

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb
The Open Door Church
Revelation 3:7-13

Text:

⁷ “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.’ ⁸ “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.’ ⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you.’ ¹⁰ 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.’ ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.’ ¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, 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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.’ ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Introduction:

Nearly every metropolitan area in the United States has at least one church that goes by the name “Open Door.” There is an Open Door Bible Church, an Open Door Community Church and The Church of the Open Door here in our area. These churches draw that name from this text. Look at v. 8: “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door...”

It is very important to notice that Philadelphia is one of only two churches where Jesus says nothing evil against them. The entire letter is positive. What is this church of the open door? Are we such a church?

Everyone knows that our historic American city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, named for the church to which we come today, means "brotherly love" (although some Philadelphians today call it "the city of the brotherly shove!").

Philadelphia was founded about 150 B.C. by King Attalus of Pergamum, whose nickname was Philadelphus, which means "lover of a brother." This man was noted for the admiration and love he had for his brother, Eumenes, and he named this city in honor of him.

One feature about the city that is crucial for understanding the text later is that the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 17 A. D., along with Sardis and other cities in that

locality. Most of the others recovered rather quickly from the disaster, but the after-shocks continued in Philadelphia for quite a number of years, with the result that the people had to flee the city repeatedly. Tiberius Caesar helped Philadelphia to recover from the earthquake, and out of gratitude the city changed its name to Neocaesarea (The New City of Caesar), and for awhile it bore that name. I mention these facts because they have a bearing on the promises to the church in this letter, as we will see.

The structure of this letter is quite simple. It seems that Jesus is telling this little church, this weak church, that they need to know two things: they need to remember who Jesus is and they need to see Jesus in perspective to themselves.

Notice how Jesus describes himself for the church of Philadelphia: “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (v.7).

Jesus is the holy one

Jesus is the true one

Jesus has the key of David

Jesus is the one who opens and shuts and no one can reverse his decisions.

What are we to make of these descriptions? They are so loaded it would take an entire session to simply unpack them. Nearly every line of this letter has allusions to Isaiah’s prophecy. Hang with me for one minute and let’s observe a few.

The most powerful expression of God’s name in the OT was Yahweh. The Greek reading of Isaiah 60:14 renders Jesus as the Holy One of Israel, the same expression we have here. In other words, Jesus is attributing to himself the name Yahweh, of old. Furthermore, in Isaiah 60:14, God promises that his people’s oppressors will bow at their feet and acknowledge that they are “the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.” So here in this letter to the church of Philadelphia, Jesus says he will bring the church’s opponents to bow at the church’s feet and confess that she is the Lord’s beloved.

Look at v.9: “Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you.”

This is extremely remarkable, folks because Jesus is declaring to this little church just who it is that comprises his beloved people in the first century and it is not the Jews who are merely ethnic Jews. Do you follow me?

Perhaps it is necessary for us to review just what we mean when we read of the Synagogue of Satan. Do you recall that both Smyrna and Philadelphia have this in common? They are also the only two churches to whom Jesus speaks no rebuke. But remember what we said back in Smyrna.

Emperor Worship

After Augustus Caesar died at the beginning of the 1st Century A.D. the Roman senate voted to have him *reified*. That is, they declared him to have been promoted to a god-like status. But a bit later, along came the emperor named Caligula in A.D. 30 who was literally a mad-man and a butcher. He declared as good news to the senate that he had

been *apotheosized*. He was now a part of the Roman pantheon though he was still living. In fact, Caligula was so mad that he actually declared his horse to be apotheosized as well so that both he and his horse were gods. There are quite a number of ancient writings that discuss this action. But as mad as he was, he established a tradition that each of the successive emperors came to be viewed as deities in the pantheon while they were ruling. At that point loyalty to the emperor came bound up with the admission that the emperor was god. So you had cities that would vie to become seats for emperor worship. They would erect temples to the emperor where the Roman citizens would come and burn incense or pour out wine libations to the emperor. The net result was that it tied fidelity to the Roman politics with religion. It was very effective.

Added to this is the Roman means for securing peace among the peoples and lands it was conquering. In earlier times, say the times of the Persians and Assyrians and Chaldeans in the OT, the conquering nations would conquer a people and then deport them to another place. This was an attempt at securing peace. They believed that if they could break up the nexus between a peoples' land, its gods and their heritage, they would be less likely to retaliate. In addition to that, these conquering governments would enlist the finest of the enemy nation's youth into their government class. So this is what you see in the days of Daniel, for example.

The Romans, however, had a different tactic. They performed god-swaps. Once they moved in and conquered a nation they would embrace some of that country's gods into their own pantheon and then insist that they in turn adopt some of the Roman gods into their own. This, too, was effective in keeping the nations from retaliating and rebelling. They could not pray to their gods for deliverance because now the Romans were praying to the same god as well.

But the Romans made one exception to this rule, namely, the Jews. They viewed the Jews as this extremely austere and mysterious people who held quite insistently on worshipping but one God – and at that, it was a God whom they could not see. In point of fact, many of the Romans suspected that the Jews were really atheists who held to no god because they could not point to him. So the Romans could not adopt the Jewish God and add him to their pantheon because they could not liken him and enshrine him. So the Jews were exempted from Roman worship including the oath of emperor worship. They were the only people not required to offer incense to the emperor. That meant, therefore, that as long as the Christians could be viewed as a subset of the Jews, they would be free from persecution for not worshipping the emperor.

You will notice that early on in church history, in the book of Acts particularly, most of the persecution falling on the church was Jewish persecution – synagogue persecution. It was Jew-on-Jew persecution largely. But as the church grew and became more and more Gentilic in its make-up, the easiest course of action was for the Jews to tip-off the Romans that the Christians really weren't Jews. So the wrath of Rome would come upon the church at the hand of the Jews. And that is precisely what was happening in Smyrna and Philadelphia. Jesus says in 2:9 that the church in Smyrna was suffering from the "slander of those who say they are Jews and are not" (v.9). In our text, Jesus says the church is suffering at the hands of those who are of "the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie" (v. 9).

I hope you can see a kind of irony here in Jesus' words.

When Jesus says that there were some in Philadelphia who called themselves Jews when they were not, but lied, he is not saying they didn't know who their daddies were. He is not saying that they were really not ethnically Jews but that they were really not a part of the true people of God.

It is extremely helpful to notice at this point in the text that Jesus, as quoted by John, supports what Paul had been saying all along, namely, that there are physical Jews who are not really Jews because they have rejected Christ. God's loyalty to the Jewish people was not tied to their fleshly heritage but to their spiritual heritage. They are here regarded as being of the "synagogue of Satan." You recall, of course, that Jesus had told the Pharisees that they were of their father the devil and that they did the works of their father (cf. John 8:44). So here in Smyrna and Philadelphia they were slandering the Christians to incite the Roman authorities against them because they refused to participate in emperor worship.

The people of God are not Jews but Christians. The people on whom God has set his love are not Jews but Christians. This is remarkable because Jesus is using Isaiah to make his point. Jesus is using an OT Israeli national text to make his point. But it gets worse.

Next, Jesus describes himself as one who holds the key of David. What is that? Jesus has unchallenged authority so that what he opens none can lock and what he locks none can open.

This is a reference to an incident recorded in Isaiah 22. In the days of Hezekiah the king there was a courtier in charge of the palace whose name was Shebna. He had been caught in a personal scam run for his own benefit, and as a result God says a very unusual, very descriptive thing about him: "I will take him and whirl him around and around, and hurl him into a far country" (cf. Is. 22:18). It was a prediction that he would be sent into Babylon. He would be replaced by a godly man named Eliakim, of whom God said, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David. What he opens, no one can shut, and what he shuts, no one can open" (Is. 22:17 NIV).

In our text, Jesus takes this passage in Isaiah and applies it to himself: "I am the one who shuts and no one can open, and opens and no one can shut." It seems likely that the Jews may have been saying that the Gentile Christians were not really in the kingdom but Jews were. Jesus is on the other hand saying that He is the one who opens and shuts up the kingdom and Jews who lie are not in the kingdom.

So when Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia that he has opened a door that no one can shut, he has sharp allusions to Isaiah's kingdom, the messianic kingdom. The church of Philadelphia was in the kingdom.

But not only did they need to know a few things about Jesus, namely, that he is the Yahweh of old and that he is the one who opens and shuts up the Davidic kingdom to those upon whom he has set his love; they also need to know a few things about themselves.

V. 8 is curious to me. There are two ways to read it:

“I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” This is the ESV. The NIV is similar. They both say, “I know that you have little power.” That is to say, I know that you are weak. But the words “I know” are interpretational. They are not in the Greek text. They are brought forward, however as an extension of the first sentence, “I know your works; that is, I know *that* you have little power, have kept my word and not denied my name.” And that is possible. The works that Jesus knows to be true are the three-fold works of being weak, keeping his word and not denying his name.

The NASB, on the other hand reads it differently. “I know your works. Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut *because* you have little power, have kept my word and not denied my name.” That is also a possible reading. I show you these options not to make a decision between them but to show you their connection with the keys of David.

At the end of the day both options are saying the same thing, namely, Christ admits into the kingdom those who are weak, those who keep his word and those who do not deny his name.

You can hear all kinds of NT gospel implications here, can’t you?

The Christians in Philadelphia were known for their weakness. This is completely contrary to the reputation of Sardis where there they had a reputation being alive, vibrant and strong; yet Jesus said they were dead. Jesus wants churches that are known for their weakness. Jesus wants churches through which his power can flow and his glory shines.

Jesus said in John 15:5, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

Three times Paul asked God to remove a thorn in his flesh, perhaps some physical malady, when instead Jesus said,

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

This is a central characteristic of all those who go to heaven: they have a desire to exalt the greatness of God’s strength through their weakness. In fact they will much rather glory in their weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon them.

This is completely contrary to how we speak today about self-esteem and motivational speech.

In order to motivate people through adversity we challenge them to see how strong they are, how capable they are. We encourage people to see how important they are, how valuable they are. This is completely contrary to Gospel talk – Jesus does not look to self-sufficient, self-esteeming, self-dependent people when admitting entrance to the kingdom; he looks to those who are weak.

“I have opened a door to you that no one can shut because you have little power!”

Jesus opens up a door for this church that none can shut because they have little power. Christ likes to exalt himself through humble and dependent people.

But Jesus opened up a door for this church that none could shut because they were loyal to his Word and to his name. This was a Christ-centered, Truth-exalting loyal church. The word for “kept” is guarded. The Philadelphian church guarded the truth of God’s Word and was loyal to Jesus’ name. This was very much a pure church – a model church. There were no stand-out personalities to name or follow; there was just commitment to Jesus Christ no matter what. There were no royalties, no marketing schemes, no growth strategies. They simply guarded the good deposit of the gospel and remained loyal to Jesus’ name.

It was because they kept the Word and did not deny Christ’s name that Lord of glory opened up a door for them that none could shut. And notice the kind of promises he gives this little powerless but God-depending church.

1. He will keep them from the hour of trial.

Revelation 3:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ **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.**

2. He will make them a pillar in the temple

Revelation 3:12 (ESV)

¹² **The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, 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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.**

This alludes to their history of earth quakes. Only the pillars were left standing and they had to flee the city several times. Well, when they come into the New Jerusalem, they will be secure. They will never have to flee out of it and they will be pillars in the presence of God.

3. He will give them a new and lasting name. They will not live in New Caesarea, they will live in New Jerusalem – the city of God where his new name and their new name will be permanently linked. Do you see? This is nothing more than the promise of heaven.