

## **REWARDING A LOCAL CHURCH**

### **Revelation 3:7–13**

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A Church that remained true to the Lord in the midst of trial, Revelation 3:7–13. Letters to first century Christians passed on to a twentieth-century church. ““To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 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. 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. 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. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him 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 him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”” (Revelation 3:7–13, NIV).

**I. As is the case with all these letters, an understanding of the town itself is often a key to understanding the insights, which are being provided in this letter.**

The letter of the Lord to the church at Philadelphia is a letter, which draws upon the rich history of the town itself and applies it then to the Christians who are living there. The city got its name because of a love of a brother for another. A Pergamum king established the city nearly two

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hundred years before Christ. We've already looked at the letter to the church at Pergamum and how it was a citadel, which for years was capital of an empire. About 150 years before Christ there lived two brothers. One was king. He went away on a journey, while he was gone the reports came that he was assassinated. The townspeople persuaded his brother to take the kingdom. However, a few weeks later the brother showed up not assassinated at all. His brother then yielded back the throne. Quite a contrast in the way brothers in these times often treated one another. There were quite a few murders in families to achieve thrones.

The Romans later wanted the second brother to take their side and topple his brother and promised if he would he would become king. Again he refused. When this city was established they decided to give it the name of "Philadelphus," for the love of brothers. There was a loyalty in their relationship that is markedly seen in the quality of the loyalty that this church had for Jesus Christ.

Another feature about the city that relates to the letter is that this city was known as a missionary city long before the Christians were there. The main reason why it was founded by the Pergamum king was so that it might spread the Greek language and the Greek civilization to the more barbaric provinces to the east. There was the hope that it would accomplish this—this noble way of life and this noble Greek language. They were so successful in spreading Greek language and culture to the surrounding area that within a hundred years, just a few years before Christ's birth, the mother tongue of Lydia had completely died out and every one spoke Greek. It was incredible the extent of this city as a missionary city.

The Christians understood it as a missionary city. It is to this town that the word is given "Behold I have set before you an open door" (Revelation 3:8).

This city had a third characteristic in that it was an earthquake city. We can find a lot of identification with that. It happened to be on a large expanse of ground that was especially subject to earthquake kinds of action. In the year 17 A.D., or seventeen years after Christ, a great earthquake struck that part of the world and twelve cities were struck hard. The worst one that was struck was this town of Philadelphia because it was closest to the fault line. It was practically demolished. What made it so bad was the continuing tremors that affected the town. In the other eleven cities the tremors after a while died down, but not so in Philadelphia. They continued for along expanse of time. So much so that practically everybody moved out of the town and the few people that remained in town to try to live under the buttressed up walls of buildings and the like were scorned by the people outside of the town, so frightened were the people by the earthquake.

When Tiberius Caesar learned of the terrible tragedy at Philadelphia, he decided to help rebuild the city and remit its taxes for five years. So the city took a new name—Neo Caesarea—New Caesarea. About fifty years later, when a new Caesar befriended the city, it was yet given one more name, the name of Flavia. But after awhile, it reverted back to its original name of Philadelphia. This is connected to the thought in the letter that you're going to be so secure that you're going to be in the temple and you'll never need to go out.

It's also connected to the thought in Revelation 3:12, "I will give to you a new name," for this city had known what it was like to have temporary names that arose and then passed away, the name from a benefactor. This time the Lord says "I'll give you My name, the great benefactor of salvation will be placed upon you." There is the character of the Lord given to this city.

**II. As is customary with all the letters the Lord represents himself to the city by features of His personality that specially apply to the church.**

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Up until now in the first five letters, the Lord has taken terms of His personality from the vision He has revealed to John in chapter 1. But now He takes details of His personality not from that vision of chapter 1 but which are emerging because of the conflict in the city of Philadelphia between the church and the synagogue. In Revelation 3:9, we see “Behold I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not but lie, behold I will make them come and bow down before your feet.” This same kind of conflict with a synagogue was going on at another town, Thyatira. Evidently a good many of the Christians at Philadelphia had themselves been members of the synagogue. When they had acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah they had been excluded from the synagogue. Members of the synagogue had extremely bitter feelings toward these who had been their fellow members, and they had extremely bitter feelings toward Jesus. What they were saying toward Jesus in the synagogue was something like this: He is the defiled one. He is the unholy one. Born of virgin? Who could believe that rubbish! Raised from the dead? The suffering Messiah? Never. The true one? No, not at all. The fake, the pretender, the deceiver of Israel. This is He who leads people astray.

In contrast to this the Lord represents himself to this church as the holy one and the true one as direct rebuttal to what the synagogue was evidently saying about Him.

The word “the holy one” was a term used in the Old Testament frequently to describe God. Isaiah 40:25 speaking in the language of the Lord “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” (NIV). As Jesus—God—is saying in the Old Testament text, “There is no one like Me. I'm holy. There is a sacredness to Me that there is to none else.” Jesus in Mark 1:24 when He begins His ministry in the Capernaum synagogue and casts out a demon from a demon-possessed man, that demon cries out, “I know who you are—the holy one of God!” (NIV).

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The Christian testimony to Jesus is that the very unique and special person of which there is no other who fully represents God and is God has come to earth. So Jesus reminds that congregation of the reality of that for which they have stood and for which cause they had been expelled from the synagogue. Because they dared to use the word of Jesus which is used of God the Father. “The Holy One.” And He is the true one.

The synagogue said He was an impostor, fraud, a fake, the deceiver, the false messiah. In Revelation 3:7, Jesus also identifies himself in a third way as the holder of the key of David, “who opens and no one shuts and who shuts and no one opens.” This is a reference to an Old Testament passage in Isaiah 22:22 where King Hezekiah had an administrator, kind of the top person of him and he was replaced by an appointed one who was told that he was the holder of the key of the house of David. And that therefore in the Davidic kings, Hezekiah was the descendent of David, he had the control of his administrator. Whoever he let in, the king got to see him. Whoever he excluded, was excluded. There was this sense of conflict between the church and the synagogue where in a sense the church had been kicked out and therefore excluded from the promises of God in the synagogue’s point of view. But here this exalted text says to these beleaguered Christians at Philadelphia, “There is one who holds the key. Entry into the kingdom of God is granted by Him and Him alone. Do not fear the expulsion, but rather fear Him who has the exclusive power to include or to exclude.”

We can, therefore, study history and get a little bit of the conflict. But how does that relate to today in terms of Jesus being the holy one, the true one, the holder of the key of David? Is He these things to you? Is He holy? None other like Him? Reserved for first place in your life? Is He on the throne of your life? Is He true rather than false? Is He the one who gives you entrance unto God? Or will He be the one to exclude you?

The expanse today is still lined up in terms of those who see Jesus as holy, true, and the one who has the power to grant eternal life, the exclusive one. Or those who see Him as not having these things at all. To those who have received Jesus Christ and believed in His name, the Lord assures those that He is these things that they have believed.

**III. The Lord then goes on, once He has introduced His character to these people and to us, to give a commendation to this church.**

The commendation, which He gives, is the outstanding quality of the church, which is loyalty. Revelation 3:8 says, “I know that you have but little power but you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” Continuing in verse 10, the Lord says, “You have kept my word of patient endurance.” In the Greek language the verb tense which is used is a past tense which means a point of action which had already occurred. In other words what is being said is not, “You are keeping My word and are not denying My name.” But “You kept My word and you didn’t deny My name.” Which means there was a crisis in the recent past in this church where they were really on the line. In the midst of extreme pressure they held true to the Lord. We do not know what this test was, which occasioned the remark of the Lord: “You held true and I approve you for it.”

But we do know some of our own tests, and the Lord approves of us for holding true to Him in the midst of these tests, tests like the lure of the world, a romantic relationship with a non-Christian, the illness or death of a loved one, or a severe hurt or trial that has come to your life which has been so severe in its impact it would have been very easy to have questioned the nature and character of God. Yet you have remained true. In all of these tests and crunching trials the Lord says “I see you when you’re holding true. I want to remind you of My approval of that

kind of loyalty.” The Lord pretty quickly gets around to saying that kind of loyalty is greatly rewarded.

With this commendation the Lord gives some promises. There’s no criticism by the way of the church at Philadelphia. We saw of the church of Sardis that there was no commendation, there was just criticism. But here’s a church remarkably opposite. No criticism, simply commendation. It may be that there are among us those persons that when Christ looks at your life He says, “There’s nothing right now I can commend. Everything you’re doing is dead works to Me. You are dead.” But there are others in the body whom the Lord may be speaking these words to and saying, “As I look at your life, even though you’re little powered people and may not be doing a whole lot in terms of what people count as success in the faith, I see that you have been true and I count that as something very special to Me.”

#### **IV. So the Lord gives some promises with His commendation.**

The first promise, which He gives in verse 8, is that He will grant the church at Philadelphia an open door. An open door. I think this is a Scripture that can apply to every believer. An open door can mean one of two things. Probably here it means both. It is first of all an open door of salvation. It is the Lord holding the door open to His kingdom and saying, “Whosoever will, may come.” It is assuring us that it is He who grants salvation. So the door is open—come on in and taste of the life Jesus Christ has. But the open door also can be a door of service to the Lord. This church at Philadelphia was uniquely located to be a sending center for the gospel of Jesus Christ to other places. The Lord is saying, “I know that you don’t have all that needs to be in terms of a mighty church that can send forth persons, but I assure you that even though you have little power I hold that door open. And if I hold it open, no one can close it.”

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I think that there are times in our life when we're especially sensitive to open doors. Paul was in 1 Corinthians 16:9 at Ephesus. He says "a great door for effective work has opened to me," (NIV). And he stays in Ephesus for two years or three. In 2 Corinthians 2:12 Paul says "I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me" (NIV). Colossians 4:3 Paul again said while he was in prison, "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message" (NIV). Here, now, the Lord is saying, "I hold before you an open door." We can really do nothing as an individual person or body of people in the Lord's work unless it is He who opens the door. That's why prayer is so vital. It is He who opens the opportunity. It is He who closes the opportunity. I think, for example, of the second missionary journey when Paul wanted desperately to go to some places where God slammed the door on him. He walked hundreds of miles trying to find an open door. He wanted to go north to Bithynia—northern Turkey today—but the Lord said no. He finally wound up at Troas and the Lord there gave him an open door of a vision. But He kept trying the doors to see which one would be open. When the open one was found the Lord put him in it in a remarkable way and established him. So much of Christian life can be frustrated if we stay pounding on a door which God has closed and don't move on to the door which He has opened. If your heart is not into serving the Lord you'll never see the open door. The Lord says I set before you an open door. An open door of service. He also indicates that to them will be given eventual recognition. Revelation 3:9 says, "You're not recognized now by the synagogue." The synagogue saw itself in terms of the prophets, Isaiah 60:14 for example who sees that after captivity, the nations, the Gentile nations would come and recognize Israel: "The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (NIV).

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The hope of Israel was that the heathen would bow down would recognize their God. In supreme irony, the Lord is saying Israel has become the heathen. The body of Christ has become the Israel of God. The synagogue must recognize someday the truth for which the church stands. As Zechariah 12:10 says, “They will look on me, the one they have pierced” (NIV). These are penetrating prophetic words, which have to do with the relationship of Israel to the church.

The Lord tells the church further as a promise that He will preserve them from the hour of trial, the great trial Revelation talks about as coming on all the world. He’ll keep them from the hour of trial. There’s difference of how to interpret this. Some believe that the promise in Revelation 3:10, “He will keep you from the hour of trial” means He’ll take the church completely out of the trial all together. Deliverance from the hour of trial means the removal of the church from the world. Others feel that “kept from the hour of trial” means that the body of Christ is preserved spiritually in the midst of the great trial that is coming. Those who have this particular viewpoint know that the verb “keep from” is used only one other time in the New Testament and that’s in John 17:15 where Jesus says to the disciples “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (NIV). In that sense the keeping power the Lord is talking about is not the keeping power of removal but the keeping power of giving one strength to go through the trouble.

I’m not sure I know enough to say which one it is. I’m ready for either and I hope you are too.

There is responsibility given to this church then to faithfulness. The Lord says to them in verse 11, “I’m coming soon. Hold fast what you have so that no one may seize your crown.”

Sometimes in Revelation the word “crown” is a laurel wreath that one wore about the head at weddings or victories or triumphs. Here I wonder if it does not stand for those responsibilities the Lord gives us as believers to carry out. The Lord is saying as He sets before this church the open

door, “Watch that no one takes this responsibility from you. It’s the responsibility you had which I have given to you and it’s not just unilateral. I don’t just bestow it and you can cavalierly do what you want. You have a responsibility to keep the crown of service that I give for you to carry out.”

What crown do I wear as a Christian? Right now I guess I’m wearing the crown of pastor. That’s my responsibility in the body of Christ. If I start sleeping in to 11:00 every morning and being cavalier about my responsibilities someone is going to take my crown. The deacons. The church. They’re going to say, “You can’t have your cake and eat it too. It’s either get to work or get off the ship.” They take your crown.

There are many ministries within the body of Christ. Ministries of teaching young people, children, adults. Ministries of being deacon or deaconess or counselor or Bible teacher or server or exhorter or any of a number of facets of responsibility in the body of the Lord that He gives to us. The Lord essentially through this is saying, “Are you seeking to go along with Christ yet seeking to escape responsibility in His body?” No, part of being part of the body of Christ is carrying some kind of responsibility and watching so that no one seizes your crown. Yet I’m asking myself, “Does anything depend upon me in the body of Christ in a sanctified sense? It all depends upon God but there are some things He trusts to our co-working with Him. Does anything depend upon me?”

We find illustrations in Scripture of persons who did lose their crowns. Esau lost his to Jacob through carelessness. Judas lost to Matthias through treachery. The Jews lost to the Gentiles through hardness of heart. Jesus warns His church “that no one may seize [their] crown.”

**V. Then He gives to the church some challenges.**

He challenges us always to conquer and to hear. His challenge to conquer is accompanied with a promise in verse twelve: “To him who conquers or overcomes I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God. Never shall he go out of it.” That’s a great promise in an earthquake city. Something that remains. That stands. In these times when there was a priest in one of the pagan religions who was specially liked or who had made a big name for himself, when he died they would build a pillar in the temple in his honor and inscribe his name upon it. It’s conceivable that the Lord drew upon this kind of imagery to say, “I’m going to make you permanent in My kingdom and you’ll never have to flee like you fled this city of Philadelphia from time to time. You’re with Me forever.” Permanence. It’s in real contrast to what He had said to Sardis about taking names out of the book of life. Here He’s saying “I’ll make you a pillar. Something that stands forever.”

He says also in verse 12, “I will write in him the name of My God, the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem which comes down out of My God in heaven and My own new name.” Three names written on the Christian. Sort of like a heavenly passport. My passport has my name and the name of my country. It admits me or excludes me from countries in this world. The Lord is saying, “I give you the heavenly passport, which has the name of my God as the tag of ownership. I give you also the name of the new Jerusalem, the city of God. And I give you my own new name.” I think there’s an incredible sort of cross reference to this in Revelation 19 where the Lord is pictured as a conqueror who is returning from heaven. In 19:12 it says “His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself” (NIV). What can that possibly mean? It can mean that there is that part of the identity of Jesus Christ that is yet known to Him but not known to us. We know Him as Savior. We know Him as Redeemer. We know Him as Friend. We know Him as Judge. Yet

no one knows himself like He knows himself, that new name, that mystery of Him which we have not yet fully explored or who we have not yet fully learned to worship. It is, I think, that new name which He knows himself that is given to us in that day so that we will know Him in the sense that even as He knows us.

What the Lord is promising believers is a permanent residence. Philadelphia had been through name changes. But the Lord now promises His people that they need only go through the name change of having His name placed permanently upon them. We live in a world of change. Thirty percent of you, according to statistics, will change residences some time this year. Move apartments, move houses or move out of the area. Mobility. Change is the watchword of our day. The Lord is saying to a people of change “When you come into My kingdom I give you permanence.” There have been, if a generation is a forty-year period of time, there have nearly fifty generations since the birth of Christ. That means if you put all of these years into a time span, suppose you could fit the last two thousand years into an hour of time. That would mean that we have lived about one minute of that time. About 59 minutes of that time has been lived by others. Jesus promises us not only permanence in regard to being with Him being in His city but He promises us permanence in regard to eternity. Therefore when He says He is holy and true and the holder of the key of David He is absolutely in earnest about saying to us how much greater He is than us and how much He really has to offer us: this life and the life to come. I'm not apologetic in talking about the life to come because it is why Jesus came, to save us from the wrath of God and to bring us into eternal fellowship with Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Closing Prayer**

One of the dangers, Lord, of looking at a Scripture even this short is that so many things pass us in so few moments of time. If we're careless in our spirit we may let Your message go over us

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because it is so comprehensive in its scope. You want to say so many things to us. We pray, Lord, that our hearts would be like sticky paper, to grab those darts of Your Spirit which were sent directly for us. I feel especially sensitive in my heart today of the fact that You want some of us to look very seriously at the crown that we are wearing or perhaps are not wearing. That You want to make us alive in our spirit with special responsibilities that we can carry in Your body that no one else can do, no one else in this church. A special, unique contribution of service or hospitality or teaching or giftedness or music or whatever You called us to do. A responsibility that we're called to carry. You're saying to us in gentle words as You commend us that we have kept Your name, kept Your faith. "Don't let anyone seize your crown." Don't give up the ship. Do not become discouraged in well doing for in due season you will repay if you faint not. You're saying to others of us to be alive to the open doors that you're placing in our life. To not simply wait and simply look at the hallway of doors that stretch before us but to get up from our seat and begin trying the doors and begin to discover which one You have opened. Help us, Lord, as individual people and as a church to be sensitive enough to You that we could walk through the door that may be to the natural eye very small. We're like the Philadelphia church Lord. We're little-power people. We're not great by the ways the world measures or even great by the way often the church measures. But that's so the power and the glory might be Yours. We want, Lord, to be Your servants. We recognize that the problems with the harvest are not with the fact that there are no people that will be hungry to receive You. The problem is as so often is with willing workers who will shoulder responsibilities and carry forth Your name. Thank You, Lord, for setting before us open doors. Thank You for the assurance that You're with us always. For the knowledge that in Your sight we're beautiful. A pillar of the temple of my God. You see us with eyes that often we don't see ourselves—graceful in your presence, delicate and beautiful,

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works of spiritual art, which You have created through coming and dying for us and rising again.

We praise You for this. Help us, Lord, to see one another through eyes which You see us

through. Filled with grace and made strong through Your beauty. Thank You Lord for this hour.

In Christ's name, Amen.