

LET THE BIBLE SPEAK, SERIES

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Letter To The Church at Philadelphia

Philadelphia was located some twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis. Most historians agree that the city was founded by King Attalus II Philadelphus, of Pergamum, who was a great admirer of his brother and predecessor, Ecumenes II. Out of his affection the king named the city Philadelphia, meaning "brother loving" or "brother lover". Being located on a main trade route from east to west, the city became an important and wealthy trade center. Philadelphia was also famous for its wines. This gave prominence to Dionysus, the Greek God of the vine and of wine, which became the chief pagan cult of the city. According to Hastings Philadelphia had so many temples and festivals to pagan deities that it was often called "Little Athens". The city had originally been established to spread Greek civilization and culture eastward. There is some evidence that this was at least in part successful. Along with other cities in the region Philadelphia was destroyed by the earthquake of A.D. 17 and was later rebuilt.

The introductory designation by the Lord creates a contrast between himself and certain situations found in the city. "The Holy" indicates that he possessed the absolute holiness of God.. This "holiness" demanded separation from the profane and sinful character so prevalent in the society and culture of that day. "The True" refers to "true, dependable, genuine, real" (Bauer), an attribute possessed by the Lord in contrast to those who "say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie."

"The Key of David...Openeth and none shutteth,...shutteth and none openeth," a probable reference to the principal problem which confronted the church in Philadelphia. Secular Israel still wielded power and control over Jews religiously, claiming final right of determining who should or should not enter heaven. They not only resisted but denied the claim of Christians that they were the true Israel of God. All Jews, therefore who accepted Christ were cast out of the synagogue. This passage declares plainly that it is Christ and not Israel who can give men entrance into the messianic kingdom. This expression comes from Isaiah 22:22-25 where the king of Israel deposed, Shebna and appointed Eliahim as the chief-steward. The analogy being that Christianity replaced Judaism, as the true religion. Thus Christ has undisputed authority to admit or exclude from heaven. The expression "key of David" also means that Christ possessed the throne of David, and that the government was upon his shoulder Isaiah 9:6. The angel declared to Mary the mother of Jesus that God would give her Son "the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:31-32). Peter on Pentecost referenced the fact that Christ would be raised up to sit on David's throne, speaking of the resurrection of Christ. Wallace summed it all up when he said "Jesus has the throne of David, the tabernacle of David, the sure mercies (blessings) of David, and the key of David in every spiritual sense of these terms...These

passages teach that the house of David was perpetuated in the kingdom of Christ, his Church."

I know thy works (behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut), that thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name."

"An open door" is a figurative expression denoting opportunity. Just as the city itself was situated geographically to spread Greek civilization, so the church was in a position through evangelism to spread the gospel. Since Christ had the key of power that declared it open, no man could shut it.

The following qualities would enable the church to take advantage of the opportunity now before them: (1) "I know thou hast a little power." Plummer renders it "Because thou hast a little power, and hast made good use of that little, I have given thee an opportunity of which none shall deprive thee."

Whether its power was small because of "few members," or "economic status," or "lowly social order," we don't know. What we do know is that its power was sufficient to achieve the purpose the Lord had in mind.

(2) "and didst keep my word." The church had stood fast and been true to the Lord. Whatever the trial may have been, this church had proven its fidelity. And (3) "didst not deny my name." They had confessed the name of Christ (Romans 10:8-10; Phil. 2:9-11) and were obedient to His teachings. To deny Him under the pressure of pagan forces would be to crucify the Son of God afresh. These Christians had remained firm.

Behold, I give of the synagogue of Satan, of them that say they are Jews and they are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee."

The true Jew was one inwardly, circumcised in heart, (Romans 2:28) a Christian, one who worshiped by the Spirit of God and served Jesus Christ. Those Jews in the flesh, who boasted that they were the true Israel, in fact were not. They hated those who accepted the Lord, and often marked them as traitors and deserters worthy of death. These were of the synagogue Satan i.e. Satan was behind their evil deeds.

That they would come and worship before the feet of the Christians, means that they would come to recognize the true power of the church, even though most of them would never obey the gospel.

They would hate the Christians, yet they would come to recognize the truth of their claim, and in so doing would come to know "that I have loved thee."

Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth."

The word of my patience refers to the patience of Christ out of which grew his word. They had kept his word. They were faithful to it. And because of this, they were given the following promise from him.

I will also keep thee from the hour of trial. "Hour" is probably used to denote a "period of time," or "a season of persecution." "From" the hour of trial literally means "from out of the midst of". It is unclear, however, whether they will be kept from it in the sense that they will receive "immunity from" or "be brought safely through" the anticipated ordeal.

The trial was to come upon the whole inhabited earth and would test "them that dwell upon the earth." "The Earth" is probably a reference to the world of the unregenerate, those living in sin who are in conflict with Christ and His Church. Even though the Church will have its trials and troubles, it will be kept from those which would affect the people of the world.

I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.

The second coming is not under consideration here, but to the constant and continual comings of the Lord, in a figurative sense, to aid his people or judge the sinful world.

"Hold fast that which thou hast," is an admonition to hold on to: the open door, His Word, a little power, steadfast endurance, and the promise from the Lord that he would care for them. The promise that the Lord would care for them is based upon their continued steadfastness.

"That no one take thy crown" is not an indication that one can gain by taking the crown of another, but that one can lose his crown by carelessness or disobedience. The Lord does not criticize this church, but does warn them that the position they occupy could become the cause of their stumbling. Remember 1Cor. 10:12 "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." To forfeit the crown would be to lose eternal life.

He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name.

This promise is personal to every individual Christian who overcomes. He speaks of those who conquer earth's allurements and temptations.

Making one a pillar addresses the permanence of his/her position in the heavenly temple of God. What a blessing and promise. In the sanctuary of this promise neither earthquakes, violence, nor persecution can ever destroy or cast them out.

Each saint has inscribed upon him three names: (1)" The name of God the Father, to

whom the individual would now belong in a permanent and fixed way." Hailey (2) The name of the New Jerusalem identifies the victorious Christian as a resident of this city. Heaven is now home. With this inscription upon him, the one who overcomes has a right to enter by the gates into the city, to dwell forever with God, and finally (3) Christ's own new name, the name written "which no one knoweth but himself." Rev. 19:12 What a glorious promise this is. We are to share in the glory which is Christ's. His name stands for all that He is, even for all that which we do not understand at this time. "When Christ shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory" Col. 3:4. and "we know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" 1Jno.3:2.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

This is all we know of the church in Philadelphia. The bible is silent as to its origin and place among the churches. It deserved no criticism or condemnation. This was a church with opportunity, duty, victory, and one that attained to that sought by David, a permanent place in the temple of God. Psalms 27:4 "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple." A church whose faithful members were given the name which belongs to God, His city, and His Christ. What a church!