

When Little Means a Lot

Special Delivery – Part IX

Revelation 3:7-13

Introduction

We have read the mail of five churches so far – letters sent by courier, dictated by Jesus Christ. Thus far we have learned the following primary truths from the letters to:

- Ephesus – it is possible to be orthodox, but unloving;
- Smyrna – suffering may mean being in the middle of God’s will;
- Pergamum – tolerating false doctrine may be the first step to disobedience to Christ;
- Thyatira – tolerating immorality may lead to practicing immorality;
- Sardis – it is possible to have an impressive past, but no effective future.

Except for one letter – to Smyrna – the letters have been sent to churches that were in deep trouble with the Chief Shepherd.

- Ephesus was cold and unloving;
- Pergamum was no longer guarding true doctrine;
- Thyatira was riddled with division and tempted by immoral leadership;
- Sardis was asleep at the wheel, resting on its past, and not passionate about its future.

We would think God was not only writing their mail, but reading ours! These problems exist in the churches not only in the first century, but in the twenty-first century.

I have to tell you something that I found absolutely fascinating.

I spent two days this past week at the Opryland Hotel and Resort where the National Religious Broadcasters Convention was being held. I was scheduled to meet with several radio network owners and owners of large radio stations as I shared with them our vision to preach God’s word around the world.

The hotel alone was unbelievable. It was so huge that it had a river indoors in which people could ride around it in a boat. It had an area that looked like a rainforest with a huge waterfall, lush greenery, and real trees stretching two stories high. I got lost in there on one occasion and was chased by a headhunter!

Opryland was next door to a huge, incredible auditorium. Country music is doing well. They might be singing about losin’ their woman and their pick-up truck and their dog, but they are getting rich losin’ them. They have money.

Well, every network owner with whom I met said the same thing – they were interested in Wisdom for the Heart, our radio Bible-teaching ministry, because times have changed. The experts had been telling the industry for twenty-five years that to build an audience in America is to minimize Bible teaching and go with talk radio and music. Nearly everyone did.

I was fascinated to learn that now, every one of the network owners said that they realized over the past decades that loyalty and support for a radio station was primarily because of the programs – and

the most popular programs were pastors preaching the Bible.

Wisdom for the Heart was told as recently as three years ago that our thirty minute program of mostly preaching would never make it off the shelf. Now we are suddenly state of the art. In fact, three new stations this week have put us on the air – for free! That is good, because we do not have any money (but I still have my pick-up truck, my woman, and my dog – which are not listed in order of importance – my woman, my pick-up truck, and you can have my dogs!).

Just this past year, a pastor of a leading mega-church admitted in print, which I read, that its strategy, its philosophy of ministry over the past twenty-five years of seeker-sensitive, seeker-driven ministry that played down doctrinal distinctives and biblical exposition has not produced committed disciples of Christ.

The tragedy in all of this is what was lost to nearly a generation of people who turned their radios on while they drove to work or school. And what was lost to all the thousands of pastors who implemented this particular church's philosophy of ministry and now heard – it might build a big church, but it does not build a strong church!

The dangers and deceptions and temptations of the first century church are still alive and well! These churches are dealing with the problems of:

- doctrinal and biblical illiteracy;
- cold hearts and unloving spirits;
- immoral leadership and sinful lifestyles excused by the pretext of grace;
- evangelistic apathy and unconcern for the present health of the church, much less the future state of the church.

God is reading our mail – every church in every generation is exposed and challenged by these letters.

By now, you might be wondering if there is a letter in this divinely inspired mail bag that is written to a church that had a future – that could provide a biblical model. Was there a church that had their eye on the right goal, for the right reason; that was attempting to teach the right things; pressing forward in the right ministry; holding the right standard; experiencing the smile and approval of God?

The answer is, “Yes!”

Turn to Revelation chapter 3 and look at verse 7. This is a letter to the church that for 1,900 years has

been a model ministry. We call it the church of opportunity – the church of the open door.

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.

Introduction by Christ to the Church in Philadelphia

Now, as in the past letters, the Lord signs His name at the beginning instead of at the end. For the first time He selects descriptions that are not found in John's vision, found in Revelation chapter 1. Perhaps this is because this church would provoke special commendation, even in the introduction.

1. Christ says in this introduction, “I am the holy one.”

Just as this church was living a holy testimony, so Christ introduces Himself as holy – “hagios,” a word that means exclusively separated unto God.ⁱ

This was a separated, holy church, exclusively belonging to God and not in any way belonging to the world.

2. Christ also signs this letter, “I am the true one.”

The Greek word “alethinos (αληθινος),” referred to something being true in the sense of being genuine and authentic, as opposed to fake. This is the word used in Revelation 3:7. Jesus Christ is the One person who is real; genuine; authentic.ⁱⁱ

My friend, anyone or anything you follow for spiritual health and healing instead of Jesus Christ will take you down a dead end alley. Everything and everyone else is a cheap knock-off of the real, genuine Savior.

3. Christ also introduces Himself in verse 7 as the “one who has the key of David.”

This is a phrase that comes from II Kings 18 where Hezekiah's faithful steward Eliakim was given the house key to not only Hezekiah's palace but his treasury. Eliakim had free access to everything King Hezekiah owned. In the same way, Christ, the faithful Son of God, has free access to the Father's throne room and has at His disposal the treasury, which He offers to those of us who believe.

In a fulfilled sense, Christ controls the entrance to David's house, which is the right of the Messiah to control and rule in the Messianic kingdom.ⁱⁱⁱ

4. **Finally, Christ says to this little faithful church, in Revelation 3:7b-8a,**

. . . [I] open and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

I know your works, Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. . . .

What does He mean “an open door has been opened before you and nobody can shut it”?

Some believe this is a reference to Christ Himself. He is the door that opens the kingdom and the believers in Philadelphia are going to get in.

Perhaps this is an allusion to John chapter 10, when Jesus said,

. . . I am the door . . . (John 10:7, 9)

In the days of Christ, sheepfolds did not have gates or doors – there was only an opening in the wall through which the sheep passed. At night when the animals were all gathered into the fold, the shepherd himself would lay down across the opening. The shepherd was literally the door.

This is Christ’s meaning in John 10:9, when He said,

I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

This is a beautiful picture of salvation, but I do not think Christ is referring to salvation or getting into the kingdom in Revelation 3. In fact, in Revelation 3 the door is always open.

Furthermore, each church is challenged regarding their present ministry and encouraged to change something or do something or begin something or confess something.

The church in Philadelphia is being given the promise of greater effectiveness in serving Christ because of their present consecration.

I believe this is a door of opportunity for even greater service for the glory of God.

Throughout Paul’s ministry he referred to open doors of ministry. He wrote to the Corinthians,

for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. (I Corinthians 16:9)

I love Paul’s spirit. He says, “Look, I have this door of great opportunity for Christ!”

How can he tell?

“There are many adversaries and challenges along the path, but it is proof to me that this is a great opportunity for the glory of God!”

Paul understood the spiritual principle that there is no such thing as opportunity without opposition.

When Paul came to Troas to preach the gospel, he wrote that,

. . . a door was opened for me in the Lord (II Corinthians 2:12)

Paul asked the Colossians to pray for him that God would open to him,

. . . a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ . . . (Colossians 4:3)

When Paul returned to the church in Antioch in Acts 14:27, he reported that God,

. . . had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

We should adopt this terminology. We need to pray for God to open doors for us as individuals and as a church for more effective means to deliver the gospel and reach people for Jesus Christ.

We want to be an assembly that looks for and walks through the open door. Let us not bang away at closed doors. Let us not argue with God over doors that are closed, while ignoring doors that are open.

Why is it that we camp out in front of closed doors? We invite other people to pray for God to change His mind.

Where is the door of opportunity swinging open? Let us pray, “Lord, help us to run through it.”

How do we qualify to even see it happening? Notice Revelation 3:8b.

. . . you have [a] little power . . .

I love this. He did not say, “you’ve gotta have it all together.”

No, “you don’t have a lot of ‘dunamis,’” or “dynamic,” which is a reference to spiritual dynamic. Christ says, “You don’t have a lot of dynamic charisma, but you do have a little bit and the little bit that you do have you have dedicated to Me and you are using to the maximum degree.”

Christ also says, in Revelation 3:8b and later in Revelation 3:10a,

. . . you have kept my word . . .

. . . you have kept my word about patient endurance . . .

Or, “you have kept the word of my patience,” which is a reference perhaps, to the work of Christ who patiently endured the cross.

These believers did not deny the gospel.

The tense of these verbs is aorist, leading us to believe this church endured some trying moment in the past in which they were told to turn away from Christ or else – and they would not deny the name of Christ or the gospel of Christ.^{iv}

“So now a door is opened for you – run through it!”

One of the reasons I believe this door referred to greater and more effective ministry is because this metaphor would have immediately been recognized.

In the same way the Sardis believers knew what Christ was talking about when He told the church to wake up – given the fact that their own city had been overthrown because their guards were asleep – this church in Philadelphia was located in a city that was literally referred to as, “the city of the open door”.

Philadelphia was the doorway to the east. It had been built as a missionary city for the Greek culture and the Greek language to spread throughout the east – into what is now modern Turkey.

The emperor had determined that from Philadelphia the Greek language and culture would be broadcast throughout the eastern provinces. Philadelphia would be a launching pad to spread Greek philosophy throughout Europe – and they were successful.^v

Jesus Christ wants this church to recognize greater potential than ever by understanding that they are positioned in a very strategic place which God considers an open door of effective ministry. He says, “Look,”

. . . Behold, I have set before you an open door . . .

This particular letter is a direct challenge to me and to our church like none other.

In 1998, while we were raising cash to purchase this 35 acre tract of farmland, our city fathers and planners were developing a plan to make this area of roughly 2,000 acres a prime area that would not only serve people from here to the beltline, but distribute traffic in all four directions.

We had no idea – but God did. At the time we closed on this land, all of the land around it was farmland – going all the way up to Crossroads Ford and even further.

While we were raising money, we did not know that this land was about to skyrocket in value because of the strategic location we would be in. Who would know that one day we would be across the street from Starbucks? How strategic is that?!

And listen to this – our city fathers and planners came up with a name for this strategic location; this 2,000-plus acre development, which placed us at the crossroads – they called it, the Southeast Gateway. The Southeast Gateway. And they broadcast the news after we had closed on this property.

This intersection on Tryon Road is now the busiest intersection in our city. Over 100,000 cars drive by here every single day. And 99,000 of them think we are a college. We have to fix that.

We are located in an area with regional exposure and impact. In fact, 50% of our assembly drives here from another city.

We are literally a church with an open door by means of our God-given strategic location to deliver the gospel to our region and beyond.

The question is, will we walk through the open door and seek to not only win those in our region to Christ, but help them grow up in Christ and encourage them and show them how to live for Christ?

Five Promises by Christ to the Church in Philadelphia

Now notice that there are at least five promises embedded in Christ’s commendation to this church.

1. First, Christ delivers to this church the promise of a future reign.

Look at Revelation 3:9.

Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not [that is, they are not true followers of the faith of Father Abraham], but lie – behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you.

Many believe this is a reference to the fact that the enemies of the church will one day be vanquished and humbled and the church will reign supreme with Christ.

2. Secondly, there is the promise of an imminent rescue.

Look at Revelation 3:10-11a.

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance [that is, you have not

denied the gospel of my cross], I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.

I am coming soon. . . .

The hour of testing is known as the tribulation. We will soon discover the details of this seven year period of intense divine judgment that will affect all those who live on the planet.

In fact, this phrase at the end of verse 10 that is translated “those who dwell on the earth” is an expression that appears over and over again in the book of Revelation. Every time it appears it refers to unbelievers – in Revelation 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, and 14, and finally, 17:2 and 8.^{vi}

This is a time of horrific judgment and trial, not for believers but for those who dwell on the earth – literally, earth dwellers. These are the ones who have chosen earth over heaven and they will suffer the great distress of God. The coming tribulation will include slaughter, atrocity, terror, panic, and judgment so descriptive that it will shock our sensitivities in the coming chapters of Revelation.

The church will literally disappear from the record of Revelation’s description of events on earth from chapter 6 all the way to chapter 19 when we return with Christ to battle the enemy and set up the millennial kingdom.

Note carefully, in Revelation 3:10, that Jesus Christ does not say to the church, “I will keep you *through* the hour of testing,” or “I will keep you *in spite of* the hour of trial,” or “I will keep you *in the midst of* the trial,” but, “I will keep you *from* the hour of trial” – this stated period of great testing and judgment on earth.”

There are those who would say this is a reference to the great white throne judgment of all the unbelievers in the future – and that the church will go through the tribulation. The problem with this view is that the great white throne judgment will not occur on earth (Revelation 20:11).

This time of great testing which is worldwide is taking place on earth and it will be universal. This is a promise then not just to Philadelphia, but to the church worldwide, “I am going to take you away.”

Notice again, in Revelation 3:10, that He says, “I will take you out of the time of testing.”

“Take you out,” is “tereo ek (τερεω εκ)”. The basic meaning of the preposition “ek” is “from, out from, or away from”.

If the Lord had wanted to convey to the church that we would be preserved in the midst of the tribulation, the preposition “en,” for “in” would have been used. Or the preposition “dia” would have been used for, “I will keep you through the tribulation.”

Furthermore, for Christ to promise the church that He will sustain them *during* the great tribulation is meaningless because they obviously died before the tribulation came – which has yet to come, right? This promise would have been meaningless.

Another problem with interpreting this to mean that Christ will sustain the church through the tribulation, or even the last half of the tribulation, is that many will come to faith in Christ during this awful time of bloodshed and they will not be delivered through it safely, they will be martyred by the tens of thousands.

Some would hold that the promise of deliverance is only from God’s wrath during the tribulation. But a promise that God will not kill believers but will allow Satan and Antichrist to kill them would provide little comfort to the church.^{vii}

Jesus says to these believers in Revelation 3:11a,

I am coming [for you] soon[!] . . .

“I am coming quickly,” which implies imminency. This could happen at any moment – this catching away of the bride of Christ or “rapturo,” from the Latin translation which gives us our word “rapture,” meaning “caught away”.

The other letters speak of Christ coming to discipline the church or rebuke the church or take away the candlestick of testimony from the church. But this coming is to take the church away!

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, in I Thessalonians 4:17,

. . . we . . . will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...

“We will be raptured; caught away.”

In the rapture before the tribulation, we, as believers, will leave earth to meet Christ in the air. In the second coming after the tribulation we will come with Christ in the air to earth.

We have an open door of ministry and know that at any moment we will be caught away by Christ as the tribulation period on earth begins and the church disappears from the pages of Revelation until she returns with Christ at the second coming.

These are the promises of a future reign and an imminent rescue.

3. Thirdly, there is the promise of significant recognition.

Jesus dictates, in Revelation 3:11b,

. . . Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

This is not salvation but the crown of a full reward.

Notice Revelation 3:12a.

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. . . .

This is the promise of recognition.

In Philadelphia, as in all the Greek cities, after the death of a faithful citizen of the city, a pillar would be carved and placed in the temple of the god he worshiped as a memorial of his faithfulness.

Christ says, “You will be a pillar in my holy place – you will have a place of special recognition of your faithful service to your true and living God.”

4. Fourthly, there is the promise of permanent rest.

Notice further in Revelation 3:12.

. . . Never shall he go out of it . . .

The citizens of this city, living on the edge of a volcanic bed, had suffered frequent earthquakes. Not long before this letter was written, there had been an earthquake and all the people had scattered. They were living in tents in the open fields for fear of buildings crashing down on them.

This is a promise of safety and security and rest . . . you will never need fear anything again.^{viii}

There is not only the promise of a coming reign, an imminent rescue, a gracious recognition, and wonderful rest, but there is a fifth promise.

5. Finally, there is the promise of an ultimate reward.

There will be three new names, each referring to our identification with God and the heavenly city through faith in Christ. Look at Revelation 3:12b.

. . . 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.

Whenever a new emperor took the throne he minted coins with his likeness and his titles and the people used them as currency. We, as believers, will have stamped on us the image and identity of our living Lord and Savior – the one true and living God.

We have the rights to the city of God – the new Jerusalem, which we will study in the coming days. In this amazing city, perhaps suspended permanently above the new earth, we will serve our God and Christ forever and forever.

Conclusion

Let me briefly draw some truths from this text.

1. First, do not be surprised by the potential of one church.

Also, do not equate the plan of God with the grandness of some church.

This church in Philadelphia had a little dynamic, but huge potential for Christ.

2. Secondly, do not ever underestimate the power of one testimony.

Do not underestimate the power of your testimony; your commitment to the name of Christ; the fact that you have not denied His name either.

I remember one Christian leader often singing, when he spoke to college students, the little chorus:

Little is much when God is in it!

Labor not for wealth or fame.

There's a crown – and you can win it,

If you go in Jesus' name.

This is when a little becomes a lot – when you give your little to God, He can make much of it.

The question remains, what kind of church do we want to be:

- A disobedient church?
- A divided church?
- An untrained church?
- A sinful church?
- A mediocre church?
- A cold church?
- A sleeping church?

How about this one? Let us be this one in Philadelphia!

We are located at the Southeast Gateway of our world. This is what we must be – a church that sees the open door and says, “There it is . . . I’ll race you.”

I will race you to it and by the grace of God we will all run toward the opportunities with faith and courage and serve with joy as we await the trumpet call of our soon-coming Savior.

I close with the wonderful challenge from an old Southern preacher who said, "It's time for our church to wake up and sing up, preach up and pray up, and

never give up or let up or back up or shut up, until the church is filled up, or we go up."^{ix}

Amen to that!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/16/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1972), p. 273.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches (Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas, p. 275.

^{iv} Thomas, p. 279.

^v Ed Hindson, Revelation: Unlocking the Future (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 46.

^{vi} Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 40.

^{vii} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 124.

^{viii} Barclay, p. 82.

^{ix} David Jeremiah, Escape the Coming Night (W Publishing, 1990), p. 73.