

William Barclay's Daily Study Bible

Revelation 3

THE LETTER TO PHILADELPHIA (Revelation 3:7-13)

3:7-13 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 man will shut, and shuts and no man opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you a door which stands open and which no man shuts, because you have a little strength and because you have kept my word, and have not denied my name. Behold, I will give you those who belong to the synagogue of Satan, who call themselves Jews and who are not, but who lie. Behold, I will make them come and kneel before your feet, and they will know that I have loved you. Because you have kept my command to endure, I, too, will keep you safe from the hour of testing, which is to come upon the whole inhabited world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have, that no one may take your crown.

I will make him who overcomes a pillar in the temple of my God and he will go out no more; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, of the new Jerusalem, which is coming down from heaven from my God, and my new name.

Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.

Philadelphia, City Of Praise (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

Philadelphia was the youngest of all the seven cities. It was founded by colonists from Pergamum under the reign of Attalus the Second, who ruled in Pergamum from 159 to 138 B.C. Philadelphos (**Greek #5361**) is the Greek for one who loves his brother. Such was the love of Attalus for his brother Eumenes that he was called Philadelphos, and it was after him that Philadelphia was named.

It was founded for a special purpose. It was situated where the borders of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia met. But it was not as a garrison town that Philadelphia was founded, for there was little danger there. It was founded with the deliberate intention that it might be a missionary of Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia; and so well did it do its work that by A.D. 19 the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greeks. Ramsay says of Philadelphia that it was "the centre for the diffusion of Greek language and Greek letters in a peaceful land and by peaceful means." That is what the Risen Christ means when he speaks of the open door that is set before Philadelphia. Three centuries before, Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond; and now there has come to it another great missionary opportunity, to carry to men who never knew it the message of the love of Jesus Christ.

Philadelphia had a great characteristic which has left its mark upon this letter. It was on the edge of a great plain called the Katakekaumene (**Greek #2618**), which means the Burned Land. The Katakekaumene was a great volcanic plain bearing the marks of the lava and the ashes of volcanoes then extinct. Such land is fertile; and Philadelphia was the centre of a great grape-growing area and a famous producer of wines. But that situation had its perils, and these perils had left their mark more deeply on Philadelphia than on any other city. In A.D. 17 there came a great earthquake which destroyed Sardis and ten other cities. In Philadelphia the tremors went on for years; Strabo describes it as a "city full of earthquakes."

It often happens that, when a great earthquake comes, people meet it with courage and self-possession, but ever recurring minor shocks drive them to sheer panic. That is what happened in Philadelphia. Strabo describes the scene. Shocks were an everyday occurrence. Gaping cracks appeared in the walls of the houses. Now one part of the city was in ruins, now another. Most of the population lived outside the city in huts and feared even to go on the city streets lest they should be killed by failing masonry. Those who still dared to live in the city were reckoned mad; they spent their time shoring up the shaking buildings and every now and then fleeing to the

open spaces for safety. These terrible days in Philadelphia were never wholly forgotten, and people in it ever waited subconsciously for the ominous tremors of the ground, ready to flee for their lives to the open spaces. People in Philadelphia well knew what security lay in a promise that "they would go out no more."

But there is more of Philadelphia's history than that in this letter. When this earthquake devastated it, Tiberius was as generous to Philadelphia as he had been to Sardis. In gratitude it changed its name to Neocaesarea--the New City of Caesar. In the time of Vespasian Philadelphia was in gratitude to change its name again to Flavia, for Flavius was the Emperor's family name. It is true that neither of these new names lasted and "Philadelphia" was restored. But the people of Philadelphia well knew what it was to receive "a new name."

Of all the cities Philadelphia receives the greatest praise and it was to show that it deserved it.

In later days it became a very great city. When the Turks and Mohammedanism flooded across Asia Minor and every other town had fallen, Philadelphia stood erect. For centuries it was a free Greek Christian city amidst a pagan people. It was the last bastion of Asian Christianity. It was not till midway through the fourteenth century that it fell; and to this day there is a Christian bishop and a thousand Christians in it. With the exception of Smyrna the other Churches are in ruins but Philadelphia still holds aloft the banner of the Christian faith.

Philadelphia, Titles And Claims (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

In the introduction to this letter the Risen Christ is called by three great titles, each of which implies a tremendous claim.

(i) He is he who is holy. Holy is the description of God himself "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," was the song of the seraphs which Isaiah heard (Isaiah 6:3). "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25). "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the creator of Israel, your King" (Isaiah 43:15). All through the Old Testament God is the Holy One; and now that title is given to the Risen Christ. We must remember that holy (hagios, **Greek #40**) means different, separate from. God is holy because he is different from men; he has that quality of being which belongs to him alone. To say that Jesus Christ is holy is to say that he shares the being of God.

(ii) He is he who is true. In Greek there are two words for true. There is alethes (**Greek #227**), which means "true" in the sense that a true statement is different from a false statement. There is alethinos (**Greek #228**), which means "real" as opposed to that which is "unreal." It is the second of these words which is used here. In Jesus is reality. When we are confronted with him, we are confronted with no shadowy outline of the truth but with the truth itself.

(iii) He is he who has the key of David, who opens and no man will shut, who shuts and no man opens. We may first note that the key is the symbol of authority. Here is the picture of Jesus Christ as the one who has the final authority which no one can question.

Behind this there is an Old Testament picture. Hezekiah had a faithful steward called Eliakim, who was over all his house and who alone could admit to the presence of the king. Isaiah heard God say of this faithful Eliakim: "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" (Isaiah 22:22). It is this picture which is in John's mind. Jesus alone has authority to admit to the new Jerusalem, the new city of David. As the Te Deum has it: "Thou didst open the kingdom of Heaven to all believers." He is the new and living way into the presence of God.

Philadelphia, The Open Door (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

In Revelation 3:8-9 there is a problem of punctuation. In the early Greek manuscripts there was no punctuation at all. The problem is that the words "because you have a little strength, and because you have kept my word, and have not denied my name," can go equally well with what precedes them or with what follows. They may express either the reason why the door stands open before the Christians of Philadelphia or the reason why they will be given those who belong to the synagogue of Satan. We have taken them with the words which precede them.

It is the great promise of the Risen Christ that he has set before the Christians of Philadelphia an open door which no man can ever shut. What is the meaning of this open door?

(i) It may be the door of missionary opportunity. Writing to the Corinthians of the work which lies ahead of him, Paul says: "For a wide door for effective work has opened to me" (1 Corinthians 16:9). When he came to Troas, a door was opened to him by the Lord (2 Corinthians 2:12). He asks the Colossians to pray that a door of utterance may be opened for him (Colossians 4:3). When he came back to Antioch he told how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

This meaning is particularly appropriate for Philadelphia. We have seen how it was a border town, standing where the boundaries of Lydia, Mysia and Phrygia met, and founded to be a missionary of Greek language and culture to the barbarous peoples beyond. It was on the road of the imperial postal service, which left the coast at Troas, came to Philadelphia via Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis, and joined the great road out to Phrygia. The armies of Caesar travelled that road; the caravans of the merchant-men travelled it; and now it was beckoning the missionaries of Christ.

Two things emerge here. (a) There is a door of missionary opportunity before every man and he need not go overseas to find it. Within the home, within the circle in which we move, within the parish in which we reside, there are those to be won for Christ. To use that door of opportunity is at once our privilege and our responsibility. (b) In the way of Christ the reward of work well done is more work to do. Philadelphia had proved faithful and the reward for her fidelity was still more work to do for Christ.

(ii) It has been suggested that the door which is set before the Philadelphians is none other than Jesus himself. "I am the door," said Jesus (John 10:7; John 10:9).

(iii) It has been suggested that the door is the door to the Messianic community. With Jesus Christ the new kingdom of David was inaugurated; and, just as in the ancient kingdom Eliakim had the keys to admit to the royal presence, so Jesus is the door to admit to the kingdom of God.

(iv) Apart from all these things, for any man the door of prayer is always open. That is a door which no man can ever shut and it is one which Jesus opened when he assured men of the seeking love of God the Father.

Philadelphia, Inheritors Of The Promise (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

In Revelation 3:9 the promise of the Risen Christ is that some day the Jews who slander the Christians will kneel before them. This is an echo of an expectation of the Jews which finds frequent expression in the Old Testament.

This was that in the new age, all nations would do humble homage to the Jews. This promise recurs again and again in Isaiah. "The sons of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you; and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet" (Isaiah 60:14). "The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia 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" (Isaiah 45:14). "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; with their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet" (Isaiah 49:23). Zechariah has a vision of the day when all men of all nations and languages shall turn to Jerusalem, "they shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zechariah 8:22-23).

It was the Christian belief that the Jewish nation had lost its place in the plan of God and that that place had passed to the Church. A Jew in God's sense of the term was not one who could claim racial descent from Abraham but one of any nation who had made the same venture of faith as he had (Romans 9:6-9). The Church was the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). It was, therefore, now true that all the promises which had been made to Israel had been inherited by the Church. It was to her that one day all men would humbly make their submission. This promise is a reversal of all that the Jews had expected; they had expected that all nations would kneel before them; but the day was to come when they with all nations would kneel before Christ.

That is what the Philadelphian Church would see, at least in its beginnings, if its members were faithful. Up until now they had been faithful. In the sentence, "You have kept my word, and have not denied my name," both the verbs are in the aorist tense, which describes one definite act in past time; and the implication is that there had been some time of trial out of which the Philadelphian Church had emerged triumphantly true. They may have only a little strength; their resources may be small; but, if they are faithful, they will see the dawn of the triumph of Christ.

Though few and small and weak your bands,
Strong in your Captain's strength,
Go to the conquest of all lands;
All must be his at length.

That which must keep a Christian faithful is the vision of a world for Christ, for the coming of such a world depends on the fidelity of the individual Christian.

Philadelphia, Those Who Keep Are Kept (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

It is the promise of the Risen Christ that he who keeps will be kept. "You have kept my commandment," he says, "therefore, I will keep you." Loyalty has its sure reward. In Revelation 3:10 in the Greek the phrase my command to endure is highly concentrated. Literally, it is the word of my endurance. The real meaning is that the promise is to those who have practised the same kind of endurance as Jesus displayed in his earthly life.

When we are called upon to show endurance, the endurance of Jesus Christ supplies us with three things. First, it supplies us with an example. Second, it supplies us with an inspiration. We must walk looking to him, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame (Hebrews 12:1-2). Third the endurance of Jesus Christ is the guarantee of his sympathy with us when we are called upon to endure. "Because he himself has suffered and been tempted he is able to help those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18).

In Revelation 3:10 we are back again amidst beliefs which are characteristically Jewish. As we have so often seen, the Jews divided time into two ages, the present age which is wholly bad, and the age to come, which is wholly good with in between the terrible time of destruction when judgment will fall upon the world. It is to that terrible time that John refers. Even when time comes to an end, and the world as we know it ceases to exist, he who is faithful to Christ will still be said in his keeping.

Philadelphia, Promise And Warning (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

In Revelation 3:11 there is promise and warning combined.

The Risen Christ tells them that he is coming quickly. It has been said that in the New Testament the Coming of Christ is continually used for two purposes.

(i) It is used as a warning to the heedless. Jesus himself tells of the wicked servant, who took advantage of his master's absence to conduct himself evilly and to whom the master made a sudden return that brought judgment. (Matthew 24:48-51). Paul warns the Thessalonians of the terrible fate which awaits the disobedient and the unbelieving when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven and shall take swift and final vengeance on his enemies (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). Peter warns his people that they will give account for their deeds to him who comes to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:5).

(ii) It is used as a comfort to the oppressed. James urges patient endurance on his people because the coming of the Lord is drawing near (James 5:8); soon their distresses will be at an end. The writer to the Hebrews urges patience, for soon he that shall come will come (Hebrews 10:37).

In the New Testament men used the idea of the Coming of Christ as a warning to the heedless and as a comfort to the oppressed. It is quite true that, in the literal sense, Jesus Christ did not come back to those who were so warned and exhorted. But no man knows when eternity will invade his life and God will bid him rise and come;

and that must warn the careless to prepare to meet his God and cheer the oppressed with the thought of the coming glory of the faithful soul.

There is another warning here. The Risen Christ bids the Philadelphians hold to what they have, that no one may take their crown (Revelation 3:11). It is not a question of someone stealing their crown but of God taking it from them and giving it to someone else, because they were not worthy to wear it. Trench makes a list of people in the Bible who lost their place to someone else because they had shown that they were not fit to hold it. Esau lost his place to Jacob (Genesis 25:34; Genesis 27:36). Reuben, unstable as water, lost his place to Judah (Genesis 49:4; Genesis 49:8). Saul lost his place to David (1 Samuel 16:1, 1 Samuel 16:13). Shebna lost his place to Eliakim (Isaiah 22:15-25). Joab and Abiathar lost their places to Benaiah and Zadok (1 Kings 2:25). Judas lost his place to Matthias (Acts 1:25-26). The Jews lost their place to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11).

There is tragedy here. It sometimes happens that a man is given a task to do and goes towards it with the highest hopes; but it begins to be seen that he is too small for the task and he is removed from the task and it is given to someone else. That can happen with the tasks of God. God has a task for every man; but it may be that the man proves himself unfit for the task and it is given to another.

It is blessedly true that even out of failure a man can redeem himself--but only if he casts himself upon the grace of Jesus Christ.

Philadelphia, Many Promises (Revelation 3:7-13 Continued)

In Revelation 3:12 we come to the promises of the Risen Christ to those who are faithful. They are many and most would paint pictures which would be vivid and real to the people of Philadelphia.

(i) The faithful Christian will be a pillar in the Temple of God. A pillar of the Church is a great and honoured support. Peter and James and John were the pillars of the early church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9). Abraham, said the Jewish Rabbis, was the pillar of the world.

(ii) The faithful Christian will go out no more. There may be something of two meanings here.

(a) This may be a promise of security. We have seen how for years Philadelphia was terrorized by recurring earthquakes of the earth and how, when such times came, its citizens fled into the open country to escape and, when the tremors ended, came uncertainly back. Life was lived in an atmosphere of insecurity. There is for the faithful Christian the promise of a settled serenity in the peace which Jesus Christ can give.

(b) Some scholars think that what is here promised is fixity of moral character. In this life even the best of us is sometimes bad. But he who is faithful will in the end come to a time when he is like a pillar fixed in the Temple of God and goodness has become the constant atmosphere of his life. If this is the meaning, this phrase describes the life of untroubled goodness which is lived when, after the battles of earth, we reach the presence of God.

(iii) Jesus Christ will write upon the faithful Christian the name of his God. There may be three pictures here.

(a) In the cities of Asia Minor, and in Philadelphia, when a priest died after a lifetime of faithfulness, men honoured him, by erecting a new pillar in the temple in which he had served and by inscribing his name and the name of his father upon it. This then would describe the lasting honour which Christ pays to his faithful ones.

(b) It is just possible that there is a reference to the custom of branding a slave with the initials of his owner to show that he belongs to him. Just so God will put his mark upon his faithful ones. Whichever picture is behind this, the sense is that the faithful ones will wear the unmistakable badge of God.

(c) It is just possible that we have an Old Testament picture. When God told to Moses the blessing which Aaron and the priests must pronounce over the people, he said: "They shall put my name upon the people of Israel" (Numbers 6:22-27). It is the same idea again; it is as if the mark of God was upon Israel so that all men may know that they are his people.

(iv) On the faithful Christian the name of the new Jerusalem is to be written. That stands for the gift of citizenship in the city of God to the faithful Christian. According to Ezekiel the name of the re-created city of God was to be The Lord is there (Ezekiel 48:35). The faithful ones will be citizens of the city where there is always the presence of God.

(v) On the faithful Christian Christ will write his own new name. The people of Philadelphia knew all about taking a new name. When in A.D. 17 a terrible earthquake devastated their city and Tiberius, the Emperor, dealt kindly with them, remitting taxation and making a generous gift to rebuild it, they in their gratitude, called the city Neocaesarea, the New City of Caesar, and later when Vespasian was kind to them, they called it Flavia, for that was the family name of Vespasian. Jesus Christ will mark his faithful ones with his new name: what that name was we need not even speculate, for no man knows it (Revelation 19:12), but in the time to come, when Christ has conquered all, his faithful ones will bear the badge which shows that they are his and share his triumph.

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Bibliography Information

Barclay, William. "Commentary on Revelation 3:4". "William Barclay's Daily Study Bible". <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/dsb/revelation-3.html>. 1956-1959.