

REVELATION

Part 8: “To Philadelphia”

Revelation 3:7–13

By David A. Ritchie

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Summary

In this sermon on Revelation 3:7-13, Pastor David A. Ritchie explores the letter to the church in Philadelphia, revealing its relevance to believers facing persecution and misunderstanding today. Through historical context and biblical analysis, this sermon illuminates the struggles of the early Christians in Philadelphia while also offering practical insights for standing firm in faith amidst opposition. Highlighting Christ's promises of identity, belonging, and eternal hope, Pastor Ritchie empowers listeners to find strength in Christ's unshakeable kingdom and persevere as faithful witnesses in a challenging world. Join us as we uncover timeless truths for navigating persecution and embracing our identity as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Scripture Reading

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. ‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’” (Revelation 3:7–13, ESV).

Introduction

Have you ever felt completely misunderstood? Maybe you underwent some type of major life transition, like moving to a new city, a new school, or a new social job.

But no matter what you did, your peers would not accept you. No matter how hard you tried, the people with authority over you seemed set against you. Maybe you felt like no one was even willing to take the time to understand you.

When this happens, it's natural to question yourself and doubt yourself. You can ask questions like, "Who am I anymore? Is what I'm doing here even worthwhile?"

If you've ever experienced such a situation, you know how far just one word of comfort can go. You know how one kind word of encouragement can change your entire trajectory and outlook on life.

In reading the New Testament, it's crucial to know that many early Christians who lived in the first century would have felt completely misunderstood by their neighbors in the Roman world.

Romans would accuse Christians of being cannibals. Why? Well, every week, when Christians gathered together, they would receive the bread and wine of the sacrament and call it the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But rather than taking the time to understand what the Lord's Supper meant, Romans found it easier to accuse them of being cannibals who ate human flesh in their weird rituals.

But that wasn't the only way that Christians were misunderstood. They were branded as "atheists" because they rejected the worship of pagan Gods. They were considered traitors to Rome because they would not offer prayers to Caesar. For these reasons, many people in the ancient world rejected and even actively persecuted Christians. As a result, many Christians would have felt profoundly misunderstood and alone in this world.

Maybe you have even felt misunderstood for your faith as well. We live in an increasingly secularized society where people are grouped into ever more polarized tribes based on their political ideology. And if you don't fit neatly and loyally into one of those tribes because of your faith, you will be mistrusted and even maligned.

For example, the people of God have believed for thousands of years that God has made humankind male and female in his image (Gen 1:28). Christians believe that God has made men and women both equally and differently, and we believe our differences are a part of the goodness of God's creation. We have believed for centuries that marriage is a life-long, enduring covenant union between one man and one woman that mysteriously reflects the love between Christ and his church (Eph 5:32). But today, in certain circles and tribes, if you believe and cherish those beliefs, you will be branded a bigot who has no place in polite society.

Yet, at the same exact time, Christians have a centuries-long history of breaking down walls of hostility that stand between people of different ethnicities (Eph 2:11-21). We have a long history of welcoming the foreigner and the stranger and caring for the least of these (Heb 13:2; Matt 25:35). Yet, in our current political climate, to stand against

racism or to promote caring for refugees and the poor is to risk being labeled woke or even Marxist.

However, to be consistently faithful to Jesus will put us at odds with the kingdoms of this world. Or to use the language of Revelation, walking in the way of Lamb will necessarily put us in tension with the Babylons of this world. And we should not be surprised by this. We will always be what the Apostle Peter calls elsewhere in the New Testament “elect exiles” (1 Pet 1:1). We are chosen and beloved by God. But we are not at home in this world, for our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20).

In today's passage, Jesus speaks to an ancient church that felt persecuted, maligned, and constantly misunderstood. They were a community of people who were a cultural minority and lived in constant awareness of their weakness. Yet, Christ wants them to know, as he wants us to know, that it is precisely when we feel powerless that, in Christ, we are stronger than we could ever know.

So, let's dive deeper into today's text.

1.) The Church of Philadelphia

Our passage begins, *“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens’”* (Rev 3:7).

You might think, “Oh Philadelphia! Finally, there is a city I recognize is in this book!”

But no, this is not the city in Pennsylvania known for Ben Franklin, the Liberty Bell, and cheesesteak sandwiches. Like all the other churches in Revelation, chapters 2 through 3, Jesus is speaking directly to a first-century congregation in Asia Minor (or modern-day Turkey) [[show ruins of ancient Philadelphia](#)].

This ancient city of Philadelphia was first founded as a Greek colony in Asia Minor. It was built along a major roadway and became a city famous for the exporting of Greek culture and language.

Toward the end of the first century, Philadelphia was also known for having suffered a massive earthquake that devastated the city. This event was a severe natural disaster, and at the time John was writing Revelation, it would have been a moment deeply lodged in the living memory of many of the residents of the city.

In fact, the destruction and loss caused by this earthquake were so immense that the Roman Empire allowed the city of Philadelphia to forgo paying imperial taxes for a season. That basically never happened and shows the utter extent of Philadelphia's devastation.

We are in tax season right now, and many of you might even be working on your taxes right now (or at least you should be). But can you imagine a scenario in which the IRS

took one look at your life and say, “Yeah, it looks like you’ve had it hard enough. You know what? This year is on us.” Whatever you would have gone through to get that response must have been pretty bad. That’s how bad the city of ancient Philadelphia has suffered recently.

But at the same time, the church of Philadelphia seems to be in a place of uncertainty and suffering. In more ways than one, the ground seems to be moving beneath them.

We can infer from this today’s text that the church of Philadelphia is numerically small. They hold no place of significant social standing or power. Yet, instead of being ignored by the larger population around them, they are being bullied by their neighbors.

As we’ve seen in earlier sermons, the Romans often persecuted Christians because they would not acknowledge the divinity of Caesar or worship the glory of Rome. But in the case of Philadelphia, the chief persecutors of the Christians were not Romans but Jews. In fact, in the first few decades of the Christian church, the most violent persecutions tended to come from Jewish religious leaders who rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

Now, why was this the case? Well, the Jews are a people who have also suffered a lot. They suffered slavery in Egypt, exile in Babylon, and they suffered as they endured being conquered and reconquered by a succession of empires like Persia, Greece, and Rome.

But even in their suffering, they took great pride in knowing that they alone were God’s chosen people. They were the one nation that was given the law and promises of God. And they believed there would be a day when the kingdom of God would come on earth, and people from all the nations who once oppressed them would bow down before them as God’s chosen people.

And that is why the early Christians offended and even outraged these Jewish religious leaders. Christians believed that the promises of God were not just for the Jewish people but for people of all nations. They believed they could be grafted into God’s holy people (Rom 11:17), not because they obeyed all the regulations of God’s law, but because they trusted in Jesus as their Savior (Eph 2:8–9).

From the Jewish perspective, Christian churches were heretical communities filled with people from unclean gentile nations who believed in a false Messiah. So many Jewish leaders wanted the Christian movement to be purged from the world, and they were willing to justify any means necessary to make life difficult for Christians.

Sometimes, this included violence and intimidation. Sometimes, this included bringing false accusations against Christians to the Roman authorities, which resulted in Christians being imprisoned and enduring lengthy and costly trials.

New Testament scholars estimate that at the end of the first century, as John was writing the book of Revelation, the Jewish community in Philadelphia numbered in the thousands.

Meanwhile, the entire church of Philadelphia was likely less than fifty people. Against such hatred, hostility, and suspicion, can you imagine how vulnerable you would have felt as a Christian in ancient Philadelphia? Can you imagine how much you would have been tempted with discouragement and simply to give up following Jesus?

So, too, I wonder if you have ever felt utterly overwhelmed and weary? Have you ever felt utterly discouraged in your faith, so much so that you wondered if following Jesus was too hard and not worth it?

If you are in that place, know that Jesus is not disappointed in your weakness. He is not threatened by your weariness. Our pain does not drive Christ away. When we are heavy laden he calls us to himself that we may find rest for our souls.

And that is exactly what we will see in the next point.

2.) Christ's Encouragement for the Church of Philadelphia

The church of Philadelphia knows they are a bullied minority with zero power and social standing. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ speaks directly to this tiny congregation and tells them, "I see you, and I know you. I see your faithful works that no one else can see. I know you feel weak—but I am strong. And my strength will be perfected in your weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

In his own words, Jesus speaks gently to this church: *"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name" (Rev 3:8).*

On the outside, it may not seem like the church of Philadelphia has done anything impressive. It doesn't seem like they are growing exponentially. They aren't celebrating multiple baptisms. And they almost certainly don't yet own a building.

But even when it is difficult, even when it costs them dearly, even when the power of hell is set against them, they are clinging to Christ. They are holding onto his every word. And they are enduring with faithfulness.

But what of those who have relentlessly persecuted the church? Christ tells Christians of Philadelphia those who oppose you are not my people. Those who trust in me are my beloved ones who I will never leave or forsake.

"Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth" (Rev 3:9–10).

Jesus tells his church, there are Jews who think they are my people only because of their race and their bloodline. However, simply being part of the family of Abraham is not what makes someone mine. Having the faith of Abraham is what makes you mine (Gal 3:7). It is not your blood that makes you my people. It is my blood that makes you my people. So know that you are my beloved. One day, your enemies will bow before you. And because you have kept my word, I will keep you.

Christ even tells the Philadelphians that he is opening a door for them that no one can shut. The open door is an opportunity—despite their weakness and persecution—to advance the gospel. Jesus is saying that even in this unlikely place, many will come to know salvation, and the church will prevail. For the word of God is more powerful than the powers of this world!

Jesus is saying to his people that even when they feel like things are only getting worse and more difficult, victory is coming because he is coming. He says, in verse 11, *“I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown”* (Rev 3:11).

It has always been a temptation to forsake our birthright and to succumb to the pressures of the world. It has always been a temptation for the people of God to compromise with those who would be persecutors.

But here we are reminded that even at our weakest, even when it looks like the world is winning, those who are in Christ are royalty. Regardless of how the world sees the church, we already have a crown. Our task is simply not to forsake that crown for a lesser glory.

As I meditated on verse 11 from this passage today, I found myself thinking of the early church legend of St. Catherine of Alexandria, who lived at the very height of Roman persecutions against Christians. Catherine was a noble young woman who came from great wealth and privilege. When she was fourteen, she converted to Christianity and devoted her life to Christ. As she grew older, she garnered a reputation for a striking beauty that was only matched by her brilliance as a scholar and her purity of character.

In fact, Catherine was so remarkable that she caught the attention of the Roman emperor Maxentius, who desired for Catherine to marry him and rule alongside him as his empress. He offered her power and wealth and protection, yet Catherine denied his advances. She refused to join herself with a man of such cruelty and pride. Catherine rejected his imperial claim to divinity because she was allegiant to Christ alone. And she believed and proclaimed that Jesus—not Caesar—is Lord.

Even when the emperor brought forth the most impressive pagan scholars and philosophers to debate her and convince her to forsake her faith in Christ, Catherine easily dismantled their arguments and put them to open shame.

So, in spite, the emperor imprisoned her. Yet, through her faithful witness and preaching in prison, Catherine converted many to faith in Christ, even members of

Maxentius's imperial court. Even though she was bound in prison, the gospel word went forth unbound.

Eventually, the vengeful and humiliated Maxentius decided Catherine must die. He hoped her execution would strike fear into all who would deny his will. So Maxentius wanted her execution to be cruel for the way she humiliated him. Thus, he commanded Catherine to be stretched over a spiked breaking wheel, one of the most painful forms of torture and death in the ancient world [[St. Catherine by Raphael](#)]. In fact, this device later became known as "Catherine's Wheel," and the presence of this spiked wheel is usually how St. Catherine is identified in classic Christian art, like in this painting by Raphael.

However, as Catherine was placed on the breaking wheel, Christian legend says the wheel itself was broken. Humiliated again, Maxentius ordered Catherine to be beheaded by a sword. Thus, Catherine of Alexandria was martyred for her faith and allegiance to Christ.

To the world Catherine looks foolish and weak in her death. Why would she choose martyrdom rather than earthly power? But God often chooses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. He chooses what is weak to shame the powerful (1 Cor 1:25). And as Emperor Maxentius knew, Catherine already had power greater than anything he could give her. She had a grace and a royalty that he could not take away.

Last fall, my family and I toured the Meadows Museum on the SMU campus in Dallas. It's one of the best collections of Spanish Baroque art in the States. And I was particularly moved by a painting of St. Catherine I had never seen or studied before.

The name of the painting is *St. Catherine of Alexandria Dominating The Emperor Maxentius* [[show St. Catherine of Alexandria by Coello](#)] by Claudio Coello. In this painting, Coello depicts Catherine not in death but in victory. She is at once identified by her spiked wheel. But notice she is unafraid of it. She even gently rests her elbow on it.

She gracefully holds the palm leaves of a martyr with one hand, and with the other, she holds a sword. This sword would have been very the one that ended her life. However, Coello chooses to depict Catherine as if she is taking the sword away from her enemy. By her faithful witness, she has disarmed her enemy. She stands over him in calm, peaceful victory, as the emperor fearfully writhes on the ground like a vanquished serpent.

This isn't what happened in Catherine's story. But like the book of Revelation itself, Coello's painting unveils the true spiritual reality of Catherine's witness.

Coello's St. Catherine becomes a picture of who the church is called to be; a church that refuses to be seduced by the powers of this world, even as kings and kingdoms that vie for our heart's affection and allegiance.

Catherine prevails even in her weakness. Her death is not defeat. Her faithful witness is victory. For though Catherine lost her life, she did not lose her crown.

So, too, like Catherine and like the Christians of ancient Philadelphia, may we endure with steadfastness, may we keep God's word, and may we refuse to let this world seize the crown that is ours in Christ.

3.) Christ's Promise to the Church of Philadelphia

To the church of Philadelphia, a city that has been shaken and threatened by destructive earthquakes, Christ makes a promise. He tells them, "I will establish you a pillar that is unshakable. For your hope is in the kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28). Though the kingdoms of this world will totter and fall, and though the ground will move beneath the mightiest of empires, you will be a pillar. And you will not be just any pillar. You will be a pillar in the house of my God."

Look again at verse 12: *"The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name"* (Rev 3:12).

Look at how these promises stack on top of one another. Jesus tells his people, "If you overcome, more than being a pillar in the house of God, you will have God's name written on you. You will have the name of the city of God written on you. I will do this myself so that no one doubts you belong to me."

This promise is by no means new. It is rooted back in the words of the Old Testament Psalms. In fact, Psalm 87 records what would have been one of the stranger promises and more unexpected prophecies of the Old Testament. It is a song about Zion; that is, it is about Jerusalem and, more specifically, the Jerusalem temple. The Psalm speaks of the beauty of the city of God and the glory of the city of God.

But what makes this Psalm strange is that it foretells a day when people from the nations will come into Jerusalem and find a home there. This was odd because, for most of the history of the Old Testament, God's people are typically trying to keep the nations out of the holy city and out of the holy temple.

However, Psalm 87 speaks of a day when God will accomplish something so miraculous and unexpected that even people from Rahab (which is Egypt) and Babylon will have a place in this Jerusalem. Even the Philistines, the ancient enemy of the Israelite kingdom, find a place of belonging in the holy city!

God declares there will be a day that comes when people from unclean gentile nations that once enslaved and exiled and oppressed God's people will somehow be united to God's people and even be considered natural-born citizens of the city of God.

Here is Psalm 87 in full: *"On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;*

behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush— ‘This one was born there,’ they say. And of Zion it shall be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her’; for the Most High himself will establish her. The LORD records as he registers the peoples, ‘This one was born there.’ Singers and dancers alike say, ‘All my springs are in you’” (Psalm 87:1–7).

Nations who were once enemies of the people of God will one day have a place in the city of God.

Thus, to the gentile Christians of Philadelphia, Christ promises, no matter what you are facing, no matter how weak you feel, no matter how misunderstood and rejected you might feel from the world around you, you belong to me. You have a hope that is unshakeable, and a belonging that cannot be taken away.

For the people of God are not given mere asylum in the New Jerusalem that is coming. You are not given a temporary work visa or a green card. If you are born again in Christ, you are a natural-born citizen of New Jerusalem.

How can this be?

Conclusion

Well, Christ, too, was misunderstood. Jesus was also rejected by men. Despite his perfect righteousness, he was crucified and died on the cross for our sins. And like any criminal of his day, when he was crucified, he died outside the gates of Jerusalem (Heb 13:12).

But it was because he died outside of the old Jerusalem that we could be brought into the New Jerusalem. For Jesus is the true king from the line of David, the one who holds the key and opens wide the gates of the city of God to all who believe and trust in him. And through his sacrificial death, he has opened a door of salvation that no one can shut.

In of ourselves and our own works, we are unworthy to come into the city or ascend the hill of God. But we come in the name of one with clean hands and a pure heart (Ps 24:3-4). We come to God in the name of Jesus Christ, who alone is holy and faithful and true.

In this life, we live as those between the ages, in the already and not yet. We live in a world that is not our home, for our citizenship is in heaven. But even when we feel homeless and hopeless and out of place, may we know that Christ knows us. May we trust that he sees us. And may we rest in the promise that his city awaits us.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1. Read Revelation 3:7-13 out loud.
2. The ancient church of Philadelphia seems to have been numerically small and weak in terms of social influence and power. Yet, despite being persecuted and misunderstood, they kept the word of Christ. How can we apply their example of endurance and faithfulness to our lives when facing similar challenges in our faith journey today?
3. This passage emphasizes the importance of standing firm in our faith and refusing to compromise with the pressures of the world, even in the face of persecution. How can we actively resist the temptation to conform to societal norms or compromise our beliefs for the sake of acceptance or approval? What are some practical ways we can strengthen our resolve to remain faithful to Christ in all circumstances?
4. Christ's promises to the church of Philadelphia that he will make them pillars in the temple of God and write on them the name of God and the name of the new Jerusalem. How does this promise of identity and belonging in Christ encourage us to persevere in our faith, especially when we feel marginalized or rejected by society for our Christian beliefs? What practical steps can we take to embrace and live out this identity in our daily lives?