

## Revelation week 10

### Philadelphia: The Faithful Church

#### I. Introduction

- a. Occasionally John MacArthur is asked by young men seeking a church to pastor if he knows of a church without any problems. His response to them is “If I did, I wouldn’t tell you; you’d go there and spoil it.”
- b. The point is that there are no perfect churches. Churches struggle because all are made up of imperfect, sinning people.
- c. The church is not a place for people with no weaknesses; it is a fellowship of those who are aware of their weaknesses and long for the strength and grace of God to fill their lives.
- d. It is a kind of hospital for those who know they are sick and needy.
- e. Like all churches, the one in Philadelphia had its imperfections.
- f. Yet the Lord commended its members for their faithfulness and loyalty.
- g. They and the congregation at Smyrna were the only two of the seven that received no rebuke from the Lord of the church.
- h. In spite of their fleshly struggles, the Christians at Philadelphia were faithful and obedient, serving and worshiping the Lord.
- i. They provide a good model of a loyal church.

- j. To aid in understanding the letter to the Philadelphia church, it may be divided into six headings: the correspondent, the church, the city, the commendation, the command, and the counsel.

## II. **The Correspondent.**

- a. The Holy One, the True One, the One who has the key of David, who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens says: (3:7c)
- b. The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine author of the seven letters, always introduces Himself with a description reflecting His character.
- c. In the previous five letters, those descriptions had come from the vision recorded in 1:12–17.
- d. But this description of Him is unique and not drawn from that earlier vision. It has distinctly Old Testament features.
- e. The Holy One refers to God, who alone possesses absolute holiness.
  - i. The Old Testament repeatedly describes God as the Holy One (e.g., 2 Kings 19:22; Job 6:10; Pss. 71:22; 78:41; Isa. 43:15; 54:5; Hab. 3:3).
  - ii. Isaiah 6:3 solemnly declares, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (cf. Rev. 4:8).
  - iii. To say that God is holy is to say that He is utterly separate from sin; therefore His character is absolutely unblemished and flawless.
- f. The title “Holy One” is used in the New Testament as a messianic title for the Lord Jesus Christ.

- i. In Mark 1:24 a terrified 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!”
  - ii. Announcing His birth to Mary, the angel described Jesus as “the holy Child” (Luke 1:35).
  - iii. In John 6:69 Peter affirmed, “We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”
  - iv. Later he rebuked the unbelieving Jews because they “disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to [them]” (Acts 3:14).
- g. Jesus’ identification of Himself as **The Holy One** can be no less than a direct claim to deity.
- i. The Lord Jesus Christ possesses in undiminished, unaltered essence the holy and sinless nature of God.
  - ii. Because Christ is holy, His church must be as well. “Like the Holy One who called you,” wrote Peter, “be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1 Pet. 1:15).
  - iii. That the omniscient Holy One gave no rebuke, warning, or condemnation to the Philadelphia church speaks very well of them indeed.
- h. Not only is Jesus Christ the Holy One; He also describes Himself as **the True One**.

- i. Truth is used in combination with holiness to describe God in Revelation 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 11.
  - ii. *Alēthinos* (**true**) denotes that which is genuine, authentic, and real.
  - iii. In the midst of the falsehood, perversion, and error that fills the world, the Lord Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6).
- i. Christ describes Himself as the **One who has the key of David**.
  - i. As is clear from Revelation 5:5 and 22:16, **David** symbolizes the messianic office.
  - ii. A **key** in Scripture represents authority; whoever holds a key has control (cf. 1:18; 9:1; 20:1; Matt. 16:19).
  - iii. As the holder of the key of David, Jesus alone has the sovereign authority to determine who enters His messianic kingdom (cf. John 10:7, 9; 14:6; Acts 4:12).
  - iv. Revelation 1:18 reveals that Jesus has the keys to death and hell; here He is depicted as having the keys to salvation and blessing.
- j. Finally, Jesus identifies Himself as He **who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens says**.
  - i. That description stresses Christ's omnipotence; what He does cannot be overturned by someone more powerful.

- ii. “I act and who can reverse it?” declared the Lord in Isaiah 43:13 (cf. Is. 46:9–11; Jer. 18:6; Dan. 4:35).
  - iii. No one can shut the doors to the kingdom or to blessing if He holds them open, and no one can force them open if He holds them shut.
  - iv. In light of the promise in verse 8, Christ could also be referring to opening and shutting doors for service.
  - v. In either case, the emphasis is on His sovereign control over His church.
  - k. That Jesus Christ, the holy, true, sovereign, omnipotent Lord of the church, found nothing to condemn in the Philadelphia church must have been a joyous encouragement to them.
- III. **The Church.**
- a. **the church in Philadelphia** (3:7a)
  - b. Little is known about the Philadelphia church apart from this passage.
  - c. Like most of the other seven churches, it was probably founded during Paul’s ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10).
  - d. A few years after John wrote Revelation, the early church father Ignatius passed through Philadelphia on his way to martyrdom at Rome.
  - e. He later wrote the church a letter of encouragement and instruction.
  - f. Some Christians from Philadelphia were martyred with Polycarp at Smyrna.

- g. The church lasted for centuries.
- h. The Christians in Philadelphia stood firm even after the region was overrun by the Muslims, finally succumbing in the mid-fourteenth century.

#### IV. The City.

- a. **Philadelphia** (3:7b)
- b. From the Hermus River valley, where Sardis and Smyrna were located, a smaller valley (that of the Cogamis River) branches off to the southeast.
- c. A road through this valley provided the best means of ascending the 2,500 feet from the Hermus valley to the vast central plateau.
- d. In this valley, about thirty miles from Sardis, was the city of Philadelphia.
- e. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, founded sometime after 189 B.C. either by King Eumenes of Pergamum or his brother, Attalus II, who succeeded him as king.
- f. In either case, the city derived its name from Attalus II's nickname *Philadelphus* ("brother lover"), which his loyalty to his brother Eumenes had earned him.
- g. Though situated on an easily defensible site on an 800-foot-high hill overlooking an important road, Philadelphia was not founded primarily as a military outpost (as Thyatira had been).
  - i. Its founders intended it to be a center of Greek culture and language, a missionary outpost for spreading Hellenism to the regions of Lydia and Phrygia.

- ii. Philadelphia succeeded in its mission so well that by A.D. 19 the Lydian language had been completely replaced by Greek.
- h. Philadelphia benefited from its location at the junction of several important trade routes (as well as from being a stop on the Imperial Post Road), earning it the title “gateway to the East” (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 114–15).
- i. The city was located on the edge of the *Katakekaumene* (the “burned land”), a volcanic region whose fertile soil was ideally suited for vineyards.
  - i. Being near such a seismically active region had its drawbacks, however.
  - ii. In A.D. 17 a powerful earthquake rocked Philadelphia, along with Sardis and ten other nearby cities.
  - iii. Though the initial destruction was greater at Sardis, Philadelphia, being nearer the epicenter, experienced frequent aftershocks during the coming years.
  - iv. That nerve-wracking experience left psychological scars on Philadelphia’s inhabitants, as Sir William Ramsay notes: Many of the inhabitants remained outside the city living in huts and booths over the vale, and those who were foolhardy enough (as the sober-minded thought) to remain in the city, practiced various

devices to support and strengthen the walls and houses against the recurring shocks. The memory of this disaster lived long ... people lived amid ever threatening danger, in dread always of a new disaster; and the habit of going out to the open country had probably not disappeared when the Seven Letters were written. (*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* [Albany, Oreg.: AGES Software; reprint of the 1904 edition], 316–17)

- j. In gratitude for Caesar Tiberius's financial aid in rebuilding their city, the Philadelphians joined with several other cities in erecting a monument to him.

## V. The Commendation.

- a. I know your works. Because you have limited strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name, look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close. <sup>9</sup> Take note! I will make those from the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews and are not, but are lying—note this—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and they will know that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup> Because you have kept My command to endure, I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is going to come over the whole world to test those who live on the earth. <sup>11</sup> I am coming quickly (3:8–11a)
- b. Finding nothing in their **deeds** that caused Him concern, the Lord Jesus Christ moved on to commend the Christians at Philadelphia for four realities that characterized the congregation.
- c. First, the Philadelphia church had **limited strength**.



- i. That was not a negative comment on their feebleness, but a commendation of their strength; the Philadelphia church was small in numbers (cf. Luke 12:32), but had a powerful impact on its city.
  - ii. Most of its members may have been poor, from the lower classes of society (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26).
  - iii. But with Paul they could say, “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. 12:10).
  - iv. Despite its small size, spiritual power flowed in the Philadelphia church.
  - v. People were being redeemed, lives were being transformed, and the gospel of Jesus Christ was being proclaimed.
- d. The believers at Philadelphia were also marked by obedience; they **kept** Christ’s **word**.
- i. Like Job, they could say, “I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12).
  - ii. Like Martin Luther, on trial before the Imperial Diet, they could say, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.” They did not deviate from the pattern of obedience, thus proving the genuineness of their love for Christ (John 14:23–24; 15:13–14).

- iii. Christ further commended the Philadelphia congregation for having **not denied His name**, despite the pressures they faced to do so.
- iv. They remained loyal no matter what it cost them.
- v. Revelation 14:12 describes the Tribulation saints who refused to take the mark of the beast: “Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.”
- vi. Like them, the Philadelphia church would not recant its faith.
- e. Finally, Christ commended the Philadelphia church **because** its members had **Because you have kept My command to endure**.
  - i. The Christians at Philadelphia persevered faithfully through all of their trials and difficulties.
  - ii. The steadfast endurance that marked Jesus’ earthly life (Heb. 12:2–4) is to be a model for all Christians. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, “May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ” (2 Thess. 3:5).
  - iii. Both Christ’s command and example should motivate Christians to patient endurance.
  - iv. Indeed, endurance is an essential aspect of saving faith (Matt. 10:22).
- f. Because of its faithfulness, the Lord Jesus Christ made the Philadelphia church some astounding promises.

- g. First, He **put before them an open door that no one is able to close.**
- i. Their salvation was secure; their entrance both into the blessings of salvation by grace and into Christ's future messianic kingdom was guaranteed.
  - ii. The picture of Christ's opening the door also symbolizes His giving the faithful Philadelphia church opportunities for service.
  - iii. Elsewhere in Scripture an open door depicts freedom to proclaim the gospel.
  - iv. Explaining his travel plans to the Corinthians, Paul informed them, "I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:8–9).
  - v. To the Colossians Paul 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).
  - vi. Their city's strategic location provided the Christians at Philadelphia with an excellent opportunity to spread the gospel.
- h. Verse 9 records a second promise made by Jesus Christ to the Philadelphia church: **Take note! I will make those from the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews and are not, but are lying—note this—I will make them come and**

bow down at your feet, and they will know that I have loved you.

- i. As was the case in Smyrna (cf. 2:9), Christians in Philadelphia faced hostility from unbelieving Jews.
- ii. Though they claimed **that they were Jews**, that claim was a **lie**.
- iii. Racially, culturally, and ceremonially they were Jews, but spiritually they were not.
- iv. Paul defines a true Jew in Romans 2:28–29: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (cf. Rom. 9:6–7).
- v. Amazingly, Christ promised that some of the very Jews who were persecuting the Christians at Philadelphia would **come and bow down at their feet, and know that** God had **loved** them.
- vi. Bowing at someone’s feet depicts abject, total defeat and submission.
- vii. The Philadelphia church’s enemies would be utterly vanquished, humbled, and defeated.
- viii. This imagery derives from the Old Testament, which describes the yet future day when unbelieving Gentiles will bow down to the believing remnant of Israel (cf. Isa. 45:14; 49:23; 60:14).

- ix. The Philadelphia church's faithfulness would be rewarded by the salvation of some of the very Jews who were persecuting it.
- x. Other faithful churches throughout history have also been enabled by the Lord to reach the Jewish people with the gospel of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.
- xi. And in the future the day will come when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26), when God will "pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10).
- i. Verse 10 contains a final promise to the faithful Philadelphia church: **Because you have kept My command to endure, I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is going to come over the whole world to test those who live on the earth.**
  - i. Because the believers in Philadelphia had successfully passed so many tests, Jesus promised to spare them from the ultimate test.
  - ii. The sweeping nature of that promise extends far beyond the Philadelphia congregation to encompass all faithful churches throughout history.

- iii. This verse promises that the church will be delivered from the Tribulation, thus supporting a pretribulation Rapture.
- j. The Rapture is the subject of three passages in the New Testament (John 14:1–4; 1 Cor. 15:51–54; 1 Thess. 4:13–17), none of which speak of judgment, but rather of the church being taken up to heaven.
- k. There are three views of the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Tribulation: that it comes at the end of the Tribulation (post tribulationism), in the middle of the Tribulation (mid tribulationism), and the view that seems to be supported by this text, that the Rapture takes place before the Tribulation (pre tribulationism).
- l. Several aspects of this wonderful promise may be noted.
  - i. First, the test is yet future.
  - ii. Second, the test is for a definite, limited time; Jesus described it as the **hour of testing**.
  - iii. Third, it is a test or trial that will expose people for what they really are.
  - iv. Fourth, the test is worldwide in scope, since it will **come upon the whole world**.
  - v. Finally, and most significantly, its purpose is **to test those who dwell on the earth**—a phrase used as a technical term in the book of Revelation for unbelievers (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8).
  - vi. The **hour of testing** is Daniel's Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:25–27), the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer.

30:7), the seven-year tribulation period. The Lord promises to keep His church out of the future time of testing that will come on unbelievers.

- vii. Unbelievers will either pass the test by repenting, or fail it by refusing to repent.
- viii. Revelation 6:9–11; 7:9–10, 14; 14:4; and 17:14 describe those who repent during the Tribulation and are saved, thus passing the test; Revelation 6:15–17; 9:20; 16:11; and 19:17–18 describe those who refuse to repent, thus failing the test, and are damned.
- m. Some hold that the promise of deliverance is only from God's wrath during the Tribulation.
  - i. But a promise that God will not kill believers but will allow Satan and Antichrist to do so would provide small comfort to the suffering church at Philadelphia.
  - ii. The **coming** that Christ refers to differs from those promised to others of the seven churches (e.g., 2:5, 16; 3:3).
  - iii. Those earlier promises were warnings of impending temporal judgment on sinning congregations (cf. Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 11:28–30).
  - iv. The **coming** spoken of here, however, is to bring the hour of testing that culminates in our Lord's second coming.
  - v. It is Christ's coming to deliver the church (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1), not to bring judgment to it.

- vi. **Quickly** depicts the imminency of Christ's coming for His church; it could happen at any time. Every believer's response should be, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).

## VI. **The Command.**

- a. **Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. (3:11b)**
- b. Because of the Lord's imminent return for His church, believers must **hold fast what they have**.
- c. The members of the Philadelphia church had been faithful and loyal to Christ; He commanded them to remain so.
- d. Those who persevere to the end thereby prove the genuineness of their salvation (Matt. 10:22; 24:13).
- e. It is true that believers are eternally secure because of the power of God. Yet the means by which He secures them is by providing believers with a persevering faith.
  - i. Christians are saved by God's power, but not apart from their constant, undying faith.
  - ii. Paul writes in Colossians 1:22–23 that "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard."
- f. According to 1 John 2:19, those who abandon the faith reveal that they were never truly saved to begin with:



“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”

- g. Christ’s promise to the one who faithfully perseveres is **no one will take your crown** (cf. James 1:12).
  - i. Revelation 2:10 defines this **crown** as the “crown of life,” or as the Greek text literally reads, “the crown which is life.”
  - ii. The **crown**, or reward, for those who faithfully endure to the end is eternal life with all its attendant rewards (2 John 8).
  - iii. Second Timothy 4:8 describes it as a crown of righteousness, and 1 Peter 5:4 as one of glory.
  - iv. In our glorified state, we will be perfectly righteous, and thus perfectly able to reflect God’s glory.
  - v. Those whose faithful perseverance marks them as true children of God need never fear losing their salvation.

## VII. The Counsel.

- a. 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. <sup>13</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ (3:12–13)

- b. As He concluded the letter to the faithful church at Philadelphia, Christ promised four eternal blessings to the one **who overcomes** (another name for a Christian; 1 John 5:5).
- c. The first promise is that Christ **will make him a pillar in the temple of God, and he will not go out from it anymore.**
  - i. A **pillar** represents stability, permanence, and immovability.
  - ii. Pillars can also represent honor; in pagan temples they were often carved in such a way as to honor a particular deity.
  - iii. The marvelous promise Christ makes to believers is that they will have an eternal place of honor **in the temple of God** (heaven).
  - iv. To people used to fleeing their city because of earthquakes and enemies, the promise that they **will not go out from** heaven was understood as security in eternal glory.
- d. Christ's second promise to the one who overcomes is that He will **write on him the name of His God.**
  - i. That depicts ownership, signifying that all true Christians belong to God.
  - ii. It also speaks of the intimate personal relationship we have with Him forever.
- e. Third, Christ promises to write on believers **the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven,**

- i. Christians have eternal citizenship in heaven's capital **city, the new Jerusalem**, described at length in Revelation 21.
  - ii. That is yet another promise of security, safety, and glory.
- f. Finally, Christ promises believers His **new name**. Christ's name represents the fullness of His person.
  - i. In heaven, believers will "see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2), and whatever we may have known of Him will pale in the reality in which we will then see Him.
  - ii. The **new name** by which we will be privileged to call Him will reflect that glorious revelation of His person.
- g. The exhortation **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches** closes all seven letters.
  - i. Believers must heed the truths found in each letter, since the seven churches represent the types of churches that have existed throughout history.
  - ii. The letter to the faithful Philadelphia church reveals that the holy, true, sovereign, omnipotent God pours out His blessings on churches that remain loyal to Him.
  - iii. He will bless them with open doors for evangelism, eternal salvation, kingdom blessings, and deliverance from the great time of testing that will come on the earth.

- iv. He will ultimately bring all those who persevere in their faith to the eternal bliss of heaven, where He will reveal Himself fully to them.
- v. The promise of those rich blessings should motivate every church and every Christian to follow the Philadelphia church's example of faithfulness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 118–129.