

WILL WE DO OUR BEST?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church
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Revelation 3:7-13. The scripture today raises the question, "Will we do our best?" "To the angel [that is, messenger or pastor] 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 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. I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Here before us is the sixth letter from the Lord to the churches of the Roman province of Asia. What we know now as western Turkey. Notice that the letters weren't broken out and sent as individual separate letters. They're all together in a collection. That is the way they were written. The reason they were written in a collection is so that each of the churches may read what the Lord was saying to all of the other churches. Because the Lord's message through all seven letters is a universal message to all churches and all Christians in all places at all times. Though we look at the map geographically we see that the order in which the letters of revelation are arranged follows a rough circle that constituted the old Roman postal route. In each of the letters we have looked at an outline that involved the letter C beginning each of the aspects of the outline with the letter C.

We look today first at the City of Philadelphia.

It was known for three things. And it's important to see how the Lord employs the nature of Philadelphia in what he communicates to the church. There's a symbiotic relation between where we live and what kind of people we are. Southern California people are different than people who like living in a small town somewhere in the Midwest flatland of Nebraska. So the Lord addresses people often by the geographical linkage and cultural linkage they have.

Philadelphia was known primarily for three things. It was a city of brotherly love. That's its name. We have such a city obviously in the United States named after ancient Philadelphia. It had acquired its name in its founding 150 years before Christ. It was founded by the ruling city of Pergamum. The ruler of Pergamum went on a trip to Greece and the report reached back to Pergamum that he had been assassinated. So his bother was asked to take the throne. Reluctantly he agreed. Sometime later the first brother showed back up, alive and well. His brother, ruling, rather than contesting the throne as with many royal brothers at that time who had hatred or fratricide (the killing of brothers) toward one another gladly yielded the throne. Later when the Romans took over control of the region they wanted him to overthrow his brother but again he reused. So the new town the brothers founded was named Philadelphia, "Brotherly

WILL WE DO OUR BEST? Jesus' Concerns for His Church

Love.” He had learned to play “second fiddle” in the relationship and love his brother and not seek a place of honor. There’s much to commend in that attitude.

Philadelphia was also known as a missionary city. Not a missionary city in the Christian sense but missionary in the cultural sense. The reason why it was founded in the first place was not to be a military outpost or strategic center militarily. It was founded to expand Greek culture and ideas. In fact it was given the specific task since it was a border town where three provinces joined together, it was given the task of Hellenizing its area. That is causing the citizens living there to speak Greek and follow Greek ways. Because the division of ethnic groups it was very difficult to attain political union in the area. So Philadelphia was planted to bring a cultural unity. It did its task well. In fact within a hundred years the mother tongue had become the Greek language displacing the other languages.

What happened in Philadelphia would be equivalent to the United States taking over Tijuana and saying, “We are going to make Tijuana an English speaking city in order to Americanize all of northern Mexico.” That was Philadelphia’s fate - to Hellenize, Greekenize its culture.

Then a third thing that the city was known for was the fact that it was an earthquake city. Seventy-five years before the writing of this letter it had had a massive earthquake that had destroyed 12 surrounding towns and the epicenter was at Philadelphia and it was demolished. The earthquake wasn’t as bad as the aftershocks. There were aftershocks at Philadelphia for 20 years. The city was almost deserted. People lived in huts outside of town. People who lived in the city were regarded as crazy because building materials in the first century were these blocks and masonry and that’s the thing that can really hurt you in an earthquake.

So Philadelphia had been through an earthquake and was very earthquake conscious even as Californians are earthquake conscious because of what happened all the way back to 1906 in San Francisco. We know the kind of damage those things can do.

Each of these traits of the city will be picked up by the Lord in his letter and referred to as they relate to the church.

First there’s the city. Next there’s the Character of the Lord that is identified in the letter. Verse 7. Frequently in the letters the Lord selects some aspect of the town’s history and culture to interface with his character, so we would expect him at Philadelphia to say, I am he who is never shaken, picking up the earthquake nature of the city and referring it to himself. But he doesn’t do this. Instead he selects aspects of his character that relate to the conflict in the town that went on in the synagogue because the church had evidently started in the synagogue at Philadelphia. There were Jewish persons who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They had evidently been rather forcefully expelled from the synagogue and following that there had been persecution. Remember this is before all the terrible things that happened with the institutional church’s treatment of Jews. And all the bad ethnic relationships that have gone on since then.

I think true Christians are always those that model after first century believers who always let religious controversy be dealt with in a spirit of love. And also always using words never using fists. Never using threats. Never using physical violence.

WILL WE DO OUR BEST? Jesus' Concerns for His Church

This synagogue had turned against the believers there. Much like the radical Jewish organizations have desecrated some of the Assemblies of God messianic synagogues on the East Coast by spray painting and vandalizing and threatening attenders. It is that kind of confrontive sort of setting. A confrontive setting that is happening today in Jerusalem between orthodox and secular. Incredible things happening in Israel today between Jews. Racial and religious intolerance is an awful thing.

The Lord picks up on this as he's writing to his church at Philadelphia. He identifies himself in synagogue language. He says I am the holy one. Why does he say this? Because the synagogue was saying that he was unholy. "Holy" after all is a term reserved for God alone. But the synagogue at Philadelphia was saying that Jesus was a sinner, the son of a devil. He was born illegitimately. Christ replies with the name that reminds his people that he is the holy one the eternal God. Isaiah 40:25 "To whom will you compare me or who is my equal," says the holy one."

To us, Jesus is not just another religious teacher or moralist. He alone is unique. He comes from God and he is God. He is holy.

He is the true one. The Philadelphia synagogue said he was an imposter a fraud, a fake, a deceiver, a false messiah. But Jesus says I'm the real messiah. The word "true" is the word "real." Jesus says "I am the real one."

There are only four options in regard to Jesus. He is either a legend, a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. He identifies himself here as the Lord.

Thirdly he says he is the holder of the key of David. That's an obscure phrase. What in the world does it mean to hold the key of David.

Isaiah 22:15-22. The situation was that during the time of King Hezekiah a descendant of David ruler over Judah, he had an administrative aide named Shebna. Shebna was a guy who got into death so he built himself a great big tomb. Hebrew people don't go in for big tombs. Ornamentation associated with death is a pagan thing. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord rebuked Shebna, told him he was going to be fired and a new guy was going to take his place named Eliakim. And that Eliakim would be given the key to the house of David and what he opened no man could shut and what he shut no man could open.

What does that mean? It simply means that as the administrative assistant to the king he was the appointment secretary and he controlled who got in and who didn't get in. Jesus is saying that he has the title of the Holder of the Key of David. He says "He who comes to the Father must do so through me." The door he opens no one can shut. And what he shuts no one can open. He brings us our access to God.

We have become locked in a trunk of our own sinful choices and we cannot get out on our own power. But there is someone who has the key. The key to unlock the prison of our own bondage and our own death and our own sin and our own wrong habits. The key has not been lost. Jesus has the key and he's quite willing to use it and to open the door.

That's the character by which he refers himself to the church.

WILL WE DO OUR BEST? Jesus' Concerns for His Church

Then third, there is the Commendation Christ brings to the church. He always seeks something that he can commend or approve. The outstanding trait of the Philadelphian Christians was their loyalty. "I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name... You've kept my command to endure patiently. I will also keep you." The word "kept" – past tense in verse 8 & 10 is a word that denotes an action in time that had occurred and is now over. It had been a severe trial and test but they had remained faithful in the test.

We don't know what the test was. And it's just as well that we don't because then we can identify with our own tests.

There are many ways if we're going to follow Christ that we're going to be tested. Our loyalty is going to be tested. We're going to be tested at school, we're going to be tested at work, we're going to be tested at home, we're going to be tested in numerous ways as to how our commitment to Jesus Christ will come ahead of other things. Jesus knows when those tests come and he seeks chances to approve us for remaining faithful.

Most of the letters to the churches there then follows word of criticism after a commendation. Then following the criticism there is a correction. But at Philadelphia as at Smyrna the second church there is no criticism of the church therefore there is no correction.

Instead there is Call. A call to the church and a call to us. It is a call that has four elements to it.

First there is the call to the open door. "I have set before you an open door which no one can shut." Some thing that the open door here is the door of salvation. The synagogue doors had been shut but the door was open to God. That may very well be because the door is open to God through Jesus Christ.

But more likely the door referred to here in Revelation 3:8 is the door of opportunity, the door of service. An open door is referred to a number of times in Paul's letters. "A great door for effective work is open to me and there are many who oppose me." 1 Corinthians 16:9. 2 Corinthians 2:12 "When I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me." Paul asked the Colossians in 4:3 "Pray for us too that God may open a door for our message." And in Acts 14:27 he tells the church at Antioch "God opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."

So an open door is a door of service, a door of expanded responsibilities and it fit the Philadelphia situation. The Philadelphia church had been loyal to Jesus and the Philadelphia church had the attitude toward the open door of activity for ministry, the same way the city was to be founded to walk through an open door to make Greek everything around it. Philadelphia Christians though few in number were being told to see themselves as their city had once seen itself. Only the church's mission was to spread the message of Jesus, not the message of some culture.

Every one of us here in the sanctuary today has somewhere in our life a door of opportunity. It may be a door that we don't even think of as a door. What an opportunity parents have with children. And what a day of opportunity to be involved in our families and our schools and our work. Every where if we would just think of an opportunity it's waiting for us to serve the Lord.

WILL WE DO OUR BEST? Jesus' Concerns for His Church

The Lord says I put before you an open door. If the door looks closed, try it. See if it's open and walk through it.

As a church we've been trying to walk through the door of open opportunity by ministering to abused children and by asking people in the congregation to consider being foster parents. We've been walking through the door of opportunity to youth and to children, the door of ministry to the immigrant in our land whether Asian or Hispanic. The door of opportunity to single parents, to families as a church. We must commit ourselves to walk through open doors. We never know who we'll be touching.

Certainly whoever stands behind this pulpit can never touch all the people that each of us can touch in our everyday world.

There's a door of opportunity that faces each one of us. If our heart is open to the Lord we will always see that open door.

There are other calls here. In addition to the door of opportunity there's the call of recognition, verse 9. Those who say we were wrong in our loyalty to Christ will ultimately recognize the truth for which we have stood. When someone is wrong we hope the day will come when for their own sake they admit their error.

There's the call to safety in verse 10. "Since you've kept my command I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world." Some think this is reference just to persecution in general. Others think that this is a reference to the tribulation period. If it's a reference to the tribulation then we have some who say here is a promise Jesus makes to rapture the church out of the trial. "I will keep you from the hour of trial." Then the post tribulationists come along and say, No this is a promise to preserve the church in the midst of trial. Like Jesus says in John 17:15 "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."

So "kept from the hour of trial" for some means being taken out of the world. For others it means being insulated in the midst of the storm.

Pre or post – you can argue whatever side you want. I'm going to take the middle position of "pan" – everything's going to pan out all right. God is always going to keep his people in any trial whether it's this trial or whether it's the tribulation. Sometimes he pops us out of the trial and sometimes he gives us the strength to go through it. But in either case he is committed to protect us.

Then there is the fourth call, the call to faithfulness – verse 11 "Hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown." What is the crown? It's not the heavenly crown of regal reign. The crown here seems to be that reference to that aspect of our being which cries with it a certain responsibility. Crown therefore sort of doubles as a title or a role we play. For example my crown is that I'm a husband, I'm a father and I'm a pastor. The crown that someone could take is that I'm unfaithful in my responsibilities toward my family or toward the church then I lose that crown of responsibility. There are people in scripture that have lost those kinds of crowns. Esau lost his to Jacob. Ruben lost his to Judah. Saul lost his to David. Judas lost his to Mathias. And the list can go on. Christ challenges us to remain faithful.

WILL WE DO OUR BEST? Jesus' Concerns for His Church

Then the letter is concluded with verses 12-13, which is a challenge from Christ both to conquer and to hear. Every letter has those two aspects – to him who overcomes I will give certain things. Then there is the wrap on it, the challenge to hear.

What are we going to be given if we remain loyal to Christ? Jesus says you're going to be given two things. For the Philadelphian Christians two things.

One is you're going to be a pillar in the temple of the Lord my God. That is one of the most unattractive promises I've ever read in the Bible. First of all I have a bad back so I don't like to stand still in one place and the idea of being a pillar and holding up a roof in a temple doesn't attract me at all.

So what is it to be a pillar in the temple of the Lord our God? We have to go back to the history of the city. Philadelphia was an earthquake city. It was a city littered with pillars that had fallen down. Pillars that had supported temples that were lying in ruins. When Jesus says to the Philadelphian church, "I'm going to make you pillar in the temple of the Lord my God," he's saying I'm going to give you permanence and there is nothing that will shake you, nothing that will topple you. You're a forever person. You're not a temporary person. You're a forever person. It's a great encouragement to us to think of that.

Then the second thing Jesus will do for us is he's going to write some names upon us. I don't know if he's going to tattoo them on or computerize them on or invisible ink them on or whether he's going to put them on our forehead or arm but we're going to have some names on us. First the name of my God – the Father. Then there is the name of the city in which we will live – the New Jerusalem, our permanent dwelling place. Then Jesus says there is my own new name. Revelation 19:12 tells us that when Jesus returns to the earth he is going to have inscribed on him a name that no one but he himself knows. We know him as Jesus, Jesus Christ, Messiah, Lord, the Nazarene, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the bright and morning star. But there is a title, a name, he says that no one but he himself knows. What Jesus is saying is that as brilliant as all the theologians might be there is an aspect to his nature and being that no one has yet figured out. There is an aspect to his identity that only he himself knows. In that day he will show us that aspect as well. He will put his own name – a new name – on us.

To Christians who lived in a town that changed names and Philadelphia had changed names Jesus promises the Christians in that town, I'm going to give you some things that will never be altered or changed. The name of my God, the name of my city, the New Jerusalem and my own new name. He says "He who has an ear to hear let him hear."

What door of opportunity is open before you? Will you walk through the door of opportunity? What test are you now enduring in your life? Will you be faithful to the Lord in that test?

Father, all of us have opportunities and all of us have tests. This letter that you gave to the Philadelphian church therefore is for us. We pray today, Lord, for anyone here going through some kind of trial or test where loyalty to you is at stake. We pray, Lord, that you will give them power to overcome. Then Lord we pray for all the open opportunities that are at our doorstep. First as persons. Personal things that are before us to effectively serve you. We pray Lord that we'll never shrink back from going through an open door because

WILL WE DO OUR BEST?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church

we're unwilling to try or to see if it was open. Or we had irresponsible fear in our life. Lord, let us be people of faith to go through whatever doors open you're calling us to. Then Lord, as a whole church, we pray to have an attitude as a whole body of people that sees life before us as an open door. May you work out your good will in us we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.