



**WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL**  
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**Jesus' Letters to Seven Asian Churches - Revelation 2:1-3:22**  
**Part 6 of 7: Philadelphia - Revelation 3:7-13**

By Tal Davis

When we hear the name *Philadelphia*, we immediately think of the city in Pennsylvania where, in 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed. But long before the United States was even imagined, a city of that name was located in Asia Minor. It is to the church in that "City of Brotherly Love" that the risen Christ directs his sixth of seven letters to the churches. It is dictated to John, and recorded in Revelation 2:7-13.

To read parts one through five in this series, click on these links:

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-1-ephesus-tal-davis/>

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-2-smyrna-tal-davis/>

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The ancient city of Philadelphia was about 30 miles southeast of Sardis on an important imperial highway running from Smyrna eastward through Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Thus, it was geographically next in line to receive a special message from Jesus.

Philadelphia was founded in 140 BC by the King of Pergamum, Attalus II (220-138 BC). He was known as Attalus Philadelphus ("the brother-lover") because he inherited the throne from his beloved brother Eumenes II. The city was famous as a missionary center for Hellenist (Classical Greek) culture and religion. The Greeks were convinced that their culture, language, art, and gods were superior to all others, and thus set out to export them wherever they could. Let's delve into what the Lord Jesus wrote to the church in that city.

*7"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: 8 'I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have followed 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 - I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth. 11 I am coming quickly; hold firmly to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; 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 My new name. 13 The one who has an ear,*

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*let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Revelation 2:7-13 NASB)*

As with Sardis, Philadelphia was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17. However, Roman Emperor Tiberius, as he did with Sardis, rebuilt it and gave it another name, Neocaesarea or New Caesar. But to its citizens it remained Philadelphia. Because of the area's rich volcanic soil, one of the city's most prosperous business enterprises was grape growing. Thus, Dionysus, the god of wine making and revelry, was its primary deity of worship.

How the church in Philadelphia was founded is not known, but at the time of this letter it must have been fairly small (v. 8). But in the Lord's estimation, size and power are irrelevant. A church's faithfulness is what matters. As always, in verse seven, the majestic speaker (the risen Christ) addresses his message *"to the angel (i.e.: the pastor) of the church in Philadelphia."* He then introduces Himself using four lofty identifiers.

First, the Lord identifies Himself as *"He who is holy" (hagios)*. He is pure, sinless, righteous, and unlike anything in the created universe. This designation is a clear self-identification with the God of the Israelites. "To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal?" asks the Holy One (Isa. 40:25). "God comes from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covers the heavens, and the earth is full of his praise" (Hab. 3:3). The term is used often in the New Testament as a title for believers: "the saints." In this context, however, "Holy" applies only to God.

Next, He calls Himself *He "who is true" (alethinos)*. Truth can be defined as the way things actually

were, actually are, and actually will be. As the Messiah and Lord, Jesus is the embodiment of Truth. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). They can know He is always reliable and trustworthy of their faith.

Third, the Lord makes a somewhat quizzical claim. He says He *"has the key of David."* To understand this title, look back to the book of Isaiah. Eliakim was a servant of King Hezekiah who replaced the subversive Shebna as the king's chief steward. The king declares Eliakim will hold the "key of David," meaning he will control all access to the king (Isa. 22:15-25). The Lord Jesus, as the Messiah in David's lineage, holds the key to access to the presence and blessings of God.

Fourth, He expands on His authoritative title. Again He draws on the analogy of Eliakim's Davidic power when Hezekiah asserted, "What he opens, no one can close; what he closes, no one can open." Jesus says *He* is the one *"who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens."* He holds the ultimate power of God to open or close the door to His kingdom, blessings, grace, and eternal life.

Then, in verse eight, the Lord turns His attention to the Philadelphian church. He begins by addressing their spiritual condition. Unlike some of the other Asian congregations who had lost their enthusiasm for service to God, the Philadelphians received no criticism from Christ. He says, *"I know your deeds."* The Lord comprehends their faithful service to Him and their efforts to remain unstained by the pagan culture in which they lived. Their motive was pure, it was out of love for Christ, the gospel, and for each other.

Then, based on the key of David authority discussed in verse seven, the divine speaker declares He has given them *"an open door which no one can shut."* We might ask, "Open door to what?" It certainly applies to entrance to

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the kingdom of God as discussed above. But it may have more immediate application for this church. Philadelphia's strategic geographic location was called the "Gateway to the East." The city earned that moniker because of its place on the main road from the west coast of Asia to the eastern Roman provinces. The Lord wanted them to see that situation as a gateway or door for the church to spread the gospel beyond its confines in Asia. Philadelphia was a prime junction of diverse cultures, languages, and people groups traveling across the Mediterranean world. Their reward for faithful service would be, like Eliakim's reward for service to Hezekiah, even greater opportunities to serve as His stewards.

That door will remain open despite the fact they only "*have a little power*." The Christians in Philadelphia were not wealthy, did not wield any influence in the town, and were probably few in number. They were low in strength, but they were high in quality. The evidence of that fact is seen in two ways. First, He says, they "*have followed My word*." Even in the face of the strong cultural and spiritual forces at work in the city's pagan environment, they had remained uncompromisingly devoted to "the Holy One" and "the True One." His word is the unblemished revealed truth that they had received from the Apostles.

He likewise applauds them because they "*have not denied My name*." All the pressures from the ungodly spiritual and social landscape where they resided did not succeed in forcing these believers to bring any shame or embarrassment to Jesus' reputation. As a result they will participate in the Lord's victory over His enemies.

Once again, in verse nine, as He did in the letter to Smyrna, the Holy One, the risen Jesus, addresses the problem of the "*synagogue of Satan*." This was same sort of Jewish faction

that harassed the believers in Smyrna. They strongly opposed the preaching of Jesus as the Messiah and conspired with the pagans to persecute Christians. Just the way He labels them makes it clear He has no regard for them. They may have claimed to be Jewish in ethnic, traditional, or legalistic religious terms, but they were obstinate in their rejection of Him (the Holy One) as Messiah, and intensely antagonistic to those Jews and Gentiles who embraced Him.

Therefore, the omniscient Lord declares that they are not really Jews at all. He says emphatically that they are counterfeits who lie. Such a strident indictment coming from Christ Himself! Yet, He knows their hearts and motives better than they do themselves. He can see through their external religious facade to the vile reality of their internal deceit.

Those who fraudulently disguise themselves as servants of God are actually children of the devil (that is why they are in his synagogue). As Jesus said of the Pharisees, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

The problem of religious fraud is true in every generation. Even today, unethical preachers go on television urging naive viewers to just send them money offerings as a "seed of Faith." They claim, that if the viewer is generous, God guarantees to bring them physical healing and financial blessings, just like He supposedly does for them. If God does not provide the blessings as soon as they want, it's their own fault for not demonstrating enough faith. So, send more seed money!

Jesus then makes an audacious promise to the good Christians in Philadelphia. He says that He will make those who persecute them (the synagogue of Satan's false Jews) "*come and bow down before your feet.*" That phrase is literally "*worship (proskynesousin) before your feet.*" He suggests that the evil persecutors will some day worship before them. They will not be worshipping the Christians, but they will be showing humility to them as they fall prostrate before God. He does not say exactly when that will happen, but we can assume it will be in the last days. The enemies of God will face a day of judgment. The Apostle Paul declares, quoting Isaiah 45:23 (see also Isa. 60:14), "As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God." In that day, their detractors will know how much Jesus truly loved the Philadelphian disciples.

The Holy One makes another promise to the Philadelphian believers in verse ten. Keep in mind that these promises are relevant to all Christians. He is pleased they "*have kept My word of perseverance.*" They were following the Lord's teachings for believers patiently to persevere in the present world of sin and evil, just as He did Himself (2 Thess. 3:5; Heb. 12:3). Because they steadfastly kept His word, He pledges, "*I also will keep you from the hour of the testing.*" The word "have kept" (*eteresas*) in the first phrase is past tense, and in the second phrase, he uses the future tense, "will keep" (*tereso*). Their future protection by Christ is a result of their past faithfulness to Him and His word.

These words of the Lord raise two questions: What exactly is the "hour of testing" and how will He keep them from it? It is important to note He says it will not only effect the believers in Philadelphia, but it "*is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.*"

Many interpreters see this as a reference to the future Great Tribulation, or time of great distress, in the end times that will precede the second coming of Christ (Matt. 24:21-22, 29). They hold the position that all true followers of Jesus will be snatched up (raptured) to be with the Lord and spared the intense hardships of that period of time.

Other commentators see it as meaning the church will be able to endure that difficult future time under the protection of God while still on earth. Still others interpret it as indicative of the generally difficult circumstances all believers in all eras will endure until the Lord returns.

Whichever way one reads it, the promise is a great comfort to all Christians that they are always safe and secure in Christ when things get really bad. Millions of Christians in our current generation are already experiencing terrible persecution around the world (see Part 2 in this series). They cling desperately to these promises of God for relief in this life or, if necessary, in the next.

The Lord follows His promise of protection with an even greater one for the future. He declares in verse eleven, "*I am coming quickly!*" He does not mean this as a threat to bring immediate judgment to them or their enemies, as He did with the Sardis church (Rev. 3:3). In this instance He is indeed pronouncing that His Second Coming is very near.

We have to keep in mind that "soon" is a relative term. What may seem like a long time in human reckoning is but a moment in God's time. Peter addressed this very issue: "Above all, be aware of this: Scoffers will come in the last days scoffing and following their own evil desires, saying, 'Where is his "coming" that he promised?' Ever since our ancestors fell asleep, all things continue as they have been since the beginning of creation ... Dear friends, don't overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:3-4,8-9).

Today, "scoffers" still ridicule the hope we have in Christ's return. In any case, Jesus warned against setting dates or speculating (Matt. 24:36-44). We do not know when Christ will come again, but we can be sure of one thing, He will not be late!

Meanwhile, until He comes, the risen Christ tells them to "*hold firmly to what you have.*" They had kept His word, but the time of persecution is not yet over. So He implores them to keep a firm grip on to the truth they



have received. They are to stay loyal to the Lord "*so that no one will take your crown*" (*stephanos*). In this case, the crown of life, as it was called with the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:10), is a garland of flowers worn in pagan ceremonies and awarded to the victors in war or sports competition. It is a metaphor for their victory over sin and the world. He does not want them to fall victim to Satan's traps or to the temptations of the evil society where they lived. Those unholy attractions would detract them from their devotion to Him and could rob them of their reward. But, if they remain strong, "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4; see also 1 Cor. 3:10-17; James 1:12).

In verse twelve, Christ speaks again to "*the one who overcomes*" (conquers). He uses another metaphor to describe how He will reward His victorious follower. He says He will make him "*a pillar in the temple of my God.*" In ancient times, the Greeks and Romans built enormous temples of stone to their gods and goddesses. Modern architects and engineers still stand in awe of the incredible abilities of the ancients to design and construct such edifices without the aid of modern technology. Pillars were cylindrical columns of solid rock and were used to hold up the roofs of the huge temples. Some roofs weighed hundreds of tons and rose 50 to 100 feet above the ground. As strong as they were, the temples were, nonetheless, vulnerable to natural disasters. Earthquakes often caused them to tumble leaving only the pillars standing.

Traditionally in the Greek culture cities, when a distinguished citizen of a community retired or died, his name would be inscribed on a new special pillar added to a temple of one of the gods in his honor. The "overcomer," metaphorically, will become such a pillar and "*he will not go out from it anymore.*" Also, Christ Himself will inscribe God's name on it. By inscribing God's True Name on the pillar, it affirms His power and authority on the conqueror. The Lord places His infinite imprimatur making him a living part of His holy temple to the True and Living God.

But that is not the only thing embossed on this new pillar (i.e.: the conquering believer). Christ will also put "*on it the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem.*" The New Jerusalem is the beautiful city which descends from heaven to the new restored earth where God will reign with His people forever (Rev. 21-22:5). This Holy City is both a place and a citizenship. By putting the city's name on the pillar it permanently establishes his citizenship in heaven.

Then, the divine Holy One says He will inscribe "*my new name on the pillar.*" The overcomer is claimed by Christ as His own possession. All these inscriptions on the new pillar on God's temple indicate that the people in Philadelphia, because of their loyalty to the Truth, are living stones on the eternal house of the Lord (1 Pet. 2:5).

Finally, in verse thirteen, the Lord again tells all His readers to open their spiritual ears and listen carefully to "*what the Spirit says to the churches.*" So then ends the Holy and True One's heavenly communiqué to the church in Philadelphia, the original "City of Brotherly Love."

In the next, and final, installment in this seven part series, we will analyze the Lord's message to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22.

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