

**The Church at Philadelphia, a Serving Church—
Pursuing your Calling in Christ
(Revelation 3:7-13)**

The church in the ancient city of Philadelphia, the sixth church addressed by Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation, had limited influence yet remained faithful in serving the Lord. Christian service is a hallmark of the faith. Effective service is a response to the ministry opportunities that Jesus alone can open for any individual believer or for a church as a whole. In His first advent Jesus came to be a servant (Mark 10:45) and He instructed His followers to become servants as well (John 13:14-16). As Jesus' followers we must pursue His calling to serve Him by serving others. This servant response to Jesus was the legacy of the church at Philadelphia.

**The Lord Jesus Christ commends the church's
diligent service while recognizing its limited strength (3:7-8).**

Like the church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11), the church at Philadelphia received no rebuke from Jesus. These were churches that received only His commendation and words of comfort. Specifically, Jesus commended the church at Philadelphia for its faithful service.

Jesus addressed the ancient church at Philadelphia, a church that faithfully served Him in spite of strong resistance (3:7a).

Philadelphia was a city located along a major trade route through the interior of Asia Minor. The name of the city means "brotherly love," an appropriate description of the church in that city. In fact, the city received this name because one of its founders, a man named Attalus, refused to curry the favor of the Romans who wanted him to denounce his own brother Eumenes. Attalus demonstrated loving loyalty to his brother at the risk of political suicide. The church at Philadelphia demonstrated brotherly love in the way it remained faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The city of Philadelphia was a gateway city. Because of the topography around Philadelphia and because of its location along a major trade route the city stood as a doorway through which travelers and traders had to pass. Consequently, Jesus referred to open doors in addressing this church. Philadelphia's location was so significant that it became the city from which Greek culture spread and influenced the region. So effective was this spread of Greek culture that by the First Century the Lydian language, formerly used in that region, was no longer spoken there.

Trade was common in Philadelphia, and the region was also known for its vineyards, grapes, and wine. However, Philadelphia lay on a major fault line and had been destroyed by earthquakes on more than one occasion. Many of its residents actually lived outside of the city in temporary housing in order to avoid the destruction that came with these earthquakes. But the city was rebuilt and continued to be a thriving center of commerce. In fact, it was at one point temporarily renamed New-Caesarea in honor of Caesar Tiberius who funded a rebuilding of the city after an earthquake.

Philadelphia was home to both a pagan culture and a Jewish presence in the first century. As in many Roman cities, emperor worship would have been expected. In addition, the pagan

population doubtless worshipped other gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon. Because of the vineyards in the region, the worship of the god Dionysus was common in Philadelphia. The Jewish population would have had a significant influence in Philadelphia and became the primary source of persecution for the church in that city.

Outside of the book of Revelation the city and church at Philadelphia are not mentioned in the New Testament. The church at Philadelphia may have had its beginnings as an outgrowth of Paul's extended ministry in Ephesus.

Jesus described Himself as holy, true, holding the key of David, and opening and closing doors (3:7b).

Jesus Christ described Himself to the church at Philadelphia in four ways. First, He called Himself the "holy one," a messianic claim. Jesus Christ is perfectly holy, separate from sin. In His earthly life the Lord never sinned. He lived an impeccable life. Jesus continues to be our example for holy living.

Second, Jesus Christ is the "true one." He is characterized by truth. He is the standard of objective truth, the one who sets the bar of right and wrong. To uphold sound doctrine is to uphold the character of Christ. As the "true one," Jesus is authentic, real, genuine in every way.

Third, Jesus described Himself as authoritative. He is the one who holds the key of David. The "key of David" is a symbol of authority over the messianic kingdom.

Finally, Jesus is the one who opens doors that no one can shut. He shuts doors that no one can open. This word picture is reminiscent of Isaiah 22:22, where God declares that His servant Eliakim would stand in an official place of authority. Eliakim would control access to the royal palace. Likewise, Jesus Christ controls access into His messianic kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus Christ alone holds this authority over eternal life. He also opens and closes doors of ministry opportunity.

Jesus knows the condition of His people and alone can open doors for churches (3:8a).

In regard to the track record of the church at Philadelphia, Jesus declared that He has given that church an open door. Since Jesus has authority over access to the Kingdom of Heaven, He also has authority over the affairs of life in this world. In the context of the "works" of the Philadelphia church this open door could refer to opportunities for service and outreach (compare 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). Christians should take advantage of open doors of opportunity when they exist, recognizing these as coming from our Sovereign Lord. When doors close, we should likewise accept these barriers as Christ's guiding hand.

Jesus commends faithfulness among His people even when they have little strength (3:8b).

Jesus had given the church at Philadelphia an open door because it had demonstrated a level of spiritual strength, it had obeyed Christ's word, and it had not denied Christ's name. This church was well qualified for Christian service, and for this reason Christ had provided the opportunity for service. The qualifications Christ looks for in Christians who would serve, therefore, include being active, obedient, and faithful. When Jesus says the church had a little strength He was not reprimanding the church but commending the church. The church may have

been small or weak, but it used what strength it had to honor Christ. It worked within and possibly beyond its limitations. The church had been obedient to the word of Christ and had not caved in to the pressure of denying the name of Christ.

**The Lord Jesus Christ further commends the church's
faithfulness in following His example of patient endurance (3:9-11).**

Where Jesus had words of challenge for most of the other churches He had for the church at Philadelphia more words of commendation. This message included three promises.

Jesus promises to make those who oppose the church recognize that His people have a beloved relationship with Him (3:9).

The church at Philadelphia had endured its share of opposition. Jesus identified in Philadelphia a “synagogue of Satan” (compare Revelation 2:9). Apparently there was an influential Jewish population in Philadelphia that brought persecution on the church. Although these antagonists were Jews by birth they were not Jews by faith, since a true follower of Abraham is one who acknowledges that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Therefore, Satan was the power behind their acts of persecution. These persecutors would one day find themselves in the very humbling position of bowing at the feet of the Christians and acknowledging Christ’s love for the ones they had persecuted. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord according to Philippians 2:9-11. In that act of worship, those who never accepted Jesus Christ in this life will recognize too late the person of Christ and the relationship of the church to the Lord. They will realize that Jesus loves, deeply loves, His people. The church at Philadelphia, like Christians today, could take comfort in the fact that Jesus loved them.

Jesus promises to protect His people from the coming period of intense trial that will encompass the whole world (3:10).

Jesus also promised the church at Philadelphia that it would escape the “hour of trial” that would come on the whole world—on everyone living on the earth. This church had patiently obeyed the word of Christ and would one day experience His deliverance. Much of the rest of the book of Revelation deals with events in a yet future “hour of trial” that will come on the entire world. No other persecution has been universal in scope, but in that future time of tribulation there will be worldwide trial. However, the church will escape that time of trial. Jesus Christ will remove the church from the earth before the tribulation begins. He will keep His people out of the “hour of trial.” This hope for the future must have helped sustain the church at Philadelphia in its own time of trial.

Jesus promises that His return is imminent and therefore reminds His people not to give up (3:11).

The only command that Jesus Christ gave the church at Philadelphia was to hold on to what it already had. No words of judgment were necessary. The church at Philadelphia, though

limited in many ways, was healthy and needed but to maintain its spiritual health. In so doing it would be sure not to lose its reward—its crown—for serving Christ. Jesus is coming “soon” or “quickly” (compare Revelation 1:1) and He will reward His people.

**The Lord Jesus Christ comforts the church with
the promise of eternal citizenship in heaven (3:12-13).**

Thankfully, every church no matter how small or seemingly weak shares in the promise of eternal blessing with God.

All true believers will have a permanent place and a renewed identity in the heavenly Jerusalem (3:12).

The Lord concluded His message to the church at Philadelphia by pointing these believers to their hope for the future. All true believers in Jesus Christ, the meaning behind the idea of overcoming or being victorious, will be made “pillars” in the temple of God, stable and permanent, never to be excluded from God’s presence. Unlike the city of Philadelphia that was frequently shaken by earthquakes, the Christians in Philadelphia would enjoy stability and strength for all eternity. There will be no need to flee God’s presence like those fleeing the city during an earthquake. God’s people will be in God’s presence, His temple, forever. Here “temple” seems to refer to God’s presence, since there is no physical temple in the future heavenly city (Revelation 21:22). Furthermore, believers will be identified with God, His city, and His Son throughout eternity—God’s name, the name of the new city, and the name of Jesus. There was a practice of erecting a pillar with a person’s name inscribed on it as a way of honoring those who were outstanding citizens of a city. The Lord will honor His people, and they will be outstanding citizens of the new heavenly Jerusalem for all eternity. Revelation 21:2 also refers to the New Jerusalem that will descend from heaven, describing our heavenly existence.

Christians must learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s message to the churches (3:13).

As with each message to each church, Jesus calls on individual Christians to hear what the Holy Spirit is teaching in each of these messages. The message to the church at Philadelphia includes the reminder that as Jesus’ followers we must pursue His calling to serve Him by serving others.