

Churches of Revelation: Philadelphia
Revelation 3:7-13
ABC 10/31/21

Open your Bibles to Rev 3:7-13 as we come to a letter written to those in a church who remained faithful to Jesus. We all realize there are no perfect churches, right? If there were, none of us would be part of it because we know we're not perfect. We all fall short of God's standard of absolute & complete holiness. & as a group of imperfect Christians, our church can't help but be imperfect. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't withhold His blessing from struggling & imperfect congregations. As we see in this letter, what matters to Him is faithfulness. Like all churches, the one in Philadelphia wasn't perfect but Jesus commends its members for their faithfulness & loyalty. They & the congregation at Smyrna are the only 2 churches that received no rebuke from Jesus. They provide a good model to us today. **7-13**

1. The City (7) This city isn't in Pennsylvania but in Asia Minor, today's Turkey. Philadelphia was the youngest of the 7 cities, founded sometime around 189 BC either by King Eumenes of Pergamum or his brother, Attalus II, who succeeded him as king. In either case, the city got its name from Attalus' nickname, *Philadelphus* (brother lover), for his loyalty to his brother. Though situated on an 800-ft-high hill overlooking an important road, Philadelphia didn't begin as a military outpost. It was created to be a center of Greek culture & language & was to spread Hellenism to the regions of Lydia & Phrygia & history tells us they succeeded. Philadelphia was at the junction of several important trade routes, earning it the title *gateway to the East*.¹ The city was located on the edge of a volcanic region & was great for vineyards. But being near a seismically active region had its drawbacks. The earthquake that destroyed Sardis in 17 AD also rocked Philadelphia. Though the destruction was greater at Sardis, Philadelphia, being nearer the epicenter, experienced aftershocks for years.² Sir William Ramsay notes:

Many of the inhabitants remained outside the city living in huts & booths ... & those who were foolhardy enough to remain in the city, practiced various devices to support & strengthen the walls & houses against the recurring shocks. The memory of this disaster lived long ... people lived ... in

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the NT, pp 114–15

² J. Hampton Keathley, III, bible.org/seriespage/8-message-philadelphia-rev-37-13

*dread always of a new disaster; & the habit of going out to the open country had probably not disappeared when this letter was written.*³

In gratitude for Tiberius' help in rebuilding their city, the Philadelphians erected a monument to him. Beyond that, they also changed their name to Neocaesarea, *new city of the Caesar*, for a number of years in gratitude to him. Several decades later, the city again changed its name to *Flavia*, in honor of the ruling Roman Imperial family. It would be known by both names, *Philadelphia* & *Flavia*, throughout the 2nd & 3rd centuries.⁴

2. The Church (7) Little is known about the Philadelphian church apart from this passage. There's no mention in Scripture of the birth of this church. It was likely started during Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Tradition tells us that a few years after Rev was written, Ignatius wrote the church a letter of encouragement & instruction & then passed through Philadelphia on his way to martyrdom in Rome. It's said some Christians from Philadelphia were martyred with Polycarp at Smyrna. The church lasted for centuries & the Christians in Philadelphia stood firm even after the Muslims took control & the church lasted into in the mid-14th century.⁵

3. The Correspondent (7) Jesus is the author of all 7 of these letters & always introduces Himself with a description reflecting His character. In the previous 5 letters, His descriptions came from John's vision in Rev 1 (12-17), but this description comes from the OT. It begins with, **He who is...**

A. Holy, meaning *set apart*. It speaks of one who's absolutely separated from sin & possesses a character that's unblemished & flawless. Interestingly, there was a temple in Philadelphia where they gave the emperor the title, *The Son of the Holy One*. But only God is **holy**. Throughout Scripture, the holiness of God is consistently declared (2 Kgs 19:22; Job 6:10; 78:41; Is 43:15; 54:5; Hab 3:3). The psalmist calls Him the **Holy One of Israel** (Ps 71:22). In Isaiah's vision, the angels call out, **Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts** (Is 6:3). The living creatures in the throne room of heaven continuously proclaim, **Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty** (Rev 4:8). The NT ascribes this holiness to Jesus. Announcing His birth to Mary, the angel described Jesus as **the holy Child** (Lk

³ *The Letters to the 7 Churches of Asia*, pp 316–17

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, pp 120–121

⁵ *Ibid*, p 120

1:35). In Mk 1:24 a demon screamed, **What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!** In Jn 6:69 Peter stated, **You are the Holy One of God.** Later he rebuked the unbelieving Jews because they **disowned** Jesus, **the Holy & Righteous One** (Acts 3:14). For Jesus to identify Himself as **He who is holy** is a clear claim to deity. He possesses in undiminished, unaltered essence the holy & sinless nature of God Himself. Because Jesus is **holy**, His church must be as well. **Like the Holy One who called you**, Peter wrote, **be holy yourselves** (1 Pt 1:15). This could have been a frightening introduction, because holiness can't tolerate sin. That the omniscient Holy One gave no rebuke, warning, or condemnation to this church speaks well of them. Jesus is not only **holy** but also...

B. True. He's perfect in unblemished truth. In fact, throughout the book of Rev, He's described like this: **holy & true** (6:10), **righteous & true** (15:3, 16:7; 19:2), **faithful & true** (19:11). The word **true** means genuine, authentic, & real. It speaks to Christ's purity, faithfulness, credibility, dependability, & genuineness. He's the **true** God, not a false one. He is the holy & genuine Lord, perfect in righteousness & **true** in His character & all that He says. Again, it's remarkable that He introduces Himself like this & that there's no rebuke that follows. He's the **true** God who has no place for error or falsehood & He doesn't admonish this church.⁶ In the midst of falsehood, lies, & half-truths that fill the world, Jesus is the **truth**, as He proclaims, **I am the way & the truth & the life...** (Jn 14:6). John proclaims, **we know that the Son of God has come, & has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; & we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God & eternal life** (1 Jn 5:20). Jesus is no counterfeit. He's perfect in unblemished truth. If we believe Jesus is the **truth**, then it should have an impact on our daily lives. We should worship God in **truth** (Jn 4:24). We should rejoice in **truth** (1 Cor 13:6). We should speak to one another in **truth** (Eph 4:25). We should meditate or think upon the **truth** (Phil 4:8). If we're truly seeking to follow the example of Jesus as He who is **true**, then truth will permeate our lives. He's **holy, true, & ...**

⁶ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church: Timeless Demands from the Lord to His People*, p 143

C. Has the Key of David, who opens & no one will shut, & who shuts & no one opens (7). A key in Scripture seems to represent authority. Whoever holds a key has control (Mt 16:19; Rev 1:18; 9:1; 20:1). Isaiah 22:15-23 gives us the background for this. It says, **I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open (22:22).** This promise was given to Eliakim, who was a faithful servant under King Hezekiah. Eliakim replaced Shebna, who was an unfaithful steward. The fact Eliakim was given the key to **the house of David** meant he controlled access to the king. As the holder of the **key of David**, Jesus has the sovereign authority to determine who enters His kingdom (Jn 10:7, 9; 14:6; Acts 4:12). Just as he holds the keys to death & hell (Rev 1:18), He holds the keys to salvation & blessing as well. He is the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from His kingdom. There's no greater comfort than to know your faith, & thus your eternity, is held fast in the all-powerful hands of our Lord. He Himself opens the door for His people to enter into the blessings of His heaven & there's no one or nothing that can close it. There's no one who can overturn what Jesus does. No one can shut the doors to the kingdom or blessing if He holds them open & no one can force them open if He holds them closed. He's in complete control over His church, this world, our lives, & our eternal destiny. It's comforting that the One who is pure in **holy** character & perfect in unblemished *truth* is also powerful in sovereign authority.

4. The Commendation (8) Finding nothing in their **deeds** that caused Him concern, Jesus moved on to commend them & He begins with a bit of encouragement. He says, **I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut...** He knew the **deeds** of this church & found nothing to cause Him concern. Unlike most of the other churches, Jesus doesn't condemn them for anything. In fact, He's put before them an **open door, which no one can shut.** If we take this phrase with vs 7, these faithful believers were eternally secure in their salvation. Of all the doors that have ever been or ever will be opened, the greatest is the door of salvation that Jesus has opened for all who enter through faith in Himself. You can enter through the door that He's opened but be warned, it won't be open forever. One day it will close. The day of opportunity will

end & those who haven't entered by faith in Jesus Christ will be excluded forever. The same Jesus who's opened the door of salvation will one day close & lock it. Listen to Jesus's words,

Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter & will not be able. Once the head of the house gets up & shuts the door, & you begin to stand outside & knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer & say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate & drank in Your presence, & You taught in our streets'; & He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' In that place there will be weeping & gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham & Isaac & Jacob & all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out (Lk 13:24–28).

Jesus is warning that the day of opportunity won't last forever. Therefore, if you're going to believe in Jesus & be saved, you must believe in Him now (2 Cor 6:2).⁷ The church in Philadelphia had an open door, with people constantly passing through as they traveled the ancient trade routes. The city had already influenced the region with the Greek language & culture. In Scripture an open door often depicts freedom to proclaim the gospel. Explaining his travel plans to the Corinthians, Paul told them, **I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, & there are many adversaries** (1 Cor 16:8–9; 2 Cor 2:12). To the Colossians he wrote, **Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word** (Col 4:2–3). Philadelphia's strategic location provided the Christians there with an excellent opportunity to spread the gospel. This church had a strategic opportunity to reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ. Their faithfulness would be rewarded & they'd enjoy the privilege of being used by God to lead others into the kingdom of His Son. This must have been a joyous encouragement for this faithful church. Jesus gave this word of encouragement & then said,

A. They **have a little power**. From the world's perspective this church may have appeared weak. But from God's perspective it had **a little power**. This wasn't a negative comment but a statement about their spiritual strength. They had **a little power**. Paul tells us about God's design for the church when he writes,

consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, & God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, & the base things

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons from the Apocalypse*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, p 132

of the world & the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God (1 Cor 1:26–29).

He went on his 2nd letter to Corinth to say,

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9-10).

This church was sufficient in Christ. Spiritual strength flowed in them. Things were happening, people were being redeemed, lives were being transformed, & the gospel was being proclaimed. They weren't relying on their own strength but on the strength of Jesus. They were dependent completely upon Him. They could echo Paul's words, **I can do all things through Him who strengthens me** (Phil 4:13). Human weakness is no hindrance to the power of God. The believers in Philadelphia not only possessed Christ's strength, but...

B. They **kept** Christ's Word. He commends them for their obedience to His Word. The term for *keep* means to watch over, guard, preserve, give heed to, observe, or obey. The church at Philadelphia observed & obeyed God's Word. Jesus said, **If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; & My Father will love him, & We will come to him, & make Our abode with him** (Jn 14:23; 1 Jn 2:5). Because of their obedience to His Word the church at Philadelphia had proven the genuineness of their love for Christ (Jn 15:13-14). They followed the example of Job, who said, **I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food** (23:12). How about you? Are you keeping His Word? Let's follow the example of the believers at Philadelphia & demonstrate our love for the Lord by obeying Him.

C. They prized Christ's name. Jesus commends them for their commitment to Him. He says, **You have not denied My name.** They weren't secret Christians. They didn't fear the consequences of their faith, so they weren't afraid to acknowledge being followers of Jesus. They remained loyal & didn't deny Him. The church at Pergamum was similarly commended when Jesus said, **I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; & you hold fast My name, & did not deny My faith ...** (2:13). Both churches refused to deny the Lord. They were loyal, regardless of what it cost them. Describing Christians during the tribulation, John writes, **Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the**

commandments of God & their faith in Jesus (14:12). The Philadelphian believers stayed loyal to Christ, no matter the cost. In vs 10 they're characterized by endurance. **Because you have kept the word of My perseverance.** This indicates they were facing persecution of some kind. Through trials & persecution, these faithful Christians patiently endured & never wavered in their commitment to Christ. Sometimes the best we can do is endure patiently. The Christian life isn't all roses & rainbows. Often it means not giving up when you feel like throwing in the towel. I pray that we too might prize the name of Christ, live for Him, confess Him before men, & never deny Him, no matter the circumstances. Look at **vs 9**.

As was the case in Smyrna (2:9), Christians in Philadelphia faced hostility from unbelieving Jews. Because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, they weren't a synagogue of God, but a **synagogue of Satan**. Though they claimed **they** were **Jews**, that was a **lie**. Amazingly, Jesus promises that some of the Jews who were persecuting them would **come & bow down at their feet, & know that** God had **loved** them. Bowing at someone's feet shows submission. The Philadelphia church's enemies would be humbled. This imagery comes from the OT, which describes a future day when unbelieving Gentiles will bow down to the believing remnant of Israel (Is 45:14; 49:23; 60:14; Zech 8:20-23). The Jews of John's day expected the Gentiles would one day bow before the children of Israel. But here's a reversal. Here the promise is that Jews will bow to those Gentiles who have accepted Jesus as Savior. Why? Because these Gentiles have become the true Israel by believing in the true Messiah, while those who've rejected the Messiah have thereby rejected their status as true Jews.⁸ As Paul told the Romans, **No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward & physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, & circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter** (Rom 2:28-29). They were those who gathered in the name of God as Jews & may have been Jews racially, culturally, & ceremonially, but not spiritually. They claimed to be the true assembly but were counterfeits. & so Jesus refers to them as *liars*. These Jewish unbelievers will be utterly humbled & defeated. They'll be made to recognize that God loved the Christians of Philadelphia. No matter what other religious groups may say, true believers in Christ

⁸ Boice, p 134

will have the ultimate victory through Christ our Lord. One day, all will be humbled & acknowledge Christ as King of kings & Lord of lords (Phil 2:11).

Jesus also offers a proclamation for the church's protection. After affirming the church's works & vindicating the church from its enemies, He pronounces a promise of protection for the church in Philadelphia. He says, **10**.

Because the believers in Philadelphia had been so faithful, Jesus promised to spare them from the ultimate test. The nature of this promise extends beyond the Philadelphian church to included all faithful churches throughout history. This vs seems to promise the church will be delivered from the Tribulation by being raptured before it. There are 3 main views of the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Tribulation: that it comes at the end of the Tribulation (post-trib), in the middle of the Tribulation (mid-trib), & the view that seems to be supported by this text, that the Rapture takes place before the Tribulation (pre-trib). Of course, there's much debate on this & Scripture isn't crystal clear. While I hold to the pre-trib rapture, not all Christians do & that's OK. Because these Philadelphian Christians were true believers, faithfully & patiently enduring the trials & tribulations of the world, Jesus offered them a promise of protection. The question is whether Jesus is promising deliverance from the Tribulation or safekeeping through it. There are implications of interpreting this as a promise of preservation rather than removal. For example, Scripture tells us believers during the tribulation will suffer & be killed for their faith (Rev 6:9–11; 7:9–14). In what sense would Jesus be keeping His church from the time of testing if they're being tortured & killed? If it's only a promise of protection from His own wrath, but not the wrath of Satan, that doesn't seem like much comfort. If the intent here is that He'll preserve His church through the tribulation, how do His words apply to the believers at Philadelphia, who died long before it occurred? It seems best to understand this as a gracious promise from the Lord to His faithful church, that for their perseverance in obedience to Him, they'll be spared the fury of His judgment poured out on the earth during the tribulation.⁹ Notice a few things: This test is in the future & for a limited time described as **the hour of testing**. This test is worldwide in scope, since it will come upon the **whole**

⁹ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, p 154

world. It's for the purpose of **testing** those who **dwell upon the earth**, a phrase that's used in the book of Rev to refer to unbelievers (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:16; 17:2, 8). It seems this is a promise of protection where genuine believers in Christ will be kept out of the Tribulation, when that time of testing comes upon the whole world. True believers in Christ who are still alive at the end of this age won't go through the tribulation but will be protected from it (1 Thes 4:13-17). Jesus concludes this promise by emphasizing that He's coming quickly (11). This emphasizes the imminency of His arrival. It could be at any time. What a wonderful promise to those who believe. Let us take comfort & hope in this promise of protection & let us look forward to the return of Christ with eager anticipation.

5. Counsel Christ's counsel to the church in Philadelphia is brief. He says, **11**.

The *coming* of Jesus to Ephesus (2:5), Pergamum (2:16), & Sardis (3:3) posed a threat to each church. At Ephesus the lampstand would be removed unless they repented; at Pergamum Jesus would fight against them with the sword of His mouth; at Sardis He'd come like a thief. The *coming* to Philadelphia, however, is different as it will end their time of trial & establish them as permanent citizens of the eternal kingdom. Unlike many of the other churches, the Philadelphians aren't told to repent, but to **hold fast what you have**. They'd remained faithful, obedient, & loyal to Christ, & He urged them to continue to do so. **Hold fast** emphasizes a continual action. They were to continually **hold fast**, remaining faithful, obedient, & loyal to Christ through trials & persecutions. Why were they to **hold fast**? 1st, because Christ's coming is imminent. 2nd, so no one would take their crown. This isn't speaking of a loss of salvation but of a loss of reward. These were believers who were going to be protected from the hour of testing. However, if they didn't hold fast there would be a loss of reward. Just as John refers to when he says, **Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward** (2 Jn 8). The believers in Philadelphia were to keep on keeping on. They were to hold fast, remaining faithful, loyal, & obedient to Jesus no matter what. We too should heed the words of Christ's counsel here & strive to hold fast, remaining faithful, obedient, & loyal to Christ our Lord.

6. The Challenge Christ concludes His letter to the church in Philadelphia as He does His other letters in Rev 2-3. He offers a challenge to the overcomers. **12**

Remember that in each of these letters this challenge is a promise given to those who are believers & each one highlights some aspect of eternal life. The promise to the church in Philadelphia is 2-fold: 1st, there's a promise of security. He says, **I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, & he will not go out from it anymore.** A pillar represents stability, permanence, & immovability (Gal 2:9; 1 Tim 3:15). Pillars can also represent honor. This marvelous promise of Christ is that believers will have an eternal place of honor in the temple of God in heaven. For people used to fleeing their city because of earthquakes, this promise was understood as security in eternal glory. They'd been described as having **little power**. But they've stood firm in Christ's power & are to be made pillars of strength in His kingdom.

2nd, there's a promise of ownership. The Philadelphians knew something about receiving new names, having the name of their town changed twice. He says, **I will write upon him the name of My God, & the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, & My new name** (12). Having the name of God & God's city refers to a person's citizenship in God's kingdom. It indicates that, like Abraham, we've looked **to the city that has foundations, whose designer & builder is God** (Heb 11:10) & that we now have a secure place in that eternal city of God. Christ's name represents the fullness of His person. In heaven, believers will **see Him just as He is** (1 Jn 3:2), & whatever we may have known of Him will pale in the reality in which we'll then see Him. The **new name** by which we will be privileged to call Him will reflect that glorious revelation of His person.¹⁰ The promise of the signature of God, the city of God, & Christ's new name depicts ownership & citizenship. For all eternity, we'll bear the name of our Lord, which will mark us out as His children. Forever, we'll enjoy all the rights & privileges of citizenship in God's eternal city.¹¹ All believers belong to God & have a personal relationship with Him. They're guaranteed an eternal citizenship in heaven. This should motivate all of us to keep

¹⁰ MacArthur, *Revelation 1–11*, p 127

¹¹ MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, p 156

on keeping on. This should motivate all of us to remain faithful, loyal, & obedient to Jesus. We have an eternal reward waiting for us. We're secure in Christ. We're owned by God. We're citizens of heaven! As we reflect on the faithful church in Philadelphia, I pray we'll heed the counsel of Christ & hold fast, remaining faithful, loyal, & obedient to Christ through whatever we may face in this life. The exhortation of vs 13, **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,** closes all 7 letters. Believers must heed the truths found in each letter. The letter to the faithful Philadelphia church reveals that the holy, true, sovereign, omnipotent God pours out His blessings on churches that remain faithful to Him. He'll bless them with open doors for evangelism, eternal salvation, kingdom blessings, & deliverance from the great time of testing that will come on the earth. He'll ultimately bring all those who persevere in their faith to the eternal reward where He'll reveal Himself fully to them. The promise of those blessings should motivate us as a church, & as individuals, to follow this church's example of faithfulness.

When Horatius Bonar wrote about the church in Philadelphia, he came to this conclusion:

Small may be our strength in these last days. The tide of error, & sin, & worldliness may be running very strong. It may not be easy to confess Christ, or to hold fast His truth. But His grace is sufficient for us; & woe be to us if we give way to the errors of the age, or conform to its vanities, or seek to please its multitudes ... Faithfulness to Christ, & to His truth, is everything, especially in days when iniquity shall abound, & the love of many shall wax cold.

Fear not! The reward is glorious! The honor is beyond all earthly honors! The contempt & enmity are but for a day--the dignity & the blessedness are forever & ever!¹²

Jesus doesn't ask for heroics. He just wants those who are His to persevere faithfully. & to those who do keep on, who endure to the end, He promises His own name & a crown of glory that will never tarnish or be snatched away. God help us to be faithful to Him who has done so much for us.

¹² Quoted by Ray Pritchard, www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-church-christ-prefers/