

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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To the Church in Philadelphia – Joss Bray

Philadelphia is the sixth of the seven churches that got a message from Jesus at the beginning of the book of Revelation.

This is one of only two of the churches that only received commendation, with no criticisms or warnings. All the others were first commended then warned then given hope and a promise. Philadelphia was different. So what was different about the church there? That's what we need to find out.

Philadelphia

By way of background, Philadelphia is the old name for what is now Alasehir in western Turkey. It is east of Sardis and the next church stop on the clockwise trade route we have been following. Philadelphia means "brotherly love" and it was an important early church centre. It saw a lot of activity in Roman times – not least being a severe earthquake in AD 17.

The message

REV 3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus introduces himself

He announces that he is holy and true. This is because he is God and what he says is the truth. He wants to reassure them that they can take the message to heart and that it is sincere truth. It is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Jesus holds a very important key. This is referred to as the key of David - and is very similar to Isaiah 22 v 22 - which is part of a passage that refers to the gatekeeper of King David's palace:

ISA 22:22 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.

The image here is of someone who controls access to the King. The gatekeeper of the palace was the one who let people in to see the king – or not. Jesus is pointing out that he is the one through whom we can access the King – the Lord God. The key to the gate to the heavenly kingdom is firmly in his hands. There is no other way. What is more, no one can cut the church off from this open door to heaven – he says:

REV 3:8 See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

And no one else can open a way that is shut. There is no other way into the king's presence. What he shuts – no one can open. Like in the Lord of the Rings there is a famous scene where Gandalf stands in the way of a fiery beast from the depths– “You shall not pass!” he says. It cost Gandalf his life to fight this evil one but like an echo of Jesus he was victorious in the end and rose to new life. That is only a film of course – but Tolkein was a Christian and was would be well aware of the self sacrifice and resurrection that Jesus demonstrated himself.

Jesus knew the church

He knew what they did – their deeds. He also knew that they had little strength. Does he criticise them for this – not at all! Their strength was not earthly power or large numbers. Their strength was that they had persevered in all the right things through faith.

They kept his word – they hung onto the word of God through thick and thin. They continued to honour Jesus and were not ashamed to do so. They endured patiently and obeyed his commands.

Jesus knew the opposition

REV 3:9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

In this message he uses the phrase “synagogue of Satan” - people who claim to be Jews but were not. We heard about this problem in the message to the church in Smyrna. It is likely that the early Christians also worshipped in the synagogue and then met again as a church to worship Jesus. For Jesus, the true Jews – the real Israel of God – were the people who recognised through the scripture and prophecies and then faith that he was the Messiah promised all the way through Israel’s history.

The Jews who didn’t believe in him were evidently persecuting the Christians who did. In fact, in Jesus’s eyes, these people were not Jews at all any more. They, in the end, will be the ones who come to the Christians in repentance when they realise that Jesus loves the church – and that it is Him that has the key to the heavenly kingdom and the heavenly King. This must have been very encouraging to the Christians in Philadelphia – they were under constant attack, and to know that in the end they would be vindicated must have been something they could hang onto and give them serious hope for the future.

Jesus then encourages the church some more

REV 3:10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

There is a time of trial and testing coming. In the book of Revelation, this is a theme that is recurrent and graphically described. There have been many discussions about what this means, when it is, how long it will be etc. There is no simple answer to this – except that it will happen.

It already happens in many places around the world where the church is persecuted. But this speaks of a time when the whole world will be affected by something so catastrophic and widespread that it will be a trial and testing of faith for everyone.

Whatever this is, Jesus said he will save them from it because they have already endured patiently. They have been tested and found to be faithful and obedient. Jesus wants them to know that in eternal terms – he is coming soon. Obviously he didn’t return before all those people in the church had died – but this is also a message to the whole church through the ages, so it has a bigger perspective and application than just for the Philadelphians.

He encourages them to keep holding on – to keep persevering, to keep being obedient to his word and to keep honouring his name.

Jesus then promises amazing things

REV 3:12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

If they overcome and keep going they will have an everlasting legacy in the city of God – the New Jerusalem. Having an inscription on a building was – and is of course – an honour that endures. The person who overcomes and stands firm in this life will be a vital part of the heavenly city - an honoured and recognised part. And their name that will never be forgotten.

What is more, they will forever have the approval, the royal seal of Jesus written on them that no one can take away. It is like an “admit all areas” VIP pass - only it lasts forever and it guarantees admission to the biggest and best party of all time – and they can stay there forever!

So what does the Spirit say to the churches?

What is God saying to us through all this?

We may feel that we are a church with “little strength”. Perhaps it is precisely because Philadelphia was like that, that Jesus had nothing to criticise. They could not be puffed up with pride in what they did, or believe they were achieving things in their own strength. They knew they couldn’t do it with the earthly strength they had.

When we went to Holy Island on a church outing last year we saw a description of the early monks there as “few in number, but strong in faith”. That resonated with us as well.

Numbers are genuinely not important. What counts is the state of our faith. Is it the sort of faith that perseveres year after year under pressure? Is it the sort of faith that honours the word of God and the name of Jesus – even when we face opposition?

Remember – Jesus holds the key to heaven – this is a “key” message. There is no other way to the Father – Jesus is the way the truth and the life. This message may become increasingly unpopular in the future – everything the world teaches goes against this. We need to make sure we hang on to this truth as central. We need to stand on the bible as the word of God and not be embarrassed about what it says or compromise the message.

Surely there are parts that are difficult to understand and we can't expect to be able to explain it all. But the overall message of the bible is crystal clear – it is God's message to us wrapped up in the person of Jesus.

What is more – we desperately need the help of the Holy Spirit to give us heavenly strength that we do not have from an earthly perspective. Jesus sent us his Spirit because he is not here as a physical person – and he sent the Spirit for very good reasons. It is only by his power that we can overcome and stand firm. It is only by his power we can be transformed people - becoming more like Jesus as we grow in him.

Do we feel weak and daunted by what God calls us to as a church? - Excellent! Then there is no room for earthly pride and we have to rely on the Holy Spirit – that power from God that Jesus sent. Let's be continually filled with the Spirit.

Do we realise that the doors Jesus opens up, no one can shut and the doors he closes, no one can open? He is in charge of our eternal destiny – we need to be sure that deep down that we are seeking to trust in the Lord with all our heart and not on our understanding as it says in Proverbs 3. Situations that look to us to be bleak and unresolvable as we see them are certainly not so to God.

The promises here are for us too – Jesus wants us to look up and see what he has in store for us – and it's all very good.