

# AVOIDING SPIRITUAL PITFALLS

## LESSONS FROM THE SEVEN LETTERS IN REVELATION

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### SESSION SEVEN: PHILADELPHIA - THE TRIUMPH OF THE WEAK

*"God has not equipped humankind with ear lids."*  
Marshal McLuhan

#### TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

<sup>7</sup>*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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. <sup>11</sup>I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. <sup>12</sup>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, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. <sup>13</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

The letters to the Seven Churches follow this pattern.

The Centrality of Christ

The Affirmation

The Fault Line

The Exhortation

The Promise

#### A. INTRODUCTION: PHILADELPHIA

##### 1. THE CITY

Philadelphia (modern name Alasehir) was the 'red city' Anatolia. It was founded by King Attalus of Pergamum (159 – 138 BC), whose surname Philadelphus meant 'loyal to his brother (Eumenes)'. The latter was the king of Pergamos and an ally of Rome for many years. At one point, the Romans suspected him of treachery and instigated Attalus to overthrow his brother. But Attalus stayed true.

It is 32 km east of Sardis and 97 km East of Smyrna on a 210 m plateau extending from the north slopes of the Tmolus/Boz Mountains toward the Hermus River, today called Gediz.<sup>i</sup>

It was regarded as the gateway to the East.

Like Sardis, an earthquake devastated Philadelphia in AD 17 and subsequent tremors brought more misery. Tiberius helped it after the earthquake. For a while, it was renamed Neocaesarea in gratitude for Rome's help. In 70 AD, it took on the name Flavia in honor of a new Imperial family. These renaming were significant as Jesus also gave Philadelphia a new name: *"I will also write on him my new name."*

Its temples merited a stream of pilgrims so that by AD 400, it was known as 'little Athens'.<sup>ii</sup> Like Smyrna, the city had a synagogue regarded by the Christians as antagonistic to them (Rev 3: 9).

## **2. THE CHURCH**

Beside Smyrna, Philadelphia was the only church without any fault line. Like Smyrna, the Church in Philadelphia faced opposition from the 'synagogue of Satan' (Rev 2: 9).

## **B. OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION**

### **1. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST**

*<sup>7</sup>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.*

Christ is the true Holy One in contrast to the Jews who claim to be Jews but are really the 'synagogue of Satan'. The terms 'holy and true' were not drawn directly from the vision of Jesus in Rev 1 but pointed to the deity of Christ. The word 'true' means genuine (in contrast to 'false') and trustworthy. This self-identity matches the Philadelphia Church's situation: persecuted by false Jews, yet remaining faithful.

Jesus is referred to as the One who holds the key of David, with the authority to open and shut any door. He determines who is in and who is out. 'The key' is akin to 'the keys of death and Hades' of Rev 1: 18b.

'The key' appears in Isaiah 22: 22, together with the promise that its custodian Eliakim would be a foreshadow of Christ. He would be the steward of the household and would have the authority to open or shut doors.<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah mentioned, "the gates are opened so that the righteous nation which keeps faith may enter in" (Isa 26: 2). Just as Eliakim himself would be fastened 'like a peg in a sure place, and...a throne of honor to his father's house' (Isa 22: 23), so in consequence the weak, the despised, and the converted outsider will be given 'in my house and within my walls a monument and a name' (Isa 56: 5).<sup>iv</sup>

## 2. THE AFFIRMATION

<sup>8</sup>*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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.*

In contrast to Sardis and the Laodicean Christians who boast of their riches, the Philadelphian church has only a 'little strength' but is faithful to Christ. The situation resembles the fellow believers in Smyrna, who acknowledge their own poverty.<sup>v</sup>

Jesus affirms:

1. Their little strength - 'you have little strength'.
2. Their faithfulness - 'you have kept my word and have not denied my name'.
3. Their triumph over those who oppose them - 'I will make those...to come and fall down at your feet'.
4. His love for them.
5. Their patient endurance.
6. His protection on them during their time of severe testing.

The believers in Philadelphia, like their brethren in Smyrna, were experiencing conflict with the Jews in the local synagogue. Some of the Jewish leaders in the late 1<sup>st</sup> Century had apparently felt that they were the ones authorized to control access to the synagogue (Matt 23: 13; Jn 9: 34 – The blind man was expelled from the synagogue). Many were most likely expelled from their own synagogues. But Jesus affirmed and welcomed them, even though the Jewish community had rejected them.

The persecutors were Jews but not really true Jews (people of God). They were really part of Satan's community ('Synagogue of Satan'). They claimed falsely to be God's holy people. In contrast, Christ speaks as the true Holy One. That was why He proclaimed Himself, and not them, as the One who had 'the key'. The door could allude to the following:

1. Entry into the New Jerusalem is determined by Jesus (Rev 3: 12; 21: 12-14; 22: 14).
2. Door to Heaven (Rev 4: 1).
3. Entrance to the temple (Rev 11: 19; 15: 5).
4. Fellowship with Jesus (Rev 3: 20).
5. Jesus as completed salvation (Lk 13: 24, 25; Jn 10: 7-9; 14: 6).
6. All of the above.

Also, God's promise to the Jews is that one day, the Gentiles would bow down to them (Isa 90: 14; 45: 14; 49:23; 45: 23; 49:7; 66: 23).<sup>vi</sup> But here, unbelieving Jews will join unbelieving Gentiles to bow down before the faithful believers (Rev 3: 9) not in the sense of being under the control of the triumphant, but in the sense of the triumph of righteousness, based on the work of Christ.

The use of the word 'hour' recalls its prominence in John's Gospel (Jn 16: 2, 4, 32; Mt 24: 4-28, Mk 13: 19, 2 Thess 2: 1-12). Christ would not protect them **from** tribulation but **through** tribulation!

The words '*keep you from*' also occurs in Jn 17: 15 – 'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from (or keep them from) the evil one.' This only other occurrence of the verb 'keep from' in Jn 17: 15 clearly states that Christians will not be exempt from trials. Like

Rev 3: 8, 10, Jn 17: 6 speaks of protection for those who keep God's Word. Beale: "I will keep you safe from the spiritual harm of the coming tribulation period".

They must recognize that God has chosen and loved them (Isa 49: 7; 43: 4). Those whom Jesus loves, they are destined to inhabit with Him (Rev 20: 9 – 'in the city that He loves').<sup>vii</sup>

Rev 3: 10 also contrasts those who are faithful and suffering whom Jesus loves, to those who are unbelievers – The former will be given strength and able to endure but the latter will not. The former's long-term home is in Heaven and they have set their sight on the eternal. Jesus will keep them to Himself.

Christ does not minimize the suffering that will come to the church but He assures them of His grace. The concepts – key, door, city, temple, and pillar - point to the wonderful assurance and promise of God to those who are steadfast in their faith. Christ keeps His people as they keep His word (v 10). They obey His word because Christ has first loved them. The result of His loving care for them is that the church with 'little power' will be established as an immovable pillar in the temple of God's Jerusalem.<sup>viii</sup>

### **3. THE FAULT LINE**

### **4. THE EXHORTATION**

<sup>11</sup>*I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

Jesus' exhortation is that the Philadelphia Church keep on holding to what they have. It's not over till it's over.<sup>ix</sup> The 'crown' is a victor's wreath appropriate to overcomers (Rev 2: 10), where the 'crown of life' is contrasted with the second death, i.e. exclusion from God's kingdom.<sup>x</sup>

### **5. THE PROMISE**

<sup>12</sup>*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, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.* <sup>13</sup>*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

On top of this, those who overcome are promised:

1. They will be made a pillar – They will become one of the foundations in God's temple. Even though they have been expelled from the Jewish synagogue, they remain a critical part of God's temple. This image is reminiscent of Isa 56:5 'in which the foreigners and eunuchs will have a place and an eternal name within God's house'.<sup>xi</sup> Ancient pillars usually bore honorary inscriptions.
2. They will never be left out again – '*Never again will he leave it*'
3. They will be given God's name in a new city - '*I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God*'. The new Jerusalem which '*is coming down from Heaven*' suggests that God always meets believers in the present. Life begins here on earth as they submit themselves to God's reign.
4. They will be given a new identity – '*I will also write on him my new name*'

The interpretation of the image of 'pillar' (v 12) include:

- a. The customary practice of a priest at a provincial center for the imperial cult to erect a statue of himself with his name inscribed on it at the end of his tenure of office.
- b. Two pillars in Solomon's temple bearing personal names (Jakin & Boaz in 1 Kgs 7: 21).
- c. The stability of the pillar in contrast to the instability and eventual collapse of the house of Eliakim's father (Isa 22: 24-25).

This pillar bears the name of God in the new Jerusalem, and Jesus' new name (Rev 3: 12) confirms that they belong to the holy city of God.

The church is thrice sealed: Belonging to God, belonging to God's Community and belonging to God's Son. The tender promise is that those who are painfully aware of their weakness and insecurity are those who shall finally BELONG!<sup>xii</sup>

Once the people of God enter the 'open door' made available to them by Christ, they will live in the temple forever! The excluded will be permanently included. We should take heart that when Christ opens the door, none can shut it!

*'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'.*

This phrase is repeated to all the seven churches. Whatever differences the churches have, two things are constant: The Spirit speaks and the people listen<sup>xiii</sup>:

1. Listening is a spiritual activity. Churches are to be listening posts. Expensive acoustical equipment help in making hearing possible but do not improve our personal listening.
2. Without listening, there is no church. The personal word is central and therefore the personal act of listening is essential. Mouths speak in order that ears may hear.

The Church must be the very place where God's Word is heard.

In the final book of Revelation, the church is the very place where God's word is heard. If the church is to be taken seriously, it must be the place where human needs are also taken seriously and then lives lived obediently. The church is the one place in the world where persons deliberately come together and uncover their ears so that the sounds of God's word will be heard accurately and believably<sup>xiv</sup>.

3. The way we listen is significant. If the divine word is primary, then human hearing is essential: that we hear is required. How should we hear? In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes the four kinds of soil akin to four kinds of hearing<sup>xv</sup>:
  - i. Hard Ground: Are our ears thick with calluses, impenetrable like a heavily congested path?
  - ii. Rocky Soil: Are we only superficially attentive like rocky ground in which everything germinates but nothing takes root?
  - iii. Mixed Soil: Are our ears like an indiscriminate weed patch in which the noisy and repetitive take up all the space without regard for truth, quality, beauty, or fruitfulness?
  - iv. Good Soil: Are our ears good soil which readily receives God's word, well-tilled to welcome deep roots, to discriminately choose God's word and reject the lies of the world, to accept high responsibility for protecting and practicing the gift of hearing in silence, reverence, and attentiveness so that God's word will be heard, understood and believed?

4. Listening must evoke a spiritual response. The hearing that begins as a physical function becomes a spiritual response. When it does not, the problem is diagnosed as 'heavy ears'.

When the Messiah comes, the ears of the deaf would hear (Isa 35:5).

But we compensate that with selective hearing. We are usually 'deaf' to our pride, blind spots, lapses, wrongful pleasures, empty dreams, onerous tasks, and over-indulgent in our fantasies.

Finally, to evoke a correct spiritual response, we must learn to listen in the following manner:

Listen to the Word as well as listen to the World.

Listen personally as well as listen corporately.

Listen to search our souls as well as listen to the needs of our community.

Listen to affirmations as well as listen to our fault lines.

Listen in prayerful reflection but also in our rush.

## **C. DISCUSSION & APPLICATION**

1. Don't underestimate the small, the weak and the insignificant. How is this true in your life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Jesus honors those who are faithful and who keep His word. Share an experience in your life that demonstrates this truth.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Listening is perhaps the most difficult thing in the Christian life. How do you practice listening to the world and listening to the Word as well as listening personally and listening corporately?

4. The Lamb will sit on The Throne. God’s specialty is to take the weak things of this world to rule. Have you experienced this in your own life?

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<sup>i</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

<sup>ii</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

<sup>iii</sup> Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

<sup>v</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>vi</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>vii</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>viii</sup> Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

<sup>ix</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>x</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>xi</sup> Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

<sup>xii</sup> Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

<sup>xiii</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.

<sup>xiv</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.

<sup>xv</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. Revised Thunder. The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination. Harper & Row, Publishers. San Francisco, USA.