

Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

Christ's Message to Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of messages titled, “Christ’s Message to the Seven Churches,” that is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation 1 the resurrected Christ revealed himself to his Apostle John, and told him to write letters to seven churches in Asia. Today, we shall examine the sixth of those letters, and learn about Christ’s message to his church in Philadelphia.

Let’s read Christ’s message to Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13:

⁷ “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. ¹³ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:7-13)

Introduction

Pastor John MacArthur says that occasionally he 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.”¹

His point is that there are no perfect churches. All churches have problems. There is no church that does not have any problems. The reason that all churches have problems is because they are made up of people who are all sinful. You see, as John MacArthur says, “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. It is a kind of hospital for those who know they are sick and needy.”²

The church in Philadelphia had its weaknesses. They were a small, struggling church in a secular city, and yet they were faithful to Christ. Only the church in Philadelphia, along with the church in Smyrna, received no rebuke from Christ.

Lesson

The analysis of Christ’s message to Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13 teaches us that a church may be feeble but faithful.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Address (3:7a)
2. The Description (3:7b-d)
3. The Commendation (3:8-11a)
4. The Complaint
5. The Command (3:11b)
6. The Warning

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

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 118.

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7. The Promise (3:12)

8. The Appeal (3:13)

I. The Address (3:7a)

First, let's look at the address.

Christ said in verse 7a, **“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write. . . .”** The letter was addressed to **the angel**, which also means “messenger.” In context of the letters, I take it to mean that each letter was addressed to the pastor of the church.

Commentator John Stott described Philadelphia as follows:

The town of Philadelphia was situated about 28 miles southeast of Sardis. It was the next town which the postman would reach on his circular tour of the seven churches of Asia. Like Sardis it was in the fertile region of Lydia and was dominated by Mount Tmolus. It stood on the banks of the River Cogamus, an insignificant tributary of the Hermus. The district was dangerously volcanic. The ancient historian Strabo called Philadelphia “a city full of earthquakes.” Earth tremors were frequent, and had caused many former inhabitants to leave the city for a safer home. The severe earthquake of A.D. 17 which devastated Sardis almost completely demolished Philadelphia.³

II. The Description (3:7b-d)

Second, notice the description.

For the first time in the letters to the seven churches, Christ's description of himself is not drawn from Revelation 1:12-17. Instead, it is drawn from the Old Testament.

First, Christ said in verse 7b, **“These are the words of him who is holy and true.”** God the Father is described as “holy and true” in Revelation 6:10. So, like his Father, Christ may be trusted

³ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 97-98.

to keep his word.

Second, Christ is the one **“who holds the key of David”** (3:7c). In Revelation 1:18, Christ, as the resurrected and glorified one, is said to “have the keys of Death and Hades.” Christ is the one can unlock the gates of death and lead into eternal life. Furthermore, Isaiah 22:22a says, “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David.” This refers to Eliakim, who was David’s prime minister. The **key of David** symbolized authority, and Christ is the one who has authority to unlock the gates of death and lead people into eternal life.

And third, it is said of Christ in verse 7d, **“What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”** The second part of Isaiah 22:22 says of Eliakim, “what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” Obviously, this description is applied to Christ, and it speaks of his omnipotence. What he does can never be overturned by someone else more powerful. He is supremely omnipotent.

So, Christ can be trusted to keep his word, he has authority to unlock the gates of death and lead people into eternal life, and he is supremely omnipotent. John MacArthur notes, “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.”⁴

III. The Commendation (3:8-11a)

Third, observe the commendation.

As he did with each of the churches, Christ began his commendation by saying, **“I know your deeds”** (3:8a). Christ is the omniscient, sovereign Lord who oversees his church.

The church in Philadelphia was a relatively small congregation. Christ said he knew that they had **little strength** (3:8b). That

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 119.

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was not a negative comment on their feebleness, but rather a commendation of their strength. Despite their having **little strength**, Christ said that the church in Philadelphia **“kept my word and have not denied my name”** (3:8c). In addition, they **kept Christ’s command to endure patiently** (3:10a). The church in Philadelphia did not capitulate to the secular culture. This small church was marked by obedience, faithfulness, and perseverance. What high praise from Christ!

Apparently, in the city of Philadelphia there were many Jews. They made life very difficult for the followers of Jesus Christ. The Jews, of course, refused to acknowledge that Christ was indeed the Messiah. They claimed to be the true children of God. But they were not. Their **claim to be Jews** was based on biology rather than on having the faith that Abraham had demonstrated (see Romans 4:13-16; 9:8). So, they had become a **synagogue of Satan** (just like their fellow Jews in Smyrna in Revelation 2:9). They were **liars** in their rejection of Christ and his followers, because they had been deceived by Satan. Although the text does not directly state it, it is probable that the Jewish synagogues had, in effect, excommunicated and closed their doors to all Jewish converts to Christ.

Christ’s commendation included four specific pledges.

First, Christ **placed before** the believers **an open door that no one could shut** (3:8a). In Revelation 4:1a, the Apostle John wrote, “After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven!” Clearly, this refers to the entrance into heaven. So, Christ was saying that while the synagogues had closed their doors to Christians on earth, no one could deny the Philadelphian Christians entry into heaven. Christ, who held the key of David, would open the door to heaven for true believers and no one would ever be able to shut it.

Second, Christ said that he would **make** the Jews **come and fall down at** the believers’ **feet and acknowledge that** he had **loved** them (3:9b). The picture is that of captives from an ancient

battlefield forced to kneel before their captors. One day, when Christ returns and wraps up history, the Jews will **fall down at the believers' feet and acknowledge that** he had **loved** them. They will acknowledge that Christ really is the Messiah sent by God, and his true children are those who believed that Christ is the Messiah. The Jews will not be worshiping Christians, of course. Instead, all will acknowledge the sovereign Lordship of Christ. This is similar to what the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:10-11, "So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Third, Christ said that he would **also keep** the believers **from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth** (3:10b). This verse is highly debated by various schools of eschatology. Evidently, there had been some recent persecution against the Christians in Philadelphia, but the Christians had remained faithful. So, God promised that he would preserve them from his coming wrath. As commentator Grant Osborne said, "Therefore, the point is that the Philadelphia church (identified with all faithful believers here) will be protected from the wrath of God against the unbelievers but not from the wrath of Satan, and that this protection is within and not a removal from. . . that wrath."⁵

And fourth, Christ said that he was **coming soon** (3:11a). This was intended to encourage the Christians to persevere. One day, Christ will come to receive his bride and take her to be with him for all eternity. Until then, his church needs to remain faithful and vigilant, awaiting his return.

IV. The Complaint

Fourth, look at the complaint.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 194.

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Actually, there was no complaint by Christ against the church in Philadelphia. It is one of only two churches – the other being Smyrna – for which Christ has no complaint.

V. The Command (3:11b)

Fifth, notice the command.

Christ's said in verse 11b, **“Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”** To **hold on** when one has little strength can be difficult. Heaven is beyond the open door, and although they cannot lose their salvation, they might lose their heavenly reward by falling into sin as some had in some of the other churches. So, Christ urged believers to remain faithful.

VI. The Warning

Sixth, observe the warning.

Since there was no complaint against the church in Philadelphia, there was no warning either.

VII. The Promise (3:12)

Seventh, notice the promise.

Christ promised four blessings to **the one who is victorious** (3:12a).

First, Christ **will make a pillar in the temple of his God. Never again will they leave it** (3:12b). Pillars represent permanence. Christ promised believers that they will have a permanent place in his eternal kingdom. This was a marvelous promise to the Philadelphian Christians who were constantly moving out of their city because of the frequent earthquakes.

Second, Christ **will write on them the name of his God** (3:12c). This represents ownership, and it signifies that all believers

belong to God.

Third, Christ will write on believers **the name of the city of his God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from his God** (3:12d). All believers are citizens of the new Jerusalem. This is a promise of security and safety and glory.

And fourth, Christ **will also write on** believers his **new name** (3:12e). This also represents ownership, and it also signifies that all believers belong to Christ.

Christ has secured salvation and citizenship for his own by paying the penalty for their sin when he died on the cross. All who believe that he is God's Son, and repent of their sin, will receive these blessings that Christ promised to the church in Philadelphia.

VIII. The Appeal (3:13)

And eighth, look at the appeal.

Christ said in verse 13, **“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Christ appealed to Christians to pay attention to what he said to them through the Spirit.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Christ's message to Philadelphia as set forth in Revelation 3:7-13, we should remain faithful.

There are two lessons I would like to draw from today's text.

First, God is more interested in faithfulness than success. My New Testament professor, Grant Osborne writes:

Every small church in a difficult area of ministry will find this letter encouraging. Every Christian uncertain about his or her gifts and place in the church as a whole will be comforted. The basic message is profound: God is more interested in faithfulness than success. I met a pastor who had been ministering in an inner-city situation where growth was impossible. He was told by a

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church growth leader that he should leave since there was no future in that church. The leaders in Philadelphia would have been told the same. Does God care only about suburban ministry where neighborhoods are exploding with people and “church growth” is almost inevitable? I think not.⁶

Christ measures every church not by how successful they are in their growth, but rather by how faithful they are to him. Christ's evaluation of every church – and every church member, for that matter – is of their faithfulness to him and not of their success.

Let us, then, commit ourselves to being faithful to God.

And second, God calls us to remain faithful to the very end. Again, Grant Osborne writes:

When we get to heaven, the greatest rewards may well be for the kind of Christians who persevered in situations like that in Philadelphia, who remained true to the Lord in an extremely difficult situation. They are given an “open door” and a “crown” that no one can take away. Still, they can lose it by failing to “hold fast to what they have.” Thus the message begins and ends with perseverance, with “overcoming” any and all obstacles to the centrality of God and Christ in our lives. We will be vindicated; we will be given the very names of God and Christ for our own. We are citizens of heaven. But we must remain steadfast.⁷

By 7 p.m. on October 20, 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics Stadium, it was beginning to darken. It had cooled down as well.

The last of the Olympic marathon runners were being assisted away to first-aid stations. Over an hour earlier, Mamo Waldi of Ethiopia had charged across the finish line, winning the 26-mile, 385-yard race looking as strong and as vigorous as when he'd started.

As the last few thousand spectators began preparing to leave,

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 199-200.

⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 200.

they heard police sirens and whistles through the gate entering the stadium.

The attention turned to that gate. A sole figure, wearing the colors of Tanzania, came limping into the stadium. His name was John Steven Akhwari. He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. His leg was bandaged, bloody. He had taken a bad fall early in the race. Now, it was all he could do to limp his way around the track. The crowd stood and applauded as he completed that last lap.

When he finally crossed the finish line, one man dared ask the question all were wondering. “You are badly injured. Why didn’t you quit? Why didn’t you give up?”

Akhwari, with quiet dignity said, “My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish.”⁸

God wants us to finish the race. God wants us to remain faithful to the very end.

My favorite Bible commentator is John Stott. He was rector of All Souls Langham Place in London and a peerless preacher, Bible teacher, evangelist, author, global leader and friend to many. Author Os Guinness visited John Stott at his bedside three weeks before he died. After an unforgettable hour and more of sharing many memories over many years, Guinness asked John Stott how he could pray for him. Lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, John Stott answered in a hoarse whisper, “Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath.”⁹ Spoken like a true Philadelphian Christian!

Let us remain faithful to the very end. Amen.

⁸ Craig Brian Larson, “Strong to the Finish,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 155.

⁹ Os Guinness, *Impossible People* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), n.p.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
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develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for Christ's message to the church in Philadelphia.

The church in Philadelphia was a feeble but faithful church. They experienced the influence of a secular culture and persecution from their former religion. And yet, through it all, they remained faithful to you. O God, enable each one of us to remain faithful to you.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!