

The Church at Philadelphia

Introduction & History

Revelation 3:7-13

The Faithful Church

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."

Position of the Church at Philadelphia



Alaşehir the modern name for Philadelphia began as perhaps one of the first ancient cities with the name Philadelphia. It was established in 189 BC by King Eumenes II of Pergamon (197-160 BC). Eumenes II named the city for the love of his brother, who would be his successor, Attalus II (159-138 BC), whose loyalty earned him the nickname, "Philadelphos", literally meaning "one who loves his brother". The city is

perhaps best-known as the site of one of the seven churches of Asia in the Book of Revelation. This city was the youngest of the seven churches.

It was situated where the borders of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia meet together. Strategically therefore important for the founders main aim. It was founded especially as a mission city to expand the Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia. Barclay mentions that they were so successful that by A.D. 19 the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greeks. Ramsay says that Philadelphia was the centre for the diffusion of the Greek language and Greek letters *in* a peaceful land and by peaceful means.

Lacking an heir, Attalus III Philometer, the last of the Attalid kings of Pergamum, bequeathed his kingdom, including Philadelphia, to his Roman allies when he died in 133 BC. Rome set up the province of Asia in 129 BC by combining Ionia and the former Kingdom of Pergamum.

Philadelphia was an independent neutral city, under the influence of the Latin Knights of Rhodes, when taken in 1390 by Sultan Bayezid I and an auxiliary Christian force under the Byzantine emperor Manuel II after a prolonged resistance, when all the other cities of Asia Minor had surrendered. Twelve years later it was captured by Timur, who built a wall with the corpses of his prisoners. A fragment of the ghastly structure is in the library of Lincoln Cathedral.

Philadelphia was the last Byzantine stronghold in inner Asia Minor. Its Greek inhabitants fled the town during World War I and created Nea Filadelfeia, in Greece.

Major earthquakes reached this area after NT times and all that is now left of the old city that would be familiar to the Apostle John are shown in the following three pictures.

The only evidence of its earlier existence is shown on the next pages. They are the ruins of a Byzantine Church.



FIG. 34: The Sun-god of Philadelphia.



View through the remaining columns of an ancient Byzantine Church in Philadelphia (Alashehir). *Photo © HolyLandPhotos.org.*

The Bible Text

Revelation 3:7

"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":

As is the case for all the other Churches the message for the Church is addressed to the 'angel' of the Church. A full explanation is found during the exposition to the Church at Ephesus.

John confirms that Jesus is holy and true. Holy is the description of God. Isaiah in various places describes the Holiness of God as his own attribute. See Isa 6:3, 40:25, 43:15, Barclay emphasises God is different and separate from all others. Truth is another aspect of God that is utterly reliable. If God says it, it will come to pass. Jesus himself says unashamedly "I am the truth" yet only God is all truth.

He holds the key of David and open and shuts as he wills with no opposition. The key stands for ownership and possession. Only family have a key normally to the home. They have authority to open or close upon someone as a right in law. Therefore when Jesus Christ opens a door he has supreme authority to do so and the Church can progress with confidence that the opening they have been given will remain as long as God's will is being done.

Some believe that the door is speaking about admission to the local synagogue and Jesus having power over the Jews and thus preventing persecution of the Christian Church in that area.

Isaiah 22:22 is an interesting verse in conjunction with this message to the Philadelphian Church. "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." This talks of admission and Jesus has all power and authority to admit to the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 3:8

"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.

This is one church that does not receive condemnation from God. They are faithful to the Lord and find being faithful does not always produce results that are beneficial to the members. Yet despite the opposition and persecution he has set before them an open door and no earthly power can shut it. They are on the winning side in the long-term. All Christians should be prepared to stay long enough to read the last chapter in the book. It is not about strength but faithfulness. They had kept God's word and that was delighting God's heart. He therefore gave power to the Church to minister before an open door. What other encouragement would a church need to continue the battle against the dark powers and forces of evil ever present?

They not only kept God's name but they had not denied His name. It was so easy to do in Roman times. As long as people saw allegiance to the ruler of the Roman Empire they could worship what other Gods they wished but these people would not bow the knee to anyone but the True God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the great promise of the Risen Christ that he has set before the Christians of Philadelphia an open door which no man can ever shut. What is the meaning of this open door?

(i) It may be the door of missionary opportunity. Writing to the Corinthians of the work which lies ahead of him, Paul says: "For a wide door for effective work has opened to me (1 Cor 16: 9). When he came to Troas, a door was opened to him by the Lord (2 Cor 2: 12). He asks the Colossians to pray that a door of utterance may be opened for him (Col 4: 3). When he came back to Antioch he told how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14: 27).

This meaning is particularly appropriate for Philadelphia. We have seen how it was a border town, standing where the boundaries of Lydia, Mysia and Phrygia met, and founded to be a missionary of Greek language and culture to the barbarous peoples beyond. It was on the road of the imperial postal service, which left the coast at Troas, came to Philadelphia via Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis, and joined the great road out to Phrygia. The armies of Caesar travelled that road; the caravans of the merchant-men travelled it; and now it was beckoning the missionaries of Christ.

Two things emerge here. (a) There is a door of missionary opportunity before every man and he need not go overseas to find it. Within the home, within the circle in which we move, within the neighbourhood in which we reside, there are those to be won for Christ. To use that door of opportunity is at once our privilege and our responsibility. (b) In the way of Christ the reward of work well done is more work to do. Philadelphia had proved faithful and the reward for her fidelity was still more work to do for Christ.

(ii) It has been suggested that the door which is set before the Philadelphians is none other than Jesus himself. "I am the door," said Jesus (John 10: 7, 9).

(iii) It has been suggested that the door is the door to the Messianic community. With Jesus Christ the new kingdom of David was inaugurated; and, just as in the ancient kingdom Eliakim had the keys to admit to the royal presence, so Jesus is the door to admit to the kingdom of God.

(iv) Apart from all these things, for any man the door of prayer is always open. That is a door which no man can ever shut and it is one which Jesus opened when he assured men of the seeking love of God the Father.

The promise given to the Church is an extraordinary one. Looking at their inability to make an impact upon their society at present nevertheless, the Lord promises them an 'open door'. No one will be able to shut it and acknowledging they have little strength it is because of two aspects of their Christian life that the Lord is rewarding. First, they have kept his word. Secondly they have not denied his name to others. This open door can mean an access into his very presence or whatever they believe the Holy Spirit is leading, that will be accomplished. It find the favour of the Lord a Christian or a church has to keep his word and proclaim his name. Is not this the Christian gospel? A church that does that will find his favour.

Revelation 3:9

"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. "

The Jews at this time were more opponents of the Church than the Roman authorities. It is remarkable that when any organisation ceases to go God's way as the Jews had done then judgement comes upon them. Instead of being the people of God those who attended the synagogue are now the synagogue of Satan. This may seem harsh but people are either for righteousness or against it even if they are misguided. If they are not motivated by the Spirit and willing to receive truth and walk in it, then they do the work of Satan by undermining the Church which is the Lord's delight.

It is not known if the Jews coming to worship before the Church will or did happen in the years that followed but one thing is certain that in the last days 'that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' Phil 2:11

A beautiful promise is made to this struggling Church. People we know that he loves them. This must mean that he will so bless and guide them that the Jew in particular will discern that God is among them and showing his favour.

Revelation 3:10

"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."

One of the greatest rewards of persevering in one aspect of life means that the Lord will preserve one in the next trial. We will pass the test if we humbly persevere in one situation at a time. The hour of trial is not known in specific terms. It could have been the Roman Empire persecuting Christians or a more general application. Testing times come in most generations and it is more how we live before such a test as to what to do when the test comes upon us. If our life is normally keeping his word and persevering then we shall be well placed to face the overall testing situation.

Revelation 3:11

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

Here is a promise and warning combined. The Risen Christ tells them that he is coming quickly. It has been said that in the New Testament the Coming of Christ is continually used for two purposes.

(i) It is used as a warning to the neglectful. Jesus himself tells of the wicked servant, who took advantage of his master's absence to conduct himself evilly and to whom the master made a sudden return that brought judgement. (Matthew 24:48-51). Paul warns the Thessalonians of the terrible fate which awaits the disobedient and the unbelieving when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven and shall take swift and final vengeance on his enemies (2 Thessalonians 1: 7-9). Peter warns his people that they will give account for their deeds to him who comes to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4: 5).

(ii) It is used as a comfort to the oppressed. James urges patient endurance on his people because the coming of the Lord is drawing near (James 5: 8); soon their distresses will be at an end. The writer to the Hebrews urges patience, for soon he that shall come will come (Hebrews 10: 37).

Holding fast is seen in several texts of the Old and New Testaments. Nine are in the OT including the following texts:

You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him, and to him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in his name. Deut 10:20

"For if you carefully keep all these commandments which I command you to do — to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to hold fast to him Deut 11:22

You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him, and keep his commandments and obey his voice; you shall serve him and hold fast to him. Deuteronomy 13:4

"but you shall hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have done to this day." Josh 23:8

Paul has a similar word for the Corinthian Church

"by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain." 1 Cor 15:2

In a letter to Timothy Paul says,

"Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." 2 Tim 1:13.

Out of several texts from Hebrews we read in Hebrews 10:23

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. "

The crown in verse 11 is unspecified. The Bible speaks of several crowns that we may obtain. There is an imperishable crown (1 Cor 9:25), a crown of rejoicing (2 Tim 4:8), a crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4), and a crown of life, Jam 1:12). Let us make sure that we do not lose our crown already allocated to us if we remain faithful.

Revelation 3:12

"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."

As in the letters to the other Churches Philadelphia The Lord gives his own promises to them. To the over comers, the Lord confirms they would be made pillars in the temple of God. This high honour was bestowed upon the Greek priests who had died in this area. Barclay records that the name of the priest and his father were engraved upon a new pillar then lifted into place in the temple as a permanent remainder of the priest's faithfulness in service. James, Peter and John seemed to be pillars in the early New Testament Church (Gal 2:9).

There is also a promise of permanence in the new life with God. No more roaming but stability, a place of security and care. It should be remembered that this place like others in Asia Minor were subject to many earthquakes and this in turn produces insecurity. God will remove all such concerns.

There must needs be a new heaven and a new earth because both have been corrupted by sin. This was caused by Adam on the earth and by the fall of Satan from heaven. Together with a new heaven there will be a new name given written upon their hearts?

Revelation 3:13

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

As with all the other churches the cry goes out to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church individually. A church either runs on a programme which is manmade or follows the leading of the Spirit.

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