

The Letters to the Seven Churches, Part VI- Grounded and Steadfast

Call to Worship: Jeremiah 17:5-8

Hymn #696- *God Will Take Care of You*

1st Scripture: Romans 10:1-13

Hymn #699- *'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 3:7-13

Hymn #579- *Be Still, My Soul*

Introduction:

It has always been the tendency of mankind to live “pragmatically.” In other words, we are often, a very “outcome” based people. We tend to judge the success of a thing in accordance with the results that come about, don’t we? If the results do not meet our expectations, we assume that we must have done something wrong, and so we look to make changes and adjustments, in an attempt to bring about different and better results. Now, don’t get me wrong, pragmatics can be very helpful, especially when running a business or when seeking to weigh through different options in life, but when it comes to our spiritual life, and how we view our spiritual circumstances, be it from an individual standpoint or a corporate (local church) standpoint, we have to be very, very careful with pragmatics and expectations. In fact, our God teaches us to fix our attention on being faithful to His Word and *not* on the results. We are called to be a “Word” based people and not a “result” based people. Results...they belong to God. We concentrate on properly sowing and watering and we trust God to give the increase in accordance with His divine will. The whole Book of Revelation, in fact, assumes this reality. We have seen, over and over again, and we will continue to see, over and over again, that the Revelation is a guide to leading us to live by faith, by seeing things how they truly are in the sight of God, regardless of what “seems to be” at the surface level of our natural senses.

Furthermore, imagine what life would have been like for the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, had He lived on the basis of “pragmatics.” He would have been in despair. It was “the joy that *was set before Him,*” which enabled Him to bear the cross, while despising the shame that He had endured. With the eyes of faith, He looked beyond what His immediate circumstances presented to Him, and He remained faithful and steadfast, and found ultimate success. He fixed His attention on the Word and will of God, and not pragmatic expectations.

The church at Philadelphia was a small, suffering church with little strength, which was being persecuted and challenged by the local Jews. Despite their arduous, ongoing labors, they didn't seem to be having much impact on the society surrounding them. And they could very easily have begun to question the authenticity of the Christian faith (or if they themselves even had the real faith), if they put their stock in "pragmatics," and what seemed to be at the level of the surface. Their circumstances seemed grim and hopeless. And so, they needed to be reminded by their loving Savior, that they were doing well, and to stay the course, fixing their eyes on the unchanging promises of God's Word, and not on their outward circumstances. If they did this, they would indeed maintain their "crown of victory" and inherit the prize!

I. An Historical Background of Philadelphia

Robert Mounce states, "Philadelphia (modern Alashehir) lies at the eastern end of a broad valley that, passing through Sardis (some thirty miles west-northwest), leads down to the Aegean Sea near Smyrna. Its location commanded high ground on the south side of the river Cogamis, a tributary of the Hermus. This strategic location at the juncture of trade routes leading to Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia (the imperial post route from Rome via Troas passed through Philadelphia and continued eastward to the high central plateau) had helped it earn the title 'gateway to the East' and made it a city of commercial importance. The great volcanic plain to the north (*katakekaumene*, the burnt land) was fertile and well suited to growing grapes. With an economy based on agriculture and industry, Philadelphia enjoyed considerable prosperity. Its one major drawback was that it was subject to earthquakes. The devastating earthquake of A.D. 17 that leveled twelve cities of Asia overnight had been particularly severe on Philadelphia, perhaps because it was nearest the fault line and also suffered a long series of tremors that followed...its name [Philadelphia] commemorates the loyalty and devotion of Attalus II to his brother (this is what earned him the epithet Philadelphus, 'lover of his brother'). Hemer calls attention to two incidents of special note: (1) a false rumor of Eumenes's assassination led Attalus to accept the crown, which he then relinquished when his brother returned from Greece, and (2) Attalus's resistance to Roman encouragement to overthrow his brother and become king. The city was probably founded between 189 B.C. when the region came under the control of Eumenes and 138 B.C. when Attalus died, although without doubt it was built on the site of some earlier

settlement. In its development under Pergamene rule Philadelphia was intended to serve as a ‘missionary city’ to bring Greek culture to the recently annexed area of Lydia and Phrygia. Ramsay indicates the success achieved, by noting that before A.D. 19 the Lydian tongue had been replaced by Greek as the only language of the country.”

II. Christ’s Self-Designation

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens...’” (vs. 7).

Here, our Lord presents Himself to this church with three main designations:

1) He is the One who is *holy*.

Sharing the divine nature, it is not surprising that our Lord would lay claim to this glorious divine attribute, using it as a comforting reminder to this persecuted and suffering church in Philadelphia. The One whom they clung to; the One within whom their faith remained steadfast, was holy. Their confidence rested in the altogether pure and righteous One, and therefore, they need not fear the threats, mockings, accusations and rejections of the world, and especially of the so-called religious Jews, who were really a synagogue of satan. In Christ, they secured and maintained a purity that no religious system of works could ever secure. All they needed, and everything they would ever need to successfully complete the race and enter glory, was secured in the Christ, in whom they committed their trust. They could say with absolute certainty and assurance with the apostle Paul, “For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (2 Timothy 1:12).

2) He is the One who is *True*.

Toward the end of this Book, in Revelation 19:11-16, our Lord is gloriously described as coming in judgment, riding on a white horse. And in verse 11, this vision begins with the words, “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called

Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.” This glorious Name is encapsulated in the term “True,” here given in verse 7, and the full description is given again later on in verse 14, when our Lord addresses the church in Laodicea. Keeping in mind that the brethren in Philadelphia were being opposed by Jews, who contended with their Christian doctrines and denied that Jesus was the true Messiah, it could have been very easy for their faith to waver, for as they continued to put all of their life stock and hope in this Jesus, they suffered for it and were under constant threat. Again, from a pragmatic standpoint, one would like to see better results, produced by the painful, faithful labors of this small church; perhaps results akin to that which was happening among their fellow (*but compromising*) brethren, serving just some thirty miles west-northwest in the well known, prosperous church of Sardis.

And so, our Lord sought to remind them here that He was the One who was indeed *True*. They could remain steadfast in their labors, not concerning themselves with what “seems to be” indicated by the present results, at the level of the surface. For, their labors in the Lord were not in vain. Their seeds sown were not wasted. They were indeed precious in the sight of God. Underneath it all, they, though small and few; they, though weary, burdened and constantly fighting, were indeed sitting under the smile of their God. And as they continued onward, they could be sure that their faith, confidence and hope in Christ; that which drove them to sacrifice and to bear the many griefs that often accompany the faithful Christian life, would not leave them empty, thirsty and disappointed in the end. They would not be ashamed. For He is *True!* He is indeed *Faithful and True*, and He is well pleased with their present labors for His Name!

3) He is the One “who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.”

Utilizing a quote taken from Isaiah 22:22, where Eliakim (the son of Hilkiah) would replace Shebna, who misused his honored position in the kingdom of Judah for the sake of riches and material gain, the Lord reminds the church at Philadelphia that *He* has the *true* key of David. In other words, even as Shebna and then Eliakim were given the authority to control who could and could not enter the king’s house (as stewards over his house), our Lord here avows that He is the One who has total control over who can and cannot enter the eternal Kingdom of God. He holds the “key of David;” that is to say, He is the Messianic link, who alone has the authority and ability to open and close the Kingdom of God to whomever He wills. The local Jews, from an

outward standpoint, seemed to possess the power and ability to determine who would and would not be accepted by God. This was their claim, and they excommunicated anyone who put their hope and trust in this “Jesus.” But in truth, they were nothing more than a synagogue of satan; they were a mirage and a false hope in the desert, for Christ alone has the key that unlocks and locks; that opens and shuts the door into the Kingdom of God. And so, this self-designation, like the others, would greatly encourage the brethren in the church of Philadelphia to continue to rest their hope in Christ alone, and not to concern themselves with the lying threats of those who call themselves “Jews,” but lie. Yes, they had the outward appearance of religion, but in truth they were dead and incapable of shutting anyone out or letting anyone into the Kingdom of God. That privilege belonged to Christ and to Christ alone, who was the Messianic Seed of David, the Seed of promise! He Himself is the way into the glorious Kingdom of God!

III. Christ’s Words of Commendation

“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie--indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (vs. 8-10).”

In spite of the fact that they were continuously opposed and oppressed, especially by the Jews (Jews in ethnic origin only), and in spite of the fact that they had little strength; they were probably few in number, utterly opposed and not making a big impact on the society around them...in spite of all of this, they kept the Word of Christ, did not deny His name, and continued to persevere, holding fast to what they knew and believed to be true. The temptation to compromise was ever upon them. From a positive standpoint, they could have been well received, especially by the Jewish population, had they simply denied Christ and adopted the Judaistic faith. They could have joined the ranks, and been a part of that which seemed to have great influence and prosperity in the society at large. And from a negative standpoint, they could have eliminated all of the ongoing threats, mocking and oppression, if they had but caved to the

religious pressures of their present opposition. And pragmatically speaking, from every outward appearance, one would think that all of their efforts and labors in Christ were superfluous and vain. Where were the results? Their confidence in and obedience to Christ only seemed to produce more trouble for them, while their enemies grew and prevailed. But through thick and thin, they refused to budge. In spite of what seemed to be at the surface, they adhered to the Word of Christ and refused to deny His Name. They persevered and pressed forward, unwilling to consider the value of their very lives, because their confidence was fixed in Christ. And so, Christ commends them for this. [Note: perhaps liken this to the faithfulness of Attalus to bro.]

And furthermore, He adds a few encouraging words of assurance to His commendations. You see, what they simply needed was the ongoing assurance that they were indeed on the right path, in spite of what the present circumstances were. And so, our Lord reassured them in a three-fold way here:

1) “See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.” They had little strength, but the good news is that the One who had the key of David, had already opened up the door of glory for them, and no one could shut it. The Jews could threaten and excommunicate and call down fire upon them, but no matter, Christ had the key of David, and no one could shut the door to the Kingdom of God, which He had already opened for them.

2) “Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie--indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” Those who have mocked, rejected and declared the church at Philadelphia as excommunicated from the Kingdom of God, in the end, would see and acknowledge the truth. The tables would be turned in due time, and their enemies would soon bow down before them, acknowledging, that in spite of the many difficult trials they had faced, Christ had truly loved and cared for them. The love of God was indeed upon these dear brethren. Underneath it all, God’s smile was upon them, even though at the surface, from a pragmatic standpoint, those who lacked understanding could not see this. And so, in the end, the Jews who oppressed them, would themselves come to confess and acknowledge that these brethren were indeed blessed of God, and loved by the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of glory, whom these Jews once denied and ridiculed. [The paradox of the cross would serve as their paradox as well—overcoming in suffering]

3) “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”

Now, before we consider the meaning of this statement, let me just briefly state what it does *not* mean. It does *not* mean, as some of our dispensational brethren would claim, that there will be a pre-tribulation rapture of the people of God. In other words, Jesus is not saying, “Because you have kept my command to persevere, therefore I will rapture you out of the world before the great and final, worldwide tribulation.” To be sure, it is always the case in Revelation, that the people of God are called to endure and persevere *through* tribulation. They must and will go through it. What then does it mean, when our Lord says, I will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world (literally, the “whole inhabited earth”), to test those who dwell on the earth?” Well, in order to understand this, we must consider a similar phrase, in fact, a phrase that is grammatically the same in the Greek language, spoken by our Lord in John 17. In John 17:15, the only other text in Scripture that uses this identical phraseology, our Lord, in His High Priestly prayer, prays to His heavenly Father concerning the welfare of His disciples, in the following way, “I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.” And the idea here conveyed, is that God would not pull His people out of the world during times of trial and testing, but rather that He would keep and protect them from the evil one. In other words, our Lord is praying that their faith would not fail, and that they would overcome all of the attacks of the evil one. Well, likewise in Revelation 3, our Lord is not telling the brethren that His people will experience a pre-tribulation rapture, so that they do not have to face the “Great tribulation.” Rather, He is stating that because they have kept His name now, He would keep them through the Tribulation later. He would not allow their faith to fail. Though some would, in fact, be persecuted and afflicted, perhaps having to endure many physical trials, He would not allow their faith to be harmed. He would keep them abiding in Him! And that is the point of this promise. In fact, the tribulation (testing) would be a means of confirming their faith!

To be sure, over the next several hundred years, the Roman empire (also referred to as the whole known “inhabited world” of the day) would be rocked, sacked and ultimately defeated, but in spite of the constant lack of stability in the world around them; in spite of the ongoing shaking and wavering of the now seemingly secure empire, the faith of Christ’s people would not fail.

Those who have secured themselves in the name of Christ, will find that Rock of security holding them up during the tribulation, when everyone else's heart in the world melts like water and collapses from the surrounding instability and the constant threat of a collapsing empire. [Note: mention the instability of Philadelphia because of earthquakes, as well].

Inevitably, this points to the final Great Tribulation as well, brethren, and the point is, that we who are maintaining our fellowship *with* and confidence *in* Christ, will be able to endure whatever happens in the world around us. A collapsing dollar, the fall of the mighty USA, economic instability, the entire world in chaos...these things will shake the world, but Christ will keep our faith strong through it all. Our faith will not fail!

IV. Christ's Words of Rebuke

Sharing a very similar faith and very similar trials as those who were members of the church in Smyrna, our Lord has no rebuke for this church.

V. Christ's Solution and Exhortation (VI.)

Since there is no rebuke given to this church, there is no solution presented, because no mentioned wrong, requires no need of repentance and/or correction. However, our Lord does give them an exhortation in verse 11.

“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.” Whether we consider our Lord's coming here as a “coming in judgment” in the more immediate sense or the final coming at the end of history, the point remains the same for all churches of all ages. “Stay the course. Abide in Me. You have come this far, keep going. Run the race of faith right to the end! Don't look back and don't let anyone rob you of your crown of glory! Fix your eyes on the prize and on Me [Jesus], the Author and Finisher of your faith, and hold fast to what you have. Keep on keeping on, and don't let go of your strong determination to finish well. Cling to what you have in Me; take heaven by force, and secure your crown!”

VI. Christ's Promises to those Who Overcome

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 I will write on him My new name” (vs. 12).

1) So fixed is a pillar in the temple, because it actually serves to help keep the whole temple erect/standing. When you pull the pillar out, the temple or the building comes crashing down. And so, our Lord, once again, wishing to thoroughly reassure the brethren of Philadelphia concerning their final, eternal destination, relates them to being a “pillar in the temple of God.” Like a pillar, once put in, they will remain forever, and go out no more. Upon overcoming, they would be eternally secure in Him! And no foe or earthquake could shake them away from this!

2) And adding to this secured assurance, He tells them that He will write three names on them:

a- The name of His God. That is to say that He would etch the ownership of God onto their souls. Having the name of God on them, would confirm that they belong eternally to Him.

b- The name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. This would mark their eternal residence among the people of God in the New and heavenly Jerusalem. They would be secured forever among those who are eternally blessed in the New Jerusalem, where righteousness alone dwells forever.

c- The new name of Christ. Every new and glorious benefit that comes upon the redeemed in glory; every glorious privilege secured and earned by the atonement of Christ, would be lavished upon them when they enter glory. To be sure, we have only received the down payment of our inheritance in the present. But in the end, even far beyond what we could ever grasp now in the present, all of the blessings will meet us head on. The name of Christ will be upon His people, allotting to them the portion that comes upon all who are in union with Him *now* by faith!

Conclusion

What will happen in the times ahead, brethren? We may and probably will face many difficult trials and testings. Our spiritual reality will be tested and tried by our physical sufferings. But, if we remain steadfast; if we cling to Christ at the expense of perhaps everything else in this world, we need to know; Christ would have us know for certain, that, in the end, we will not be ashamed! And so, let us not live according to the pragmatic scenery of what seems to be, but rather in accordance with the firm and solid truth given us in God's Word, and secured eternally in Christ!

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (vs. 13).

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Psalm 46