

REVELATION 3:7-13

(Readings: Matthew 16:13-28; Isaiah 22:15-25)

Philadelphia - The Faithful Saints!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

We have seen that each of the previous churches are found in distinct cities.

Distinct cities because each had its own particular character due to history, culture, religion, ethnicity and location.

No two towns were quite the same.

This trend shows itself again in the sixth letter to the churches - the letter to the Philadelphian congregation.

For where do we find Philadelphia situated?

It is right out in the boondocks.

You see, this town was right on the edge of civilisation, the frontier, the last stop before the wilds of Phrygia and the barbarous tribes up north.

Philadelphia had even been especially set up to convert those barbarians into cultured Greeks.

But while it may have worked elsewhere, as in Sardis effectively turning the Lydians into all things Hellenic, it was far from successful here.

Philadelphia remained a border town, and so had not grown much at all.

And there was the geographical location of Philadelphia.

Or should I say geothermal?

For Philadelphia was on the edge of something else too - the edge of a volcanic area.

In an earthquake in A.D. 17 this city had been devastated.

Through the help of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, it had been rebuilt.

But you can imagine how those Philadelphians felt every time those earthquake tremors came.

It was part of their life there that they were often going out and coming in.

They would go out to safe areas in the open country to avoid falling masonry.

And then they would come back in when things were calm again.

This is the background to the city of Philadelphia, the town whose name meant "brotherly love."

A city which had a faithful church within her.

In fact, this is one of only two of the letters where the church addressed is regarded so positively.

This is why it might surprise many Christians today to hear the first aspect to this text.

For HERE IS A CHURCH WHICH IS SMALL.

Yes, the Philadelphian church doesn't have many members.

There are few who were gathering there on the Lord's Day.

Verse 9 is clear about this with the phrase "I know that you have little strength."

Because this is not speaking about any weaknesses in her, but rather the strength that is found in numbers and influence.

So that is a worldly strength, because, when we consider everything else written about the communion of the saints there, she is very spiritually strong.

James Ramsey comments, "In every sense in which men estimate strength, in wealth, in world appearance, and in numbers, this church therefore appears to have been weak.

"But it is just such that Jesus delights to honour.

"This very feebleness, united with such faithfulness, made it a specially appropriate instrument of His power.

"The treasure is placed in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God.

"As the Lord said to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness,' so He says to every feeble and faithful church and believer."

We only need to note in this connection the reference in verse 12 to being "a pillar in the temple" of the heavenly Jerusalem.

That's an image we'll come back to further on.

But for now we may note that it emphatically supports the Philadelphian congregation as a true church.

Mind you, we don't need to go as far as verse 12 for this.

The words of the Lord in verse 7 already make it clear what kind of church this is.

When he speaks of the key of David, the key which when it opens it cannot be shut, and the key which when it shuts no one can open it, these are the keys of the Kingdom!

This is about the faithful preaching of God's Word, administering His sacraments, and practising church discipline.

This is what we read of in Matthew 16.

For, there, when the Lord was commissioning His disciples as the foundation of the New Testament Church, He spoke of what He was giving them to do it.

The words He said in verse 19 there about the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and about whatever they bound on earth being bound in heaven, and vice versa, is precisely the same imagery as this.

For this is exactly what they were doing!

There would have been an even closer connection for those in Philadelphia with an Old Testament passage, though.

That was what we read in Isaiah 22.

There in verse 22 Isaiah pronounces God's judgment upon Shebna, the king's treasurer and chief officer.

Because Shebna was not serving the Lord his office will be taken away from him and given to Eliakim, who would be faithful.

And it was quite an authority!

For this power of "the key to the house of David" gave him the right to determine who should enter the king's presence and who shouldn't.

It was this key which belongs ultimately to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He said in John 14 verse 6, "No one comes to the Father except through me."

So it is Christ Himself who adds to His church, He opens up the way to God, He saves.

And He chooses not to save also, as the case may be.

Because these Philadelphian believers are true believers the door is open to them.

The door to not only faith but the assurance of eternal life and all the blessings that go with it.

That was a lot better door to think of than some of the doors they would have experienced.

One of those other doors would have been the synagogue door.

Most of that congregation were Jews and there was a large Jewish community in Philadelphia.

So when they had come to faith they would have been excommunicated, cursed as apostates and shut out.

The Jews continue to treat converts to Christianity in the same way today.

In some cases they even have a funeral service because they believe that conversion to Christ is the death of that person.

Congregation, since it's Jesus who is the true Son of David, and as He holds the key and He has an open door before them, there's great encouragement.

His word is what will keep them.

Because He has promises in here for them.

He's the One who gives even that small congregation everything they need to be His faithful congregation there!

For they are those who are hearing what the Spirit says.

That's why verse 8 can end by saying they have kept the Word of the Lord and not denied His name.

For while this may be a church which is small we must also see that HERE IS THE CHURCH THAT STANDS TALL.

This is our second aspect.

Here we turn to consider the verses 9 and 10.

The first thing we note here is the presence of a false church.

Verse 9 describes a group of people in Philadelphia as "the synagogue of Satan."

And it further goes on to say that they "claim to be Jews though they are not."

Now, the Lord is speaking of those who are ethnically Jews here.

And he cannot deny them their racial origin.

But what He does do here is to deny their Judaism any connection with the true church.

Congregation, what you will find often throughout the New Testament, and John says it in Revelation also, is the teaching that the privileges and promises given to Old Testament Israel have been inherited by the Christian church.

We already saw such a connection with the phrase about "the key of David."

And here we meet it again as those who don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are called part of the Synagogue of Satan.

It was an appropriate title for them.

Those Jews were quite devilish in the terrible way they attacked the early Christians.

We only need to refer to the other letter this phrase "synagogue of Satan" is used.

That is in Revelation 2 verse 9 in the letter to the church at Smyrna, a church which had an equally difficult time with the Jewish community there.

That was the church whose minister, Polycarp, was martyred by a mob led by Jews!

This would have made life for the Philadelphian believers quite difficult.

Not only had they lost family and friends amongst the Jewish community with their conversions - now those family and friends were actively try to destroy them.

But what those Jews are trying to do to these Christians will be turned back on them.

For much as they are trying to get those Christians to bend the knee before their rules and regulations - or at least before the worship of the Emperor - it will actually be they who, one day, will bow before the Christians!

Mind you, it will be a time that is too late for their salvation.

They will see then, to their eternal regret, how badly they had it all wrong.

Congregation, HERE IS THE CHURCH THAT STANDS TALL.

These are those who are looking up - and they're keeping it up.

And they're those who are being encouraged by the really big picture.

Verse 10 draws that out for them.

The Lord says there, "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."

There will be a time of persecution unlike they have had so far.

A time, though, that has often occurred throughout church history.

Even now they're occurring to believers in certain parts of this world.

Well, those Philadelphian believers were about to undergo such a wave of anti-Christian persecution.

They were soon to experience an anti-gospel fury sweeping through the entire then-known world.

Their loyalty to Christ would be tested to the max.

So they mustn't forget the big picture!

For when the Lord speaks about their being kept it's not about their being somehow saved from going through it but rather Christ's promise of keeping His Church to the very end.

This is the echo of Matthew 28 verse 20.

Because there is this very promise.

There the Lord Jesus declares, "And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age."

This is what is confirmed by the third aspect in this text.

For the verses 11 and 12 tell us that HERE ARE THE SAINTS WHO WON'T FALL.

Saying such a thing might seem presumptuous.

How can we say they won't trip up?

And how can we know that some - if not many - won't fall into the devil's trap?

There are those churches that speak of black-sliders.

They teach that there are believers who will stop believing.

Things become too difficult for them.

Or they're seduced by the sights and sounds of this world.

But then we must ask if they were truly believers in the first place.

Because it's the saints who are the object of this letter.

And we must also realise of these verses that it's the Lord who's writing this letter.

He knows who He's addressing.

These are those He's already acknowledged as those who've proved their faith.

"I know your deeds," He said in verse 8.

So to exhort them to hold on to what they have makes a lot of sense.

To encourage them not to let go of their crowns fits right in.

And to promise them as He does in verse 12 definitely shows us these are the words of the Son of God.

For there the Lord uses two vivid word pictures to assure them of how precious they are to Him.

The first of these we note there is the image of being a pillar in the temple of God.

Now, we can recognise quickly which 'temple' this is.

Because it's not about the actual physical temple in Jerusalem.

This is the spiritual temple.

This is describing God's being amongst His people.

This is about the fellowship He has with us.

And this also points us to the temple above.

For there is the heavenly Jerusalem where God and the Lamb are.

There is where believers will spend all eternity.

But what about the pillar?

Well, whichever way you look at it, a pillar is a vital part of a building's structure.

Without pillars it cannot stand.

And with pillars it represents what will abide and stand firm.

We use the same imagery today.

We speak about well-known community figures as pillars of society.

But, dear friend, are you a pillar of your local church?

Are you someone who's a vital part of this congregation?

Do you give all you can for the cause of Christ in this place?

You see, there are some people who never think of the Church until they want something out of it.

They want the Church to support them - not the other way round.

You might be thinking here, 'Yeah, I know people like that, and real wasters they are!'

But could this also be you?

Friend, you might not be an obvious user of the Church.

But there are also those who use the Church for a certain status and affirmation.

There's a sense of tradition or comfort the Church gives them.

Yet, as to what they give the Church, that's something else.

This will be the type of person found out when the church does go through a trial.

He will be the one who won't hang around when he's not getting anything out of church anymore.

You know, that's an interesting aspect with small churches.

People like that don't tend to join them.

Because in a small church you have to be committed.

When I ministered in a large congregation, one of the occasional visitors said to me, "I like this church!"

Well, that got me wondering.

Was he going to tell me about the depth and application of the preaching?

Would he comment on the warm fellowship of the members?

Was there another spiritual aspect?

But what he said next was this: "I like it because I can sit at the back and no one notices me!"

Woh!

That certainly doesn't happen here, does it?

Unless, of course, we have a visitor who does sit in the very back and who takes off straight after the worship service!

And that's despite a number of members who did try to talk with him and seek further fellowship with him.

But he was noticed!

And we have to acknowledge that that can mean people don't come back to worship with us.

It's a little too close.

A bit too much like family.

And as for the preaching and the psalm singing?

It's just a bit too much of the Bible for some!

We can begin to see why Philadelphia was a faithful congregation.

Rather small and united in the Lord than large and divided.

Then there is the second word picture in verse 12.

This is the writing on the believer of the name of God and the name of the city of God and the new name from God.

You see, now it's absolutely clear they are the Lord's.

We can compare this to when in the ancient world there was a new king.

For immediately coins would be issued with his name stamped upon them.

Coinage was the sign of kingship.

And the name was the sign of ownership.

Dear believer, you are like the coin of God.

You have to have your owner's name stamped on you!

Your life should be such that all will see whose property you are.

Which is what they certainly saw of the saints in Philadelphia.

HERE ARE THE SAINTS WHO WON'T FALL.

No wonder this is such a complimentary letter!

They were living pillars!

They stood firm and they stood out for their Lord.

It's interesting that in later years when Islam swept across Asia Minor, for many years Philadelphia stood as the last bastion of Christianity.

And when it fell, it did not fall through weakness or lack of courage.

It fell because it was betrayed by its fellow-Christians of Constantinople, who were jealous of its honour.

Even today there are still churches in Philadelphia.

Whether or not those churches are as true and faithful as the church receiving this letter we cannot know.

But unlike five of those other churches who received letters there is still a Christian presence there and in Smyrna.

Congregation, is that part of the legacy of these faithful saints?

It could be.

But we don't need to go to the other side of the world to see what they've left us.

Because as we are in Christ we also share that right here and now.

In our looking to the Lord where He's put us we are witnesses to Him.

And then these promises are ours too.

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

Dear Lord, we thank You again for the preaching of Your Word.

This is the open door no one can shut.

And this is again the way that has been opened up for us because this is the gospel.

We pray that many may have heard this good news today.

But we also pray that many will have been changed by this good news today.

May there be even more living like the Philadelphian believers.

In Your saving Name we pray, Amen.