

Letters to the Seven Churches: Philadelphia

REVELATION 3:7-13

Baxter T. Exum (#1582)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to see you this morning! I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Clayton will be leading us in "We Bow Down" (#984). And remember, we plan on heading outside immediately after that song. When we are done singing, let's get out of here and do our visiting outside. The good news is: Our numbers in Madison and Dane County have improved dramatically over the past few weeks, so hopefully we continue heading in a good direction.

The other good news we have comes from our Bible correspondence course program. You might have noticed in today's bulletin that we had a total of 1192 lessons graded in January, coming in from 405 students, with 110 of them being new students. Several weeks ago, we had a rather unique letter come in that said,

Dear church,

I am writing in order to ask for a Bible study. I am a prisoner at Vernon County Jail. My wife is also serving the same sentence as I am. Currently your church sends her a Bible study, and I would like to be involved also. You see, we are not able to call each other, however, we write to each other every day. We had both attended the church of Christ in Viroqua for over 20 years. Thank you for your time and effort to reach out to prisoners. There are very limited Christian resources in prison.

Sincerely,

Travis

Again, Travis is in the Vernon County Jail up in Viroqua, and his wife is in Taycheedah up in Fond du lac. And that is all I know, but we are thankful that Travis and his wife are able to study together, due to what is being done by this congregation.

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. The good news is that God sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that message, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. And once again, we are starting today with a few examples. This one comes to us from the Wisconsin Avenue congregation in Huron, South Dakota, as Rebecca was baptized there last Sunday, January 31. We rejoice with Rebecca and her new Christian family out in South Dakota.

And the next one comes to us from the other direction, from the Carriage Oaks congregation in Bossier City, Louisiana, as Nick is baptized just a few days ago (on Wednesday, I believe). We are thankful for Nick's honest heart and courage in obeying the gospel this week. And again, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What Nick and Rebecca have done this week, you can do this morning! If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

This morning, we continue our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Back in December, we learned that the book of Revelation is written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD.

The first message is written to the church in EPHESUS. And Jesus' evaluation is that they are really good at standing for the truth and weeding out false teachers, but they had left their first love. So, Jesus calls on them to repent and return and to do the things that they did at the beginning.

The second message is sent to the church in SMYRNA. They had been pressured and slandered, but they are not condemned for anything; instead, Jesus encourages them to ***"be faithful until death,"*** and he would give them the crown of life – nothing but encouragement in that message.

The third message, is sent to the church in PERGAMUM. These people had faithfully held onto the Lord's name (going back to the days of Antipas, the Lord's faithful witness who gave up his life for the faith); however, some of the Christians in Pergamum were holding to the teaching of Balaam and to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and the Lord's message is that these people need to repent, or else he would come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the message to the church in THYATIRA. This congregation is growing in good deeds, but they tolerate the woman Jezebel, who is leading God's people astray. The Lord threatens them with judgment, but those who do not hold to the teaching of Jezebel are told to simply hang in there until the Lord returns, ***"Hold fast, until I come,"*** Jesus says.

Then, last week, we looked at the message to the church in SARDIS. They had a reputation for being alive, but Jesus accuses them of being dead; so, they are commanded to wake up and repent. There really wasn't anything positive about the church in Sardis, other than the fact that they had a few there who had not soiled their garments.

I. Today, we move to the next message, and this one is intended for the church in PHILADELPHIA.

And, by way of review, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we are using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We're looking at the CITY itself and any background information we

might have, then we'll look at how JESUS describes himself, we'll look at the POSITIVE, then the NEGATIVE, followed by any COMMANDS that are given, and then ending with a CONDITIONAL PROMISE. As you might be able to see, I've grayed-out the CRITICISM part of this, though, because, thankfully, there's nothing negative in this message. Like the message to Smyrna, this one is all positive. In other words, this message is sent to a church that is doing some things correctly. This is a church we need to pay attention to.

But we start with the city, and obviously, when we think of Philadelphia, we think of cheesesteaks, and Rocky, and the Liberty Bell, and the American Revolution, don't we? We think of Philadelphia as the birthplace of the United States Marine Corps, home of the first library, the first hospital, the first medical school, the first zoo, the first business school here in this country.

But, when people 2,000 years ago thought of Philadelphia, they thought of a city in Asia Minor, a city plagued by earthquakes, a city that had to be rebuilt over and over again. They thought of a city known for the production of wine, coming from the many grapes that were grown in the volcanic soil on the surrounding plains. They thought of a city founded by the Greeks in 189 BC, located on a major trade route, a city intended to spread Greek culture to the east, a gateway city, as we might say today. I don't know whether you've driven through Beloit lately, but over the past few years, Beloit has rebranded itself as the "Gateway to Wisconsin," inviting the people of Illinois to come up here to do business, promoting Wisconsin culture. This was Philadelphia's mission as a city. It was known as a "little Athens," because of its ties to Greece.

We know they had a major earthquake in 17 AD, and the aftershocks continued for many years. One ancient geographer actually referred to Philadelphia as a "city full of earthquakes." And whenever the slightest tremor was felt, it was common for everybody to immediately run outside the city for safety. In fact, over time, many people just moved out into the countryside permanently. By the way, we are looking at a picture of what is left of what is known as "Saint John's Church" in Philadelphia. It wasn't built until more than 500 years after New Testament times, but due to the earthquakes in the area, all that remains are these massive stone pillars.

We know that the city had a number of different names through the years. They started out as Philadelphia, a word meaning "brother lover," because the founder loved his brother so much. After the big earthquake in 17 AD, Emperor Tiberius made the city tax-free for a few years to help rebuild, and the city responded by renaming themselves "Neo-Caesarea," or "New Caesar," to honor the emperor. Later on, Emperor Vespasian did some good things for the city, so they renamed themselves Flavia (after Vespasian's family name). At one point, they had so many temples they renamed themselves Neokoros (meaning "Temple-Warden" or "Temple Keeper" or "Temple Sweeper"). But eventually, they came back to Philadelphia.

So, with this as background, let's look together at the message. It's found in Revelation 3:7-13,

⁷ "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: ⁸ 'I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹ Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹²

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and 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 My new name.
¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

II. **Having already looked at the CITY, we move along now to text itself and to the DESCRIPTION OF JESUS in this message.**

And unlike the other letters, this is the first time the description is not tied directly to the vision of Jesus back in Chapter 1. But instead, the description is tied to some other passages. Jesus is described as being ***“holy.”*** Back in John 6:69, Peter says to Jesus, ***“We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”*** To be ***“holy”*** is to be set apart, special, separate. But beyond being ***“holy,”*** Jesus is also described here as being ***“true.”*** This isn't necessarily ***“true”*** as opposed to being ***“false,”*** but the reference here is to being ***“genuine”*** instead of ***“fake.”*** Jesus is the real deal.

And then, beyond being ***“holy”*** and ***“true,”*** Jesus is also described as having the ***“key of David”*** – and because of this, he is one ***“who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens.”*** In Chapter 1, you might remember that Jesus is described as having the ***“keys of death and of Hades,”*** but this is different, this is the ***“key of David.”*** Back in Isaiah, God tells Isaiah to remove the wicked palace steward Shebna (an evil and self-serving man), and he is to replace him with a righteous man by the name of Eliakim. The Lord says (in Isaiah 22:22), ***“Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open.”*** Eliakim, then, seems to be something of a prophetic picture of the coming Messiah, a righteous leader, as opposed to those who had failed in the past. And the early Christians would have understood the reference, almost a direct quote from the prophets. Jesus has the authority of a temple steward, he has the ability to let people in and out. Jesus controls the door. He is the gatekeeper.

He is a God who opens doors. Now, I do find it ever so slightly hilarious that due to the COVID situation we are worshiping with the doors open this morning! For the record, it is very roughly 10 degrees below zero at this moment. But Jesus is described here as opening a door.

III. **...and this leads us to the COMPLIMENT.**

Notice: Jesus starts by saying, ***“I know your deeds.”*** Now, after reading the previous five messages, I'm guessing the church in Philadelphia might be a little nervous at this point! It seems that several of the other reports included a ***“but”*** right here, ***“I know your deeds, but...”*** and then Jesus drops the hammer. But here, the Lord explains that he has put before them an ***“open door.”*** We'll get back to that in just a moment, because I want us to start with the REASON for the open door. There's a ***“because”*** in verse 8. He gives them this ***“open door,”*** because they have ***“a little power”*** and have ***“kept [his] word,”*** and ***“have not denied [his] name.”*** The opening of the door, then, is the direct result of Jesus knowing their deeds.

He starts by suggesting that they have ***“a little power.”*** At first, it almost sounds like a criticism, but it's not! And I say that because of what the Lord says next. It seems to me, then, that Jesus is referring to their size, their numbers, their political strength, their resources: You might not have the budget of these other congregations, you might not have the attendance they have, you might not have the resources they do, but you are faithful with what you have! If we were to visit all seven of these congregations in Revelation, this is the church that we might be least impressed with. And yet, as Jesus evaluates this church, he is not looking at the externals.

And in terms of numbers and resources, we understand this, don't we? We are not a large congregation. We don't have the budget other congregations might have. We don't have the numbers and the dollars. And that might be discouraging sometimes, it's easy to focus on that. We look at other congregations, and it's easy for us to feel inadequate, but that's not how Jesus judges a congregation, is it? No! We think of God's response to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."** What is true of churches is also true of individuals. We might think we are too old, or too young, or not smart enough, or wealthy enough to do great things for God. But God isn't looking at the outside; he's looking at the heart. And that's what we see here. In verse 8, what Jesus notices when he looks at a church is whether they have kept his word (whether they are obedient to his word), and whether they have denied his name. Down in verse 10, he also says that they have **"kept the word of [his] perseverance."** The NIV has Jesus saying, **"...you have kept my command to endure patiently."** These people might not have power (from the world's point of view), but they are holding up under pressure. And unlike some of the other congregations, they are not giving in to a worldly way of thinking.

It seems that they are facing some pressure from the Jews. In verse 9, Jesus refers to those who are of **"the synagogue of Satan,"** those **"who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie."** It was common back then for the Jewish leaders to kick Christians out of the synagogues. They would "shut the door" on them. They were kept out. Jesus refers to this in John 16:2, when he said, **"They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God."** Jesus also refers to shutting the door in this way in Matthew 23:13 as he says, **"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."** Those Jews who persecuted the church were claiming to be God's people, but they are not. And here, Jesus says that these people who shut out the Christians will basically come crawling back, at some point finally understanding what they have done.

The point is: He sees that these people in Philadelphia are faithful – they keep his word and they do not deny his name - and in response, Jesus blesses them. He blesses them with an open door. They are faithful with what they have, and so he blesses them with more opportunities. Several times, the apostle Paul uses the picture of an open door to refer to opportunities. In Acts 14:27, Paul comes back from his First Missionary Journey and reports to the church, **"...all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."** In 1 Corinthians 2:12, he refers back to visiting Troas and says that **"...a door was opened for me in the Lord."** In 1 Corinthians 16, with reference to preaching in Ephesus, he says that **"...a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries."** In Colossians 4:3-4, he asks the church in Colossae to pray, **"praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak."** Opportunities for teaching and preaching were described as **"open doors,"** and that seems to be what we have here in Philadelphia. Because they had been faithful to the word and had not denied the Lord's name, Jesus is giving them an open door. He is entrusting them with even more responsibility.

And it seems that the same is true for us. If we keep his word and don't deny his name, we will also have opportunities – opportunities to take the word of God and faithfully use it to make a difference in this world, teaching through the word and through our personal example. Our goal, then, is to keep the word and then step through those doors the Lord opens for us. We live the word, and then we teach it. We show and then we tell. Jesus opens the door, and we step through it.

We pay attention to the world around us. We look for those open doors. We make ourselves available. We look for opportunities. We pay attention to the people around us, starting with our own friends and family. We don't have a shortage of opportunities, but we sometimes have a shortage of people who are willing to step through open doors. We think of what Jesus said in Luke 10:2, ***"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest"*** [ESV]. We need laborers. A few days ago, I was thinking that in many cases, somebody has a great idea to reach out to the community, but the idea needs a champion. That's what makes the difference. We think of the Bible correspondence course program, with over a thousand lessons sent out and graded every month. It's an awesome outreach opportunity. Literally thousands upon thousands of men and women (primarily in prison) have been reading and thinking about the word of God because of our small congregation. It hasn't necessarily been "hard" work (in terms of being physically challenging), it's not something that requires some kind of supernatural knowledge or ability, but it's a service that just needed somebody to say, "Yes, I can do this. Yes, I can step through this door." And there it is! The same goes for anything the church accomplishes. It's easy to say, "We are too small." It's easy to say, "The opportunity is too large." It's easy to say, "There's no way we can do this." But faith says, "This door seems to be open; let's just try stepping through it." That's what Jesus seems to be encouraging in Philadelphia. Instead of focusing on things we cannot do and making excuses to do nothing, we step out in faith and we step through the open doors.

IV. Normally, we'd be looking at the CORRECTION at this point in the message, but we have **NOTHING here – nothing negative at all.**

V. So we move on to verse 11, and we come to the COMMAND.

And the command is simple, as Jesus says, ***"I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown."*** In other words, "Keep up the good work! Hold on and keep on doing what you are doing! And if you do, no one will take your crown." And so, instead of coming in judgment (as Jesus threatened with some of the other congregation), this is meant to be encouraging.

VI. As we come to the end (in verses 12-13), we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

For those who overcome, Jesus promises to make each of them ***"a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore."*** As I understand it, they would honor somebody in the ancient world by dedicating a pillar in a temple in their honor. In our culture, we think about going in a school or a hospital and seeing plaques with donors' names on them. Something like that, but a pillar. The custom in my wife's family in Hawaii is to scatter their loved ones' ashes in the ocean, and to remember that person, they put up what looks like a 4x4 post on the shore somewhere – either with a plaque on top or maybe with the person's name engraved on the side of the post. It is an honor, a memorial to that member of the family. And that's what Jesus seems to be saying here. Only here, as opposed to what they would do in Philadelphia, they ***"will not go out from it anymore."*** Due to the earthquakes in Philadelphia, they were always fleeing the city; temples were always collapsing. God's honor, though, is permanent.

The other part of this is that the Lord will write on his people three names – the name of God, the name of God's city (the New Jerusalem), and a new name – ownership, citizenship, and relationship – God's name, the name of his city, and the name of his Son. We will be labeled as being important, tattooed, so to speak. I remember the first time a parent came to me and said, "I want you to talk to my teenager and tell them it's a sin to get a tattoo." And my answer was, "You do know Jesus had at least two tattoos, right?" We read about those in

Revelation 19, by the way. And, by the way, they never brought their kid to me to have the tattoo talk! But here, Jesus says he will write on us – three names – a public acknowledgement that we belong to him! We remember how the city of Philadelphia kept getting new names. Here, we are introduced to a new name. The Lord will honor us in this way if we overcome – a conditional promise.

Conclusion:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” All of us have ears, but the question is: Are we really listening? Do we understand that if we’re faithful, Jesus opens doors for us? This seems to be the main point of this message. If we are faithful, the Lord opens doors for us. Do we understand that we have the privilege (even an obligation) to step through those doors? As a congregation, I think it’s pretty safe to say that we only have ***“a little power,”*** but are we faithful? And are we looking for the open doors all around us? Today’s passage is addressed to the church in Philadelphia, but it applies to us insofar as we hold to the Lord’s name, and to the extent we are willing to be Jesus to the world around us.

As we close, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God who opens doors. You have put us in a place where your people seem to be few and far between, and so we ask for courage and wisdom as we look for opportunities. We ask for your strength as we reflect your love and grace to the world around us. We pray that we would always be faithful as we wear your name in this community. We pray that we would represent you well. Forgive us when we fail. Forgive us when we fall short.

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for your word. Thank you for lifting our burdens.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com