

Revelation 3 (7-13) – The Church that Jesus Loves

Does Jesus love your church? Well, if it is a true Christian church, then yes, of course Jesus loves it. All churches have flaws, no church is perfect. And still, Jesus loves all of his churches. But how he manifests that love for them, and how they experience that love, can differ greatly.

The book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord of His Church. In chapters 2 and 3, Jesus speaks individually to seven different churches. While each letter addresses a particular situation in a particular church, Jesus is pointing in a timeless way to the challenges and potential problems of all of his churches of all times.

In these letters Jesus rebukes, warns, and even threatens most of these churches. Still, he even mentions his love for the lukewarm church of Laodicea. He says he is going to spit them out of his mouth, yet he also says that he loves them and is giving them time to repent. So yes, you can say that Jesus loves every Christian church.

Having said that, there are some churches that were very pleasing the Lord, and their experience of God's love was greater. The churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia received much commendation and no condemnation from Jesus. They weren't perfect, but they were pleasing.

Today, we look at the church in Philadelphia. What made Jesus love this church so much? And what special blessings will Jesus give to such a church?

As a greeting to the letters, in 1:9-20, Jesus is revealed in a dazzling portrait of his person, divinity, rule, and work. And the introduction to each letter focuses on the particular thing that they need to hear about him, in order to endure persecution, remain faithful, and repent where needed.

Each letter starts with "*And to the angel of the church, write*". A messenger from each church was sent to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey, where he had been exiled. Then the messenger would deliver that letter to the church, as well as the entire book of The Revelation.

Ephesus received the first letter because it was the closest church from where the Apostle John was. The distance from Ephesus to Smyrna was about 50 miles north, and Smyrna to Pergamum about another 50 miles north. Then from Pergamum you would travel southeast about 40 miles to Thyatira, then 30 more miles southeast to Sardis, and then 30 more miles southeast to Philadelphia.

Each of these letters starts with an introduction, then there is an examination, an exhortation, and it ends with a motivation. In the letter to Philadelphia, the introduction is in vs.7, the examination in vs.8-10, the exhortation is in vs.11, and the motivation is given in vs.12-13.

The city of Philadelphia was once a major trade route and served as a bridge between Greek and Roman culture. But the city was destroyed by a great earthquake around 17 AD. It was rebuilt by the Roman emperor Tiberius, and a religious monument was made to honor him.

We don't know much about the church at Philadelphia, except that it was small, and it was good. Like the letter to Smyrna, and unlike the other church letters, Philadelphia is given no condemnation or criticism at all. Again, this doesn't mean that they were perfect, but it does mean that they were faithful.

Vs.7 – Unlike the other letters, this is not taken from the picture of Jesus given in Revelation 1:9-20. But it is very fitting for this particular church. Jesus is described in four distinct ways.

The words of the holy one – God is the only one who is truly holy. So, Jesus is clearly saying that he is God. In the vision of Isaiah 6, the prophet wrote that the angels were crying out “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!*” And in John 12:37-41, the Apostle connects Jesus with this very vision.

There are many places in both the OT and NT where God is called the holy one, and where Jesus is identified as the holy one. In Revelation 1:8, Jesus says, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega,*” says the Lord God, “*who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*” Revelation 4:8 says, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*” In Mark 1:24, a demonized man cries out, “*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.*” The *Holy One of God* is a Jewish term for the Messiah. Jesus the Messiah, the holy one, tells the church that God is speaking to them.

the true one – this is Jesus once again claiming to be God. Revelation 6:10 – *They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true...”*. This is speaking of his character, and not just that he speaks true words, but that he is the true God, and not one of the false gods. Jesus is saying that he is the truth itself. John 14:6 – *I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*

Jesus is the one *who has the key of David*. The key is an emblem of authority and control. Elsewhere Jesus is called the Root of David. This means he is the source of David. He is also the Messiah who comes through the family line of David. Revelation 22:16 – “*I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David.*” Jesus has control over God's kingdom. Luke 1:32 – *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.*

This reference to *the key of David* takes you back to Isaiah 22:22 – *And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.* This is describing how the chief steward of the royal household holds the keys to the royal treasury. He could open it or shut it to and for anyone he wanted. Jesus is saying that he has the power over all the royal riches of heaven. He can withhold them or dispense them as he pleases.

who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens – here Jesus is saying that he decides who enters the kingdom of heaven. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus says, “*I have the keys of Death and Hades.*” Jesus not only controls God's blessings, but the door to God's kingdom, and salvation.

So, this is the picture. Jesus, who is God, whose holiness doesn't tolerate sin, who is the absolute standard of truth, who has control over the kingdom of heaven, and all the blessings of God, this is the one who has given them no condemnation, no rebuke, no warning, and no judgment.

Why? Because this church wasn't like the other churches that needed to repent about some major error. This church had not lost their loving spirit like Ephesus. This church had not compromised with the world like Pergamum. This church had not become immoral like Thyatira. This church was not dead like Sardis. This church wasn't lukewarm like Laodicea. Jesus wasn't saying that they were perfect but that they were pleasing to him. And he had some special blessings for them.

Vs.8 – *I know your works.* Jesus has examined them completely and perfectly. And he says, *Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.* They weren't a perfect church, but they were a faithful church, and Jesus was pouring out rich blessings upon them. It was a true church where grace was abounding. They weren't orthodox in doctrine but lacking in love. They didn't seek the world's favor or fall for the world's enticements. They weren't acting alive but actually dead. And they weren't lukewarm. No, they were committed and consistent.

The Apostle Paul uses the phrase “open door” to refer to fruitful gospel ministry. 1 Corinthians 16:9 – *...a wide door for effective work has opened to me.* 2 Corinthians 2:12 – *When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ...a door was opened for me in the Lord.* Colossians 4:3 – *pray...for us, that God may open to us a door for the word.* People were getting saved in Philadelphia. And people were growing in the faith. As Romans 5:2 says, they had *obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

I know that you have but little power – Jesus isn't saying they were spiritually weak, but that they were a small and poor congregation. They couldn't depend on the might of a big team, or the power of some influential person. But as Zechariah 4:6 says, it is *not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD.* They didn't have big numbers or big names, but they had big spiritual power. If you keep committed and consistent, you'll have all the power you need.

and yet you have kept my word – This isn't talking about perfection, but direction, and dedication. 1 John 2:3 uses the same word for keep – *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.* This was a church that sought to learn and obey the Scriptures, keeping them in view, and seeing everything from that point of view. This what you must also do, to see all of your doubts, fears, difficulties, frustrations, pain, problems, suffering, tragedies, temptations, and troubles in the light of Jesus, instead of seeing Jesus in the light of those things.

Too many get the order backwards, they start with the human viewpoint, and they see Jesus in the light of problems instead of seeing problems in the light of Jesus. Too many times someone abandons the Bible as the only infallible rule for faith and practice because they can't understand all the suffering that they see. But you don't have to understand it all. Look to the cross and know that God is good, and God will make everything right, and everything is working for your good and his glory to make you more like Jesus. Keep your focus, and you'll keep the faith.

and have not denied my name – there was obviously cultural pressure to do just that. They were far outnumbered. They were facing persecution. But they did not yield. They kept the command of Jesus to endure patiently. Vs.10 reiterates this – *Because you have kept my word about patient endurance.* Revelation 1:9 – *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.* Revelation 14:12 – *Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.*

Why does Jesus say that he loves the church at Philadelphia? Because although they were small in number and influence, they kept his word about enduring patiently, and they did not deny his name even when the pressure was on. They kept Jesus in the center of all their decisions. They did not compromise with the truth to avoid persecution or to curry societal favor, or for the sake of other pragmatic and temporal gains. And Jesus promises them some very special blessings.

Vs.9 – We see the term *synagogue of Satan* in both the letters to Smyrna and to Philadelphia. These were unbelieving ethnic Jews who were persecuting those who believed in Jesus. As we discussed with the letter to Smyrna, these were physical Jews but not spiritual Jews. Romans 2:28-29 – *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly...But a Jew is one inwardly.* By rejecting the Jewish Messiah, they have renounced their status as “true” Jews, and that is why Jesus calls them “liars.” Only those who believe in Jesus Christ are the true spiritual Jews, the true family of God.

behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. This is a powerful picture of the Lord Jesus vindicating this Christian church. This picture reflects Isaiah 45:14 – *Thus says the LORD: “The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: ‘Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.’”* You see it also in Isaiah 60:14 – *The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.* It may also refer to some of their persecutors coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Vs.10 – In vs.8, Jesus said *you have kept my word and have not denied my name.* Now Jesus says, *Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.* As far as what this *hour of trial* refers to, there is no historical, cataclysmic event in the past that we can point to.

But the phrase *those who dwell on the earth* is used several times in the book of Revelation, and it refers to unbelievers (cf. Revelation 6:10, 8:13, 11:10). So, there are some who say this verse looks forward to a future tribulation period, which is detailed in Revelation chapters 6 through 18. It is a time of great persecution and judgment for the unbelievers, the time of the Antichrist. And this promise to Philadelphia is a prophetic signal to all of God’s faithful. They say it is talking about the rapture of the church, which speaks of the removal of the faithful from this world before the time of the great tribulation. But we can’t say for sure that this verse is pointing to that. But we can say for sure that whatever this trouble was, is, or will be, the church at Philadelphia was or would be spared from it. They had already been tried, and they had been found faithful.

So, I don’t know exactly what all of this is about in terms of timing and detail, but I do know that it is something good in the midst of something very bad. And that’s all I need to know. If you keep patiently enduring, you will be delivered.

Vs.11 – Jesus gives them an exhortation. *I am coming soon.* This may be a link to vs.10 and the rapture of the church, but again, we don’t know that for sure. But we do know Jesus is telling them to be ready, and not to slack off. *Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.* He isn’t talking about them losing salvation, but losing rewards. 2 John 8 – *Watch yourselves, so*

that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. 1 Corinthians 3:15 also speaks of being saved but losing rewards. Jesus is saying you've done well, and your time of trouble is almost over, so don't get careless now. Keep holding on, you're almost home.

Vs.12 – Jesus gives them further motivations. *The one who conquers* – as we have said with all the letters, this refers to all the genuine believers who have true faith in Jesus Christ.

However, I also believe that this particular blessing and honor is especially for those who conquer in the way that Philadelphia conquered. Namely, that they overcame great odds and held their ground under great pressure. They kept committed and consistent. They kept their focus. They kept their faith. They kept patiently enduring. And they kept holding on.

I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it – This is powerful imagery, especially since Philadelphia was known for earthquakes. Jesus says your standing with God is steady even though the ground beneath you shakes, and once I come for you, then you will live eternally with me. Pillars were named for people. Jesus says your name will be carved into the temple of God.

and I will write on him the name of my God – Jesus says your name will be carved into the temple of God. And God will write his name on you. What an incredible blessing and honor this will be! This is beyond humbling, and almost beyond imagination. Think of it! What mercy! What grace! What love! What worship of God does this inspire!

Jesus says your name will be carved into the temple of God. You will be designated a permanent citizen of the kingdom. And God will write his name on you. You will be forever his.

But that isn't all that Jesus will write on you; *and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven.* This looks forward to Revelation 21 and the eternal state. You will forever have a place in the city of God.

Jesus also says *and my own new name.* This recalls Philippians 2:9, which says *God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.* Whatever it is, whether it is King of kings and Lord of lords (cf. Revelation 19:16), or something we haven't heard of yet, it will be the greatest name and highest honor, a name that speaks of his eternal fullness and splendor. You will be marked with his eternal name.

Vs.13 – *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* This is a message for all Christians. Keep committed and consistent, and you'll have all the power you need. Keep your focus, and you'll keep the faith. Keep patiently enduring, and you will be delivered. Keep holding on, you're almost home. Keep your eyes on the prize of Jesus himself.

Remember what he is telling you here, when the pressure is on, when the chips are down, when it seems there is no hope. No one can take my hope from me because my hope is not in this world. My hope is Jesus. You will forever be a citizen of God's kingdom. You will forever be God's possession. You will forever have a place in God's city. You will forever be marked with the eternal name of God's Son. That's what Jesus will do for the church he loves. Hallelujah! Amen.