

In his book, “When God Whispers Your Name,” Max Lucado tells the story of John Eggen, who had never preached a sermon in his life before the Sunday morning when it snowed and the pastor wasn’t able to make it to the church. Eggen was a deacon – not a preacher, but he was faithful, and that meant on that particular Sunday morning he had to preach, and at the end of his hesitant sermon, one young man invited God into his heart.

No one at the church could appreciate the significance of what had taken place that morning, for that young man who accepted Christ that snowy Sunday morning was none other than Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the man who has often been called, the “prince of preachers.”

God blessed the ministry of Spurgeon, and when he was less than 30 years old, Spurgeon became the pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle. His sermons were so powerful that although the building could hold 5000 people, the crowds who came to hear him were so thick, that they would line up outside trying to hear him preach.

Spurgeon was an amazing preacher, and ironically, it all started on a snowy Sunday morning with the faithfulness of a deacon who had never preached.

Faithfulness means being committed to what God gives you the opportunity to do, whether it looks like a big assignment or a small one. Giving a sermon to a handful of people on a snowy Sunday morning doesn’t seem all that significant, but it still required faithfulness none the less, and God richly blessed it.

That’s a great story of faithfulness, and this morning we are going to look at a faithful church – the church in Philadelphia – the sixth out of the seven churches on this postal route in western Asia Minor. Now, as a reminder, these seven churches were real churches, and even though there were other churches in the region – the Lord chose these seven churches to send His letters to – churches that represent all churches, at all times, and in all places.

Now, as has been my practice with the other churches thus far, let’s look at the city of Philadelphia before we look at the church. Philadelphia means “*brotherly love*” and the city was so named to commemorate the love and devotion that Attalus II had for his brother and king – Eumenes II.

The city of Philadelphia was located about 28 miles SE of Sardis. It was the youngest of the seven cities, and originally founded as a missionary outpost for Hellenism – the culture of ancient Greece. The intended purpose of this city was

to spread the Greek language, to expand the Greek way of life, and to enlarge the Greek civilization throughout the Asian providences, and consistent with its purpose, the city was constructed with beautiful Greek buildings and architecture, and as such, it was also called “*Little Athens.*”

As a reflection of its Greek culture, as one might imagine, the Olympian gods were at the center of worship in this city, and its chief deity was Dionysus who was thought to be the god of wine. Apparently, the soil in the area was very fertile – the city was rich in agriculture, especially vineyards, and they became known for the production of wine.

Some of the things most notable about this city pertained to its geographical location – and it’s a good news/bad news kind of thing. Philadelphia was built on a narrow pass between two mountain ranges, and as a result, the city of Philadelphia became the literal doorway to the east – to the rest of Asia Minor. The highway from Rome, called the “Imperial Post Road,” went through Philadelphia to go eastward – it was a road that connected one continent to another, and as such, the city became an important trade center. **Have you ever traveled on a highway in the middle of nowhere, approaching a town, and before you get to the town, you see a road sign that reads, “Next services 150 miles”?** That prompts you to look at your gas gauge, to ask if anyone needs to go to the restroom, and to check your clock to see if it’s getting close to meal time. In my thinking, that’s the image I get when I think about Philadelphia before venturing further east into Asia Minor. Its location was good for the city, but it wasn’t all good because the city was built near a fault line and severe earthquakes were a constant threat, in fact, the city was destroyed a rebuilt a few times because of these quakes.

Now, when it comes to the church in Philadelphia, historically, there isn’t much known, other than it was likely one of those churches that was founded as the gospel message spilled out of Ephesus and spread into the rest of Asia Minor. That’s about it – but Jesus had something to say about this church that gives us a lot of insight. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Revelation 3** and we will start with **verse 7**. Jesus says,

“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:”

This is His introduction to the church, and here Jesus describes Himself as **holy** – holy in His character, holy in His words, holy in His actions, and holy in His

purposes. Jesus is perfect in all His ways – without error, without falsehood. He is the holy One – the Lord. Jesus is also **true**, meaning He’s the original, He’s authentic, He’s the real thing, and when taken together – Jesus, who is holy and true, is worthy to evaluate the church.

Jesus says He **has the key of David**, which speaks to His authority, and let me explain. Back in **Isaiah 22**, under the reign of King Hezekiah, there was a man named Eliakim who served as the royal treasurer. Eliakim had the authority and the responsibility of guarding and accounting for the royal treasure, and he was given the key to the vault by the king – the key of the house of David. He had the key, and he had access to the royal treasure, and in a similar way, the Father has given the key to the kingdom, and all that it entails, to Jesus. Jesus has the key for He is holy and true, and it is Jesus who has the ultimate authority to **open** and **shut** doors in our lives. That’s what He does.

I was reminded of the story found in **Acts 16** where Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for preaching the gospel. They were beaten with rods, and placed in the inner part of the prison with their feet secured in stocks. From all outward appearances, this would seem to be a big problem for them, a huge hinderance in their ministry of spreading the gospel, but at midnight, they were praying and singing hymns while the other prisoners were listening, and then all of a sudden, there came a great earthquake. The earthquake was so violent, that all the prison doors came open and the chains fell off. The prison guard freaked out and was about to kill himself thinking the prisoners had escaped on his watch, but Paul told him to stop, no one had left. The prison guard brought out Paul and Silas, took them to his house, cleaned their wounds, and his family heard the gospel and all were saved. What initially seemed to be a big problem for Paul and Silas, the Lord used as an opportunity to open the door to the Gentiles.

It is Jesus who opens and shuts doors. That’s what He does. When He shuts doors – we wait, and when He opens doors – we are to seize the opportunity and walk.

Jesus continues with **verse 8** and He says,

“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 kept My word, and have not denied My name.”

I know your deeds. Jesus said those words to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The church at Philadelphia had served God well in difficult circumstances and Jesus knew it. He knew all about them, and like the church in Smyrna – the

suffering church, this is the only other church where Jesus had nothing negative to say about them. He offers no criticism or condemnation of this church.

Again, an **open door** is mentioned by Jesus which I believe is an open door for opportunities to evangelize and to serve others in ministry, and this makes complete sense if you think about the mindset of the city and their geographical location. If you remember, the city itself was on a mission – to spread the Greek culture throughout the whole region, and a main Roman road goes through their city, so Jesus seems to be telling this church, *“I have opened a door for you to take advantage of this mission-minded culture that already exists, and to take advantage of the fact that a main Roman road already goes through your city. I’m bringing people to you.”*

Jesus opened a huge door for this church – a church He described as having **little power**. It’s a *little* church – they were *little* in numbers, and presumably *little* in resources and *little* in social status, and that’s important for us to hear because sometimes churches like this think there is *little* they can do, but churches like this can trust the Lord just as well as anyone else. With simple faith, *little* churches can be just weak enough to be strong in the Lord, for its in our weakness that we truly depend upon God, and His power is on display.

The Apostle Paul said something similar in **1 Corinthians 1:26-29**.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷ but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God.

These are God’s qualifications for service, and it appears to me that all of us are more than qualified – our church is more than qualified. So yes, God chooses the little churches to do great things and that’s very encouraging. It’s not the size of the church or the resources of a church that determines its ministry – it’s the church’s faithfulness to the Lord. So, when the Lord opens doors, it’s reasonable that we faithfully walk through those doors. I think that is the expectation the Lord has for those who are more than qualified to serve Him.

There is a story of a guy who prayed this prayer every morning: “Lord, if you want me to witness to someone today, please give me a sign to show me who it is.” One day he found himself on a bus when a big, burly man sat next to him. The bus was

nearly empty but this guy sat next to our praying friend. The timid Christian anxiously waited for his stop so he could exit the bus, but before he could, the big guy burst into tears and began to weep. He then cried out with a loud voice, “I need to be saved. I’m a lost sinner and I need the Lord. Won’t somebody tell me how to be saved?” He turned to the Christian and pleaded, “Can you show me how to be saved?” The believer immediately bowed his head and prayed, “Lord, is this a sign?”

The Lord is always at work around us, and when we see Him at work around us, that is our sign, our invitation – that is our open door to get involved.

Now, if you notice, Jesus said two things about this church in Philadelphia. He said they **“have kept My word, and have not denied My name.”** In other words, the church in Philadelphia was true to the Word of God – they kept it, they held fast to it – they heard the Word and they were obedient to it. And secondly, they were not ashamed of Jesus. They expressed their faith and loyalty to Him, and they lived their lives in a way that was consistent with His name – His character. Jesus faithfully carried their cross, and they faithfully carried His name – but it wasn’t easy and Jesus knew it.

Look at what He tells this church in **verse 9**.

“Behold, I will cause 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 at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you.”

The city of Philadelphia reportedly had a large Jewish population, and apparently, the Christians were persecuted by some of these Jews – Jews in name only who claimed to be the true people of God. Their claim was based on their biology rather than on the basis of faith like their own patriarch Abraham.

These Jews had likely told the Christians, especially the Jews who were converted to Christianity, that they were illegitimate and unloved by God – which was a lie of Satan. These Jews were in conflict with the Christians, shutting the doors to them in the community, but these Jews did not realize that it’s Jesus who has the key, and in a wild twist, Jesus promised that these Jewish people would eventually come and bow down at the feet of the Christians – which I take to mean there will come a day when the Jews will humbly accept that the followers of Christ are the people of God – the people that God loves, and without jumping too far ahead, this is the purpose for the Tribulation period, referred to by the prophet **Jeremiah** as

“the time of Jacob’s trouble.” The purpose of the Tribulation period is to bring the Jewish people, and anyone else who is lost, to the realization that a true relationship with God comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. That day will come for the Jewish people for they are special to God.

Now, continuing with this end times train of thought, because it appears Jesus is continuing with this train of thought, He says in **verse 10**,

“Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”

At first glance, we can tell very quickly that these words from Jesus to the church in Philadelphia involve something more than this church in Philadelphia, for we are told that something will happen that is beyond a local event, beyond a regional event, but it will **come upon the whole world**. So, it’s a global event.

Jesus describes this global event as **the hour of testing**. Some translations may read “the hour of trial,” but whatever the case, it speaks to a period of great calamity and affliction, and most Bible scholars see this global event as a reference to the Tribulation period which will impact the whole world. This is much more than the difficulties and the trials and the hardships we endure that are common to all people. This is something entirely different – this is an event that includes the outpouring of God’s wrath and judgment upon those, Jesus says, **who dwell on the earth**.

So, who are those who will dwell on the earth during this worldwide Tribulation period?

That phrase “*dwell on the earth*” is used nine times in the book of Revelation, and each time it is referring to unbelievers. Plus, to *dwell on the earth* implies the earth is your home, but for those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ – this is not your home. We are just passing through, strangers in a foreign land, because we have a heavenly home, and our citizenship is not here. In this book, there are people of God, and then there are people of the earth – those who have rejected Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

So, this Tribulation period, which is a season of affliction and wrath and judgment, will be global in nature, and it will involve the unbelieving inhabitants of this earth. **Well, what about the faithful followers of Jesus Christ? What about the**

church? In this verse, Jesus makes a promise and He says, **“I also will keep you from the hour of testing.”**

Jesus tells the faithful church that He will keep them **from** this worldwide Tribulation period. Now, I will tell you there is a long-standing debate about this and let me explain. There are many well-meaning Christians who sincerely believe the church will go through the Tribulation period or at least through part of it, and therefore, they interpret this promise from Jesus a little differently. Instead of understanding this verse to mean that Jesus will *keep you from or keep you out of* the hour of testing, they interpret it by suggesting that Jesus will *preserve you through* the hour of testing.

I cannot accept that interpretation for several reasons – one, if the Lord did not mean to say **“keep you from”**, then He could have used other words, but He didn’t. Two – we have already learned the inhabitants of the earth during this period are those who have rejected Christ. Three – the Apostle Paul tells the church in **1 Thessalonians 5:9**, **“For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,”** and lastly – during the Tribulation period, there will be lost people who are saved, who repent of their sin and accept Jesus as Savior and Lord – that is the intent, and except for a small remnant, these new Christians are not *preserved through* the Tribulation period – they are martyred, they are killed by the Antichrist and his followers.

So, I believe this worldwide hour of testing – this Tribulation period, is not meant for the church, it is intended for the Jews and the lost people who dwell on the earth at that time. The church will be kept from this season of affliction and wrath and judgment, and we will talk about that more in two weeks.

Okay, let's press on beginning with **verse 11**. Jesus continues with His promises and He tells the church,

¹¹“I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹²“He 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“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Jesus promises that He is **coming quickly**, meaning that when He does come for His church, it will be sudden and unexpected. So, while they waited, they were encouraged to hold on to what they had – to keep doing what they were doing.

They were to continue to walk through the doors of opportunity He opened. They were to continue to depend upon Him, and they were to persevere in their loyalty and faithfulness to Him – and with this came a great promise of permanence.

Jesus said, that for those who **overcome** they will be like **pillars** in God's temple. If you recall, the city of Philadelphia was destroyed a few times by earthquakes – their buildings and their Greek architecture crumbled and collapsed, and often times the only things left standing were the huge pillars. In this symbolic image using a pillar, Jesus promises a position of stability and permanence in the new Jerusalem – the ultimate temple of God.

We are also told that those who overcome will also be privileged to bear His **name**. As believers, we identify with Jesus, and here Jesus tells us He will identify with us. In the ancient world, when a slave was freed, he often kept the name of his master and was even granted his master's social status. Though born into bondage, a benevolent owner could give that slave a new identity, a new citizenship, and a new name. That's the promise for those who overcome – for those who know Jesus Christ and their Savior and Lord.

So, our challenge like this church in Philadelphia, is to depend upon the Lord no matter our size and resources, to persevere in our loyalty and faithfulness to Him, and to walk through the doors of opportunity He opens to us.

One stormy night an elderly couple entered the lobby of a small hotel and asked for a room. The clerk said they were full, as were all the other hotels in town, but he said, "I can't send a fine couple like you out in the rain." "Would you be willing to sleep in my room?" The elderly couple hesitated, but the clerk insisted. The next morning when the man paid his bill, he said, "You're the kind of man who should be managing the best hotel in the United States. Someday I'll build you one." The clerk smiled politely, but didn't think much of it.

A few years later, the clerk received a letter from the elderly man, recalling that stormy night, asking the clerk to come to New York with a round-trip ticket enclosed in the letter. When the clerk arrived, the elderly man took him to the corner of 5th Avenue and 34th Street, where there stood a magnificent new building.

"That," explained the man, "is the hotel I have built for you to manage." The man was William Waldorf Astor, and the hotel was the original Waldorf-Astoria, and the young clerk, George C. Boldt, became its first manager.

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