

A Glorious Church

Scripture: Revelation 3:7-13

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People of God: Tonight we look at the church of Philadelphia--not the one in the United States but the one in Asia Minor. As perhaps many of you know, the name Philadelphia means brotherly love. Just as the name--the city of brotherly love--has a very positive ring about it, so this letter is one that is very positive in character. This is a glorious church.

But wait a minute, someone might say! How can you say that? Have you forgotten what you just read? Look at what Christ says about this church. How can you be so positive about it? How can you describe it as being glorious? Indeed, as you read this letter, you discover it had a number of challenges.

First of all, Christ says *I know that you have little strength*. This church was not strong. She did not have too many members. The members of the church were a small minority in the large city of Philadelphia. As a result, she did not have much influence in the community. The ruling authorities did not belong to the church. Nor did other influential members of the community. Instead, the members of the church came those who didn't count. Those who were not rich. Those who were not powerful. It was a small church. It had little strength.

In addition, this church ran into difficulty with a more powerful part of the community. They had problems with the local synagogue. The Jews in this city didn't like this little church in their backyard. Now you must remember that the gospel was always preached first to the Jews. After all, Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT. The Jews should have received the gospel with open arms. They should have embraced the Messiah. But instead, the majority rejected the gospel. They persecuted those who taught that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. This small church in Philadelphia had to

endure the pressures of the much larger Jewish community.

Yet despite the little strength of this church, despite the pressures put on it from the Jews, I say this was a glorious church. This was a church that receives only praises from Christ. No word of condemnation is given to her. No word of warning is issued. That happens to only one other church in these seven letters. That's why I say this is a glorious church. Because despite the challenges she faced she remained true to Jesus. She remained faithful to her task.

Christ commends the church by saying: *you have kept my word and have not denied my name*. How easy it would have been for this church to give up. She didn't have many numbers. How could she stand against such pressure by those who claim to be God's children? But the church did stand. She remained true to her confessions. She refused to give in. She kept the word of command of Christ to endure patiently.

What a testimony to her spiritual strength. Because that is what counts. Not whether the church makes up the majority in a community. Not whether the church is rich and powerful. Not whether the church is influential among the elite. What counts is spiritual strength. That's what this church had.

Moreover, this church had an opportunity to preach the gospel. Christ says: *I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut*. This open door refers to an opportunity to proclaim the message of God. In various places throughout the NT, the apostles used this phrase of a door to indicate whether they were able to preach the good news. For example in II Corinthians 2:12 Paul says: "...I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me..." Here Christ had opened a door for the church in Philadelphia. They could preach the gospel. They may have been small, but that did not prevent their witnessing to what God had done in Christ.

As a result, I say this is a glorious church. The Lord was with her. Never let first impressions fool you. Never judge a church by outwards measures. Never evaluate the effectiveness of a church by earthly means. According to earthly standards, this church was nothing. But from Christ's point of view, she was a glorious church.

After all, the strength of the church lies in Jesus Christ. Notice how Christ is described here: *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*.

Christ is holy. Let us here recall the vision of Isaiah the prophet. Christ will soon allude to this book. When Isaiah has a vision of God, he heard the seraphs sang "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty." This description is

now applied to Christ. He too is the holy one. Because he is holy, so too is the church.

Christ is also true. True in the sense that he is the genuine article, the real thing. This was denied by those who belonged to the synagogue. They denied that Jesus was truly the Messiah. They accused the church of being a false gospel--of being a departure from the OT revelation of God. But it was those who denied Christ who are liars. Christ is the true Son of God. He is the authentic messiah. He is the real thing. As a result, the church's message was the true. They could be confident in its message.

Christ is also the one who holds the key of David. This is a reference to Isaiah 22. There the prophet brings judgment upon the treasurer of the royal palace. This was an important office because the treasurer controlled the finances of the royal house. Because of wrongful acts, Isaiah transfers this office to another person saying: *I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.* These words are now applied to Christ. He has the key of David. In other words, he controls the royal household. He supervises the king's business. He is the one who determines who can gain entrance into the presence of the king.

Indeed, Christ is the key to the kingdom of God. He has been given authority to rule. It is only through Christ that we gain access to the King. Therefore, it is Christ who opens and closes the kingdom. But what is astounding is that Christ has equipped his church with these keys as well. In Matthew 16 Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to Peter, to the church. Through the preaching of the gospel, the church opens and closes the kingdom of God. What a powerful authority the church has.

Therefore as you look at this in Philadelphia, do not be deceived. She may have little strength. She may be harassed by others. But she is a glorious church. Glorious because of Christ who is her head and Lord.

This is a glorious church because Christ offers no words of warning. Instead, he gives a more extensive promise: a three-fold promise: vindication before her foes, deliverance in the final period of testing, and security in the coming age.

The first promise is vindication before her foes. This is found in verse 9: *I will make them who are of the synagogue of Satan... come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.* As I said earlier, this church had to endure the pressures and opposition from the Jewish community. This was hard on the church. As it is for any church. The church of Jesus Christ today receives scorn and opposition from many sides. There are those who accuse the church of intolerance because of her stand on

certain moral issues. There are those who view the church as the place where hypocrites gather together. There are those who find the church to be an inconvenience and irrelevant to their lives, so they try to lead a spiritual life apart from the church.

But in the end, these people will be proved wrong. In the end, they too will see the importance of the church; they will see how Christ loves the church. Indeed, he gave his own life for the sake of the church. One day this will all be made clear to those who ridicule and oppose the church.

What an encouragement this was for the church in Philadelphia. They may have been small but they did not have to worry about the opposition. The church was on the winning side in the spiritual warfare they were involved in. This spiritual warfare continues. But we do not have to be downcast. We do not have to be discouraged. Yes, at times we lament that the church in Canada has lost its position of authority. At times, we wonder whether we make any difference in this community. But remember the church is the object of Christ's love. One day everyone will acknowledge this.

But this promise does not mean life will be smooth sailing for the church. The second promise reminds us that there will continue to be hard times for the church. But deliverance will come. We find this second promise in verse 10: *I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole earth to test those who live on the earth.*

Now some people see in this verse a support for the rapture, the idea that believers will be raptured to heaven before the going gets tough. In other words, the church will escape the final tribulation. But this verse cannot be used to support that idea. For one thing, Christ is dealing with the church in Philadelphia in the first century and not the final tribulation. Besides, the other churches were not escaping times of tribulation, but were already experiencing it.

So what does this verse mean? It's a promise that when the church goes through times of trial, Christ will give the church the strength to go through it. The church will emerge from the time of testing, stronger than ever. The church will experience opposition. That's the nature of the spiritual warfare we are in. The kingdom of God stands opposed to the kingdom of darkness. This conflict produces clashes. It produces the hour of trial. But Christ delivers his church so that in the end the church is victorious. As the first promise reminds us, even the enemy will have to acknowledge this fact.

This leaves us to consider the third promise, a promise about security. In verse 12 we read:

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God.

Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God... and I will also write on him my new name.

What is this promise all about? It's about security. In order to appreciate the reference to being a pillar in the temple of God, there is something about the city of Philadelphia we need to know about. This city was prone to earthquakes. Many times earthquakes destroyed parts of this city. Buildings toppled. People were forced to leave their homes and sleep outside the city. With earthquakes, you lose your sense of security and safety within your own home. Those living in Haiti and Chile know all about that.

But Christ promises security. *He who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of God.* Now this is figurative language. We won't actually become pillars. Instead, the temple symbolizes the presence of God. He who overcomes will be a pillar in the presence of God. In other words, believers will be safe and secure in the presence of God. Never will we have to flee from his presence. While the citizens of Philadelphia had to flee their city when there was an earthquake, citizens of Kingdom of God will never have to flee from God's presence because nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The second part of this promise reinforces the security we have in Christ. Believers will be inscribed with a three-fold name. Christ says: *I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God... and I will also write on him my new name.* We will receive the mark that we are God's children. We will bear the image of God as we were meant to do. We will also be given the name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem. This will be our new address. This is where we will live in the presence of God, forever. We will also be given of the name of Christ himself. Indeed, we already bear his name. We are Christians. But then we shall do so in perfection.

People of God, we are presented here with a glorious vision of the church. The church today may not measure up as one of the most influential institutions of Canadian society any longer. In fact, there can be a great deal of pressure put upon us to change our beliefs and practices. But we can remain true to our Savior. The door is still open to be a witness. There are many opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Why can we still have such an optimistic outlook? Because the church is not measured according to earthly standards, but heavenly ones. The church has a glorious future because of Jesus Christ. He has promised vindication from her foes, deliverance in the midst of trials, and security for the future. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the*

churches.