

Revelation 3:7-13
November 10, 2024

Good morning. We are continuing our series in the book of Revelation. We will be focusing today on Revelation chapter 3:7-13 which contains the words of Jesus Christ to the church in Philadelphia. For the past several weeks we have been considering a series of letters that John penned from Jesus to seven churches in Asia Minor.

As we learned in the opening verses, Revelation is a book that is designed to reveal the person and the heart of Jesus Christ. Even though this is often seen as a mysterious or even obscure book, throughout Revelation we come to see that Jesus wants us to know him better. To better understand what he has done, what he is doing and what he will do in the future.

There was a first century Jewish blessing that said, "may you be covered with the dust of your rabbi."

In that day, a disciple would walk, talk and even dress like his rabbi. He would seek to follow his rabbi so closely that he would be covered by his dust. As Christians, we are called to be disciples of Jesus. Following him in a way that we die to self and become more like him. This is a high call that comes with great change and even persecution.

In our passage today, we will see the church in Philadelphia as a model of a church that is following Christ.

The main point of this message is: **As we patiently and steadily pursue Jesus, we are empowered to spread the gospel and rewarded by being more like him.**

I will now read Revelation 3:7-13 and pray for God to speak to our hearts through his word.

Revelation 3:7-13

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.’

Pray

As we consider this passage we will be looking at three main points. Jesus our sovereign ruler, leading to the church’s response to this truth and ultimately the reward of a new identity, in this life and the next. So 3 R’s, Ruler, Response, and Reward.

Like any other church, the church at Philadelphia was not a perfect church. But, it is one of only two of the seven churches in Revelation that received only commendation from Jesus and encouragement with no correction or rebuke.

As with the other six churches identified in Revelation, Philadelphia was located in Asia Minor which is modern day Turkey. Philadelphia was established in 189 BC by King Eumenes II of Pergamon. King Eumenes named the city for the love of his brother who would be his successor Attalus II whose loyalty earned him the name Philadelphos, literally meaning “one who loves his brother.”

Philadelphia, like much of this region, was built in an area with active volcanos. Like Hawaii, volcanic ash made this soil very rich and good for lush growth, in fact this area was known for its vineyards and wine. Unfortunately, it also made this area susceptible to earth quakes and in AD 17 this city was destroyed by such a quake. Due to its strategic position for trade, the emperor Tiberius rebuilt it later in the first century. This also led to Tiberius being greatly honored and ultimately worshiped as a god in Philadelphia.

Very little is known about the church in Philadelphia. Some have presumed that it was a church plant from the church in Ephesus. Verse 8 suggests that they were likely a small congregation when it says that they were of little power, but Jesus sees them and speaks encouragement to them.

1. Jesus, our Sovereign Ruler

Verse 7 opens with a central aspect of this encouragement which is Jesus as their sovereign king or ruler. Unlike chapter 1 of revelation where we see a visual description of the glorified Jesus Christ, here Jesus identifies himself as God and king. This verse gives us four descriptive statements of Jesus that Jewish believers, in particular, would have heard as statements confirming that he is both God and Messiah.

He first identifies himself as “the holy one.” Throughout scripture, holiness is a term reserved specifically for God and

what he establishes as set apart to him. Holiness is the essence of God and permeates everything about him. It means that he is set apart from anyone else and is perfection of all his attributes. The term holy is also used to refer to anything set apart for God. Perhaps the best example of this is the sabbath which scripture says is a day which is holy or set apart for him.

Secondly, Jesus then refers to himself as true or the true one. This does not simply indicate that Jesus speaks the truth, but rather he is the true one. The Greek word used for true in this passage indicates him as authentic or genuine. In essence, as we often sing in worship, the “only true God.” This letter to the church in Philadelphia only refers to two spiritual beings; Jesus as the one true God and Satan as the God of every other counterfeit or alternate focus of worship.

Thirdly, Jesus refers to himself as the holder of a particular key which is the key of David. This is specifically referencing his identity as Messiah. This messianic reference is seen in **Isaiah 22:22** where speaking of this future King it says **"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."**

In the first century, a key symbolized the sovereign authority of a king. This allowed access to the king himself as well as to the treasury of his kingdom.

Lastly, in verse 7 Jesus refers to himself as the one “who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.” This final attribute of Jesus as God indicates his absolute and sovereign authority. This attribute is both humbling and comforting as it indicates that none of us know him unless he has first opened our hearts to knowledge of the gospel. And it also reflects that when he does this work of opening the door of our hearts, no one can close that door.

Verse 7 therefore is Jesus' primary encouragement to the church in Philadelphia and to us. To meditate on his holiness and his absolute sovereignty allows us to rest in the knowledge that this Jesus that we follow was not simply a good teacher or someone who died for what he believed in, but rather a king with absolute authority. This would have been very encouraging to this small church in Philadelphia. You see, the more we meditate on and grasp Jesus' absolute sovereign control over all things the more we trust and have peace even in situations where we feel very small and out of control.

Consider for a moment what weighs on your heart. Perhaps this thing leads to feelings of anxiety or discouragement or even anger. You have carried this burden so long that you don't know how much longer you can carry it. This burden may be your physical health or someone close to you. It may be a financial problem or a spiritual burden. Verse 7 reminds us that Jesus, the one true God and king is sovereign over all of life. He has the ability to open doors that seem impossible to open and also has the ability to shut doors that seem as though they would never close.

Illustration: (Graphic of surfer)

Have you ever noticed how hypnotizing the ocean is. It seems like we can never tire of just gazing at it, in its beauty and awesome power. What you are looking at is one of the waves in the city of Nazaré, Portugal known for producing some of the largest waves in the world. This one is 86 feet tall. This tiny dot is a surfer here is setting the Guinness world record for largest wave ever successfully surfed. His name is Sebastian Steudtner of Germany. You might notice the jet skis just beyond the wave. These waves are so large a surfer needs to be towed up and onto the wave.

Now some may think that these big wave surfers are simply insane, adrenalin junkies and you would not be completely wrong. But I believe there is another motivation. It is something in the human DNA that wants to engage and interact with such great power. To be small, yet to feel and connect to that great power. This is exactly what scripture is calling us to when it calls us to “fear God.”

If we take away nothing else from this passage, it is to have our gaze shifted from the distractions and challenges of this life that can make us feel powerless and small and to Jesus, our savior and king who is awesome in power and yet sees us and calls us to draw close to him and draw strength from his power.

This leads us to one final encouragement from Jesus stated in verse 8 when he says “I know your works.” Jesus wants this small congregation in Philadelphia to know that he sees them and also sees their works. How often when we are going through something difficult are we tempted to believe that we are alone and no one, not even God, sees our struggle, even as we are seeking to faithfully live for Jesus. He wants you and I to know that he sees our work. So what is this work that Jesus commends in this small, but healthy church?

2. Response

This leads us to our second point which is our response to our sovereign king, Jesus.

It is important to recognize that the church in Philadelphia is not commended for their size or their musical gifting or even for the skill of their teachers and leaders. In fact, Jesus highlights in verse 8 that, by the world's standards, they are very small and have little power in of themselves.

But he commends them in that they “kept his word” and were unwilling to deny the name of Jesus. They had recognized the fundamental elements of the Christian life, which were to identify themselves with and elevate the name of Jesus and to stay firmly grounded in the unchanging truth of his word.

Philadelphia, being under Roman rule, had expectations that Caesar would be worshiped as a god. Also, claiming Jesus as Messiah would have put them out of the synagogue which in that day was the center of the Jewish community and would have consequences on family relationships, as well as business. Refusing to bow down to Caesar would have potential life and death consequences as we have heard in other messages about early martyrs for the faith. So to speak the name of Jesus, to preach his word and to worship him and him alone required great courage.

Similarly, in our modern world if we talk about God at all, we are encouraged to hold to an “all roads lead to heaven” approach to faith. But this simply was and is not the message of Christ. He said in **John 14:6**, **6** “**I am *the way*, and *the truth*, and *the life*. **No one comes to the Father except through me (emphasis added)**.” It seems in our current pluralistic culture that evangelism starts with being willing to simply speak the name of Jesus.**

So the Philadelphian church was under great pressure. It is in this letter that we see a second reference to the “synagogue of Satan.” Also referenced in His letter to the church in Smyrna, this small church was experiencing persecution by those who claimed to be Jews, but were only focusing on outward standards.

The apostle Paul speaks to this same phenomenon in

Romans 2:28-29

28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Being referred to as the synagogue of Satan reflects the work of the enemy to resist the name of Jesus and to discourage his people in the service and pursuit of Christ.

While speaking on spiritual warfare, I heard a pastor say that he considers the primary temptation of Satan for Christians is to give up. As we wrestle with the pressures and struggles of this world and our own sin, it is easy to get discouraged and simply throw in the towel. Not of course to take away our salvation, but rather to neutralize our effectiveness for the kingdom. Jesus commends the church in Philadelphia for their endurance and holding fast to the word in spite of resistance.

Speaking to the same point, Presbyterian pastor, **Donald Grey Barnhouse**, who coincidentally pastored in Philadelphia, PA, speculated in one of his radio sermons what a city would look like if Satan took over.

"If Satan took over Philadelphia, all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say 'Yes, sir' and 'No, ma'am,' and the churches would be full every Sunday... where Christ was not preached".

You see, the primary agenda of the enemy is not the propagation of particular sins, but rather to distract us from following and keeping our eyes on Jesus.

As mentioned earlier, Satan is the prince of counterfeit worship; propagating division by encouraging focus on the outward appearance of faith while denying the inward reality of a changed heart.

Rather than engaging this controversy with angry debate, this small church kept their focus on the name and message of Jesus. In doing so Jesus was opening the doors of this synagogue and this passage would indicate that the name of Jesus was being proclaimed such that eventually they would recognize him as messiah.

This is the implication of verse 9 where Jesus says "behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet. And they will learn that I have loved you." The implication of this passage is that these "false jews" would one day recognized Jesus as messiah and that his love is for his church. They would one day bow but would do so as a conquered foe.

But this is often not an overnight process. For many of you who know what it's like to pray for an unsaved loved one or for growth of the church we often recognize that the challenge is to persist even when it appears that nothing is happening.

So Jesus now commends this church in Philadelphia for their "patient endurance." Have you ever noticed that when going through a trial or difficult season in life that enduring that trial is not where our choice lies, but rather how we will endure that trial. The Philadelphian church patiently endured. This indicates a level of peace and trust in Christ and his perfect timing in his work.

How often we are tempted to impatiently endure. This type of endurance is often marked by anxiety and even anger as we desire to not only direct the outcome, but the timing of the work of Christ.

In verse 10, Jesus states that because of their patient endurance he will keep them from an hour of trial that his coming on the whole world. It is unclear what this trial refers to. Some have used this passage to indicate that faithful Christians will be kept from the coming great tribulation, in other words holding to a pre-tribulation view that Christians will be raptured before the great tribulation.

As appealing as a pre-tribulation rapture is, it seems that scripture indicates that we will be protected through or in the tribulation, rather than removed from the tribulation. For instance, in John 17:15 Jesus says “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” This phrase, “keep them from” is the same phrase in the Greek as is used in Revelation 3:10.

But regardless of our position on these future events, the implication to the church in Philadelphia is that Jesus sees them and they are secure in his protection from God’s wrath which is coming on the world.

This leads to Jesus’ only exhortation to the church at Philadelphia which is in verse 11 to “hold fast what they have.” This was not a correction, but rather an encouragement to stay the course. This church, though small, has been able to keep the main things, the main things. Proclaiming the name of Jesus and keeping his word.

Hebrews 12:1-2a (NASB)

12 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 [a]fixing our eyes on Jesus, the [b]author and perfecter of faith,

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews encourages us to lay aside the distractions and encumbrances of this life, and to more and more fix our eyes and hope on Jesus. This was challenging for the church in Philadelphia and is challenging for us as we live in the midst of cultural pressures to water down the message of the gospel.

3. Reward

This brings us to our final point which is the effect or perhaps we can think of it as the reward of patient endurance in the midst of trial and holding fast to the name of Jesus and the message of the gospel.

In verse 12 he states they will be made “pillars in the temple of my God.” In that culture, the temple often had pillars that were dedicated to individuals by name. These were immovable and typically marble structures. This passage reflects the growth of God’s people, both personally and corporately, as they persevere in the Christian life over time. But in this case rather than those pillars of the faith honoring those who have gone before, these pillars will carry the name of God and the address of God, the New Jerusalem.

You see, as we follow Jesus and are faithful to patiently endure the challenges of the Christian life, our identity changes. We become less recognizable as the old self and more as reflecting only the name of Jesus.

A few years ago, we had another church that met here on Sunday afternoons. Some of you might remember Redemption House. They were young and vibrant and many in their congregation were only recently coming out of dark and difficult lives. The pastor of this church commented to me one day that he saw in our congregation what he hoped would characterize his church one day. He saw what he called 'mature oaks of righteousness.' These were members of our congregation who had been walking with Jesus for decades and had endured under various trials both personally and as a church body. The effect was deep roots and mature branches that were bearing much fruit.

I would like to offer only two points of application today:

First, keep it simple. The Christian life is not easy, but it is simple. This passage reflects growing in our wonder of our sovereign king, Jesus. Spend time worshipping him. As you pray, acknowledge and meditate on his holiness, his love and his power over all things.

Secondly, hold fast to him through reading and studying his word, both personally and corporately.

As we close today, my prayer is that CrossPointe Church would be steadfast in its pursuit of Jesus and grow to be more and more like him in the coming days.

Let's pray