

Revelation – Letter to Philadelphia - The Faithful Church ch.vv7-13
No.9

After dealing with Christ's words to the first 3 churches we traced the problems that affected them so long ago, and still affect the church of today of which we are a part.

The love had gone from the church, and error had been allowed to creep in, so it wasn't before long that those who were faithful to Christ became a minority – and those who compromised with the world became the majority. Yet to all these churches the Christ who sees and knows all things came with the severest of judgements if there was no sign of repentance – and the promises to over-comers if they did change their ways and return to their first love and faith.

So it is with great joy to come to this Letter to the church at Philadelphia. This was a church where love prevailed, and like the letter of Paul to the Philippians is filled with only praise and promises. There is not even a hint of criticism or condemnation, which is a refreshing change.

This church represents the church of revival and renewal. The few who remained faithful have been touched and transformed by the Spirit of God – and the result was a church where AGAPE was an experience, and not just a word. It is the kind of church I want to be part of.

Background to the church at Philadelphia

Philadelphia means 'brotherly love' which is part of our expression of social and spiritual grace – e.g. 1 John 4 v1 – "We should love one another" and v11 'since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another'

The city had a turbulent history, and was founded in the reign of Attulus I in about B.C 150. It was situated in the Lycus valley which was subject to frequent earthquakes, and along with 10 other cities was destroyed in AD17. This made people fearful of living there, and so the city remained small by comparison with others in Asia Minor. The chief local god worshipped was Bacchus (which implies something to do with excessive drinking by the residents)

The city was an influential centre of Greek culture. Its people were noted for their caring love for those in their community. You can imagine how much more dynamic they became when that human love was touched by God's love. The church there was a place where both natural human love and supernatural heavenly love were combined.

This kind of love makes bad men good and good men better.

Tradition has it that the church there was a woman pastor called Ammia, who was ranked as a prophetess along with the 4 daughters of Philip the Evangelist mentioned in Acts 21 vv9-10

To them the Lord writes the letter -

1. Christ –

The author is described in v7 as being 'holy and true' - and the one 'who holds the key of David.'

Here he is described in 3 aspects -

i. As being 'holy', as God is holy. It is the one characteristic that sets Jesus part from all others – and it is equally amazing that we are to be 'holy, as he is holy.'

We are often afraid of the word - but I was less fearful when I heard Revd. Stephen Alford say – 'Holiness in the soul in perfect spiritual health.'

Without holiness it will be impossible for anyone to stand before the God who is holy.

It doesn't mean wearing a halo above your head (or a white plastic one around you neck).

It means being able to stand before God in the righteousness which is not yours, but is that of Jesus your Saviour.

Being holy literally was 'The Holy One' which was a name given to God – and which Jesus accepted as being equal within the Trinity of 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

cp 6v10 – Where Jesus is described again as 'the Sovereign Lord, holy and true'

This description tells us that Jesus is 'genuine'. He is all that He claims to be. It also means that he is faithful and that He will always keep his word.

ii. He is also described as being 'True'. Jesus is the 'true One'

He said so in John 14v6 – 'I am the way, and the Truth, and the life'

He not only spoke the truth – He is the truth -and it is only in him that we discover who and what is true

iii. He is also described as the 'one who holds the keys of David'.

We might not see at first what this implies if John had not written down immediately what Jesus told him to write. Jesus was the one with the authority of a king - who can open and shut doors – and which once done no-one can undo.

The words take us back to Isaiah 22v22 – which was a promise given by God to a man called Eliakim, who was a faithful servant of king Hezekiah – 'I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no-one can shut; and what he shuts no-one can open'

The Key of the House of David – means the authority that being a king like David carried with it. Remember that Christ himself is described as being of the 'lineage of David', and such authority comes with that relationship

The doors mentioned here might refer to the city gates which once closed by the king could not be opened – or once opened could not be closed without his authority. In a greater measure it means that Jesus holds the key to admittance to heaven, as David might have held the key to the city of Jerusalem.

There are 'doors' we cannot open and we waste our time and energy trying to force open what God has closed. Equally there are doors that we cannot open, but He can, and when he does what is required of us is obedience is to go through those open doors to do His Will, wherever it takes us and whatever it means. This is something we need to learn if we are not to spend our energy doing what he does not want us to do,

2. Condemnation – there is none. Cp. Romans 8v1

‘There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.’

3. Commendation v8ff - there is plenty

Christ has 4 things to commend the church with - and then these are followed by a promise. The pattern is the same – Praise first and a Promise later.

a) I know your deeds –v8

He knows what we do and why we do it. He knows how well, or badly we have done.

He knows how often he has ‘opened a door’ of opportunity for us – and how often we have gone through it. I have a distant relative who is Dutch, and I well remember him preaching in his own language of which I am not familiar. I only understood one word as he preached from this verse – that was ‘open door’ – which any Englishman could recognise.

The greater the opportunities we have will bring greater opposition cp 1Cor.16 v9 where Paul says – ‘a great door of effective work has opened up to me – and there are many who oppose me.’

The test of a true ministry is measured by how many it makes glad – and how many it makes sad. As a young preacher I used to go to the home of a fiery Methodist pitman preacher who would ask each week – ‘Did anybody get saved?’ If the answer was ‘No’, he would then ask ‘Did anybody get mad? If the answer to that question was also ‘No’, he would say – ‘Did you preach the gospel then?’

Doors are opened by Jesus for a reason. They are doors of opportunity for both preacher and seeker. And both must go through them when they are open.

The doors to the Kingdom in this day of grace are still open, but will not always be so. Like when Noah and his family went into the Ark -God ‘closed the door’ and they were saved whilst the unbelieving world perished.

See – the door is open still and will remain so until God closes it.

The meaning of a closed door would be familiar to travellers in those days, because if they arrived at the city gates after dusk the doors would be closed – and not opened until sunrise.

But here the reference is to ‘open doors’ for Serving Christ. cp. 2Cor2 v12 where Paul says, ‘When I came to Troas to preach the gospel ... a door was opened for me by the Lord’.

He asked the Colossian Christians to pray for him on his visit to Rome ‘that God would open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.’

So then, the message to Philadelphia is to go through the door that Christ has opened and be a missionary church. The church has not used this open door often enough. In fact from 1792 and William Carey there was probably more missionary work done in the following 200 years than in the 1500 years since the door was opened at Philadelphia. We as a church have been very reluctant to go out through the ‘open door’ to welcome others in through that ‘open door’ to be with Christ. I wonder if that is because we think we are too small and insignificant?

Because there was something else Jesus knew about the church at Philadelphia –

b) I know that you have little strength.

If by that he means that you have little human strength, then that is an advantage and not a deterrent.

Paul boasted about his 'weakness' – what he described as 'a thorn in the flesh' - and which can only speculate about what it was. 2Cor.12v8-9 'The Lord said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in your weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me'. Paul boasted of his lack of strength, because it proved the mighty power of God working through him. The church was small and weak – but it was still useable for God.

Our 'weakness' is not the opportunity for us doing nothing – but is the opportunity for God doing something through us that without Him we cannot do. This is always my prayer – 'Lord give me something to so that I cannot do without you.'

When we start doing what we cannot do the 'adventure of faith' begins.

Yet – here is the other side of the coin. Their 'weakness' was obvious - but their strength was equally obvious if you look at it as Jesus did. YET – what a lovely word – Yet

c) You have kept my Word. i.e. You have heard and obeyed me.

For us, as for them, we are to see the 'open door' and go through it relying, not on our own strength, but on His power being made available to us. This is so because we do not go through the 'open door' alone – He goes with us in the person of the Holy Spirit to release his power to work through us to the salvation of others. The church does not only have to believe the Word - but also to obey it. This is not always so. Many will say they believe, but rarely do what Jesus asks them to do.

James 1v22 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves – but Do what it says.' In the church at Philadelphia all Jesus had to do was to make his word known and it was DONE. Just like at Creation – God spoke and it was done. Hebrews 11v2

John 14v23 – 'If you (anyone) love me you will keep my words – and my Father will love you and we will come you and make our home with you.'

Remember the words of Mary at the Wedding in Cana – "Whatever He says to you, do it." What a difference instant and total obedience would make in our individual lives - and in church life too. They had 'kept' God's word in as strange way – i.e. by giving its truth to others. By doing so Christ commended them further -

d) You have not denied my Name. v8b

Jesus had promised to the church at Sardis – or at least to the few who had remained faithful to his Name – that he would confess their name before this Father and the angels in glory. 3 v5

This is a 'cause and effect' promise. What Jesus does for us is directly related to what we do for him. Cp Luke 12v8 "Whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.'

The opposite is also true – that if we deny him here he will deny us there. cp His words of

condemnation to those who said ‘LORD! LORD!’ with their lips, but not with their hearts – ‘Depart from me -I never knew you’.

Peter is remembered for his denial of Jesus as much as for his loyalty and love for him. We all know that he denied Jesus 3 times during the night before the Cross. What made it worse was that just a few hours before he had said – ‘If all deny you – I will never deny you. I would rather die for you.’ But we know that he did what he didn’t ever think he would do. It is unfortunate for Peter that his 3 denials are written for all to see – I am glad that mine are still a secret between the Lord and myself. Could Jesus say of us as believers and as a church – ‘You have kept my word and not denied my Name?’

The churches of every generation are characterised by having much to say about what they believe, but not so much about how much they have obeyed - or perhaps more appropriate have disobeyed what they believe. To the church a Philadelphia Jesus commends what he sees and knows – ‘YET- despite your weakness – in relying on my strength you have kept my word and not denied my Name’

Now comes the promises after the praise.

i. The Vindication. vv9-10

They had stood firm and faced even those who were violently opposed to the gospel. Satan’s followers who, although they called themselves Jews, were members of ‘the synagogue of Satan’ Jesus has some harsh words to say about them – ‘they are liars’. I suppose in that they were like the one they served, who is described by Jesus in John 8v44 as ‘the father of lies.’

Those who proudly stood in opposition the Christ and his church will finish up grovelling in the dust before them. It is interesting to know why they will be brought to submission – it will be to acknowledge that Jesus loved those whom they despised and opposed. v9b

Some have suggested that the Jews mentioned here are few that became true believers in Jesus as their Messiah, and so come to worship with the others despite having formerly opposed them. But I do not think this is clearly said in the verse. It is more likely that as we read these letters and early church history we can see that there was a Jewish element in the church that wanted to make Christians into Jews and hold the view that they did, that Jesus was not God’s Messiah. This is the second time they have been referred to as ‘the synagogue of Satan’ being present within the church. They not only did not accept that Jesus was God’s Messiah for Jew and Gentile, but insisted that within the church that even Gentile Christians should submit to Jewish Mosaic Law in order to worship God as they did.

This problem did not go away, because a few years later the church at Philadelphia received a letter from Bishop Ignatius warning them not to listen to anyone propounding Judaism.

In the O.T. we are told that the heathen nations will bow down before Israel and acknowledge that God is with them. But here in Revelation it is the unbelieving Jews who will do that and acknowledge that believers in Jesus are truly loved by God, His Father.

Paul speaks in the same way in Phil 2 vv10-11 that the day is coming when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God.’ Every knee and every tongue means unbelievers as well as believers. The big difference is that we as believers can do that voluntarily now.

A true Jew was one like Paul, or John himself, who had found forgiveness and peace with God through the finished work of Jesus.

ii. Preservation –v10

An hour of trial was coming, but because you have kept my word I will keep you.

This hour of testing would be worldwide as well as church-wide, and whilst it would refer to the trials being brought upon the ‘whole world’ of the Roman Empire at that time, it could also apply to the ‘whole world’ at a later time connected to Christ’s return which is again mentioned in v11.

v10 says that they will be kept ‘from the hour of trial’ - and not as some have put it ‘in the hour of trial.’ There is no way of knowing which is the better translation. One thing we can know is that if we are kept from the Trial it could refer to the Rapture of the church before the Great Tribulation begins. However, if it some local trial that we cannot avoid we will be kept ‘in’ it and come through it. The idea is like the phrase we use of ‘keeping your head above the water’

Do we not pray as Jesus taught his disciples to say – ‘Lead us not into temptation’ - or as in another version – ‘Keep us from the evil one’. Whichever meaning seems best they both have value – that whatever test or trial we may face we will be kept in it if we cannot be kept from it. cp 1Cor.10v13 –‘No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted beyond what you can bear he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.’

Revelation ch.6 -18 is a prophetic parable about the Tribulation that will engulf the world - but it will not happen until Jesus comes – and he says in the next verse – ‘I am coming soon.’ The scene is being prepared; the opening acts have been performed – but the final curtain will not come down on this sinful world until Jesus comes.

The true church are those who truly belong to Christ, and have his promise that they have suffered enough whilst holding on to his word and not denying his Name - and they will be ‘kept’ in and though every trial including the final one which will engulf the world.

5. The Counsel vv11-12 - is based on the fact of the 2nd Coming of the Lord.

The counsel is simple, short and clear -They were to hold fast to what they had. It contains both a warning and a promise.

He was coming ‘soon’. That does not mean ‘at once’, but rather that he will not delay His Coming beyond the time set by His Father, who according to Mark 13v33 is the only one who knows the exact time. Cp. Acts 1v7 ‘It is not for you to know the times and dates the Father has set by his own authority.

The meaning is that as we don’t know the time of His Coming we should be ready when he does come and not be found wanting like the 5 foolish virgins, whose lamps went out before the bridegroom arrived.

We are to hold fast to what we have. What did they have? A crown.

This was the crown of Life referred to in ch.1v10. and which is promised to the over-comers in the church at Ephesus. If they received the ‘crown of life’, how much more will those at Philadelphia, who have ‘kept the word’ and ‘not denied his Name’?

How much more for us if we remain as faithful as they did?

Believers have to endure for Jesus the things they cannot enjoy.

They need to rely on their weakness being replaced by God’s power, so that in faithfulness they will stand firm against all the wiles of Satan. Cp. Eph.6 v10 – ‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the devil’s schemes’. By so doing we will share in the victory of Christ over Satan.

We shall be ‘more than conquerors’ through Him who loved us’

The crown is the over-comer’s crown. Not a laurel wreath at the early Olympic Games which will fade too soon, but a crown the will never lose its lustre because it is the ‘Crown of Righteousness’ In 2Tim 4v8 Paul says ‘ Now there in is store for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord shall give me.’ I am glad that he goes on to say – ‘and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.’

Peter says in 1 Peter 5v4 ‘When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.’

What a promises to hold on to! What Jesus promises is certain – so hold on to it.

Don’t let anyone or anything snatch it away from you – because you have to do something special with it one day cp Rev.4v10- the crowns are to be laid at the feet of Jesus as he is worshipped as the one who in worthy to receive all glory, honour and power.

One of the problems churches have today is that we do not ‘ hold fast’ the truths we once regarded as sacred – and man’s opinion about God has become more important than God’s opinion about man. Never go back to anything less than God has provided only in Christ – or what you have already experienced thought the Holy Spirit working in your life.

Go on through God’s ‘open doors’ to all that lies ahead. The church which is alive is alive because of the Spirit of God using the Word of God to lead people to Jesus, who is the Word of God, and to sharing in all that he has done for us in saving power and grace.

Churches like that at Philadelphia grow in love for God as well as knowledge of him.

The church that wants to stay as it is will never gain the crown that awaits the faithful – or enjoy the blessing that are to enjoy while we wait. Faithful churches will support a God-blessed, Bible-based ministry that lead to the Cross – and then to the crown.

5. The Challenge – vv12-13

Here again there are 3 aspects put before the over-comers in the church

i. I will make him a pillar in the Temple of my God.

A pillar is a support. This means that in the church of Christ the over-comers who hold fast to

the truth and wear the crown will become supports instead of supporters.

The Tabernacle construction detail is given to the fabric and function of every part - and especially the pillars. Pillars are often carved to look beautiful - but that is not what they are designed to be.

They are designed to carry the load of the building and hold it together.

We ought to be glad that in the church there are some who are 'pillars' capable of carrying the load of those who are not able to support themselves. This is why every church needs Elders and Pastors who are truly burden bearers.

ii. Never again will he leave it. This is a promise that David longed for cp Ps 23v6 - 'that I may dwell in the House of the Lord for ever.'

The pillar is part of the permanent construction of the Temple – as are those who are the 'pillars' of the church. This says something about the security the believer has in his God. He has promised that he will never leave us – and here He promises that we will never leave him.

From that moment on the over-comers have new names written on their lives.

Jesus himself will write these new names on those who are his.

Man was made in God's image, but sin spoiled that likeness. Now by saving grace God has remade us in Christ's image, and identifies those who are his by putting on them his own Name – 'They are mine,' says God. cp the seal of the Holy Spirit in Eph.1 v13.

This seal, or new name, identifies who we are – and to whom we belong.

So over-comers bear God's new name – and the new name for the city of God which is to come – and which will be perfect compared to the earthly city bearing that name. This New Jerusalem will come down from heaven and be inhabited by those who bear the Name of God – and also the name of the place where God dwells.

They will also bear a 3rd name – v12c

This is the new name of Jesus – known to us as the 'Son of Man' - known in heaven as the 'Son of God' – and now recognised by both earth and heaven as 'the Man, Christ Jesus' - that unique combination of the human and the divine. There is no-one else like him.

The hymn-writer says, 'God's new best name is Love' - and with that name written on us, as well as our own new name mentioned in 2v17 – plus the new name of Jesus – this is our sure passport into heaven and glory. These over-comers have kept the word - not denied his Name – which is now written on their lives. Others should recognise us as being different, even if they cannot know why it is so.

The religious leaders in Acts 4 questioned Peter and John by whose power and authority had they healed a man in the Temple precincts but could find no answer to their questions, and only concluded in v 13 that although they were unlearned and had never been to school they were identified 'that they had been with Jesus'. Somehow, if not visibly, they bore the Name of Jesus in their lives and conduct. So should we.

The Promise of Christ to the church at Philadelphia is such a blessing and challenge to us as we

read this Letter and Jesus reminds all who have ears to listen to what the Spirit says.

They had gone through God's open-door of opportunity here on earth, and one day go through another open door when they get to heaven itself. Christ's death on the cross was meant to open 2 doors – i. The doors of men's hearts to receive him
and ii. The doors of heaven through which He will receive them.

So let those who bear his name never deny it and do so to his glory alone, and to lead others by the example of love to be as the church at Philadelphia did. May the church I belong to here be such as to receive such commendation from Christ and not one word of condemnation.

Norman

Hiley July 2008