm in the faith, tell those around you the good news of Salvation in Jesus.

You have received so much, don't throw it away because the pressure is too much, Hold on to Jesus, Stand firm by the Holy Spirit.

Why? Because ...

¹² *The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.*

The promise is quite simple. Hold on and you will be a pillar of the church! Like Samuel and others you will live in the holy place. – Heaven. Again you can read all about this place in Revelation 21:9-22:5. Time does not allow us to do it now but take time today to enjoy what we are looking forward to. We need to be reminded of these things because the present will be a struggle, but Hold on, Stand firm, because God has amazing things prepared for those who remain faithful.

The new name is a reference to the fact that Philadelphia was re-named regularly by successive emperors. God would give them his new name! they would be his people in his city, no longer subject to the evil of the emperors but subject to the one who loves us and freed us from sin.

¹³ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches

We are not speaking from our own knowledge, the Holy Spirit has caused these letters to be recorded and translated so that you can hear what he is saying to the churches. This is our Jesus speaking to us, today, Hold on, stand firm, times will be tough but I have promised a place for you in my presence forever. So endure what life throws at us , be faithful, live holy and true lives and look forward to enjoy what is guaranteed by God.