

The Letter to the Church at Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

by Jeffrey Brett

"And to the angel of the Church in Philadelphia write: These things saith He that is holy, He that is true, He that hath the key of David, He that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and 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. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches".

A going back to what was at the beginning

Are you aware of the fact that it is far easier to go with the stream than against it? There is very little effort needed to go with the stream, but anyone who tries to swim or row against a strong tide very soon realises that strength, stamina and endurance are needed to keep going or to make any progress at all. It is exactly the same in Christianity. Just to go along with what is popular, or the latest trend, is far easier than making a stand for Christ, when all around everyone is giving up or going away.

When we study the letters to the seven Churches, we notice a downward trend most of the time. Even Ephesus was said to have fallen, and when we get to Laodicea, we see the dreadful end to which that departure at the beginning leads. God, however, always keeps for Himself those who truly love Him, even if they are only a few, a remnant in the midst of many nominal Christians. We come across this in the preceding letters, but here in Philadelphia we have a remarkable going back to what was at the beginning, at least in character if not in size. Here we have the second of the seven Churches, to whom the Lord Jesus has nothing to speak against. The other was Smyrna.

This is one of the most encouraging passages of Scripture to anyone who really loves the Lord Jesus, and wants to maintain His interests. It tells us that the Lord Jesus has His eyes upon any who are seeking to go on for Him, apart from all the corruption, formalism and indifference to the claims of Christ, that is in the profession of Christianity today. It speaks of a condition where Christ is everything and in all, and all that is not true to Him is refused.

We should understand that the last four letters to the Churches speak of things that go on, right until the coming of the Lord Jesus for His Church. This is because they all contain references to the coming of Christ. We have Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, all describing conditions found amongst the Lord's people, right up to the end. So we conclude that today the Lord Jesus can see saints of Philadelphian character. We can be certain that there are such in the world, and there will be until the end. Our desire

should be to be found numbered with them. They show spiritual and moral features that please the Lord Jesus

It is perfectly true that a faithful remnant was found in Thyatira. There were a few faithful individuals in Sardis, and there is the possibility of someone hearing the Lord's voice and opening the door to Him even in Laodicea. But Philadelphia speaks of an even further revival. Here there is not just a correction of gross abuses and terrible error as to the truth of God, but a return to the original spiritual features of the Church. To keep the word of Christ and not to deny His name, to know His love, and to keep the word of His patience, is really to have the spiritual features that marked the Church at the beginning. The meaning of Philadelphia also, 'the love of the brethren', would show that a genuine love of one another, as a product of the love of the Lord Jesus to us, was seen actively in their midst. The wonderful revivals that began early in the nineteenth century, which led to the recovery of many great truths which for centuries had been neglected, and which also led to an almost worldwide evangelical outreach, would historically refer to a Philadelphia period. However what comes out in this letter is not so much a period in the Church's history, but spiritual, moral *features* that are pleasing to the Lord Jesus.

The Holy and the True

It is perfectly in accord with this that the Lord Jesus here presents Himself as "the holy and the true", and as "having the key of David". Unlike all the other letters, He speaks here of what He is in His Person, not some office that He fills. One result of seeing the Lord Jesus in this way would be that we would be set apart from everything that is corrupt and formal. When He was here on earth, He was indeed God's Holy One, but here He is presented not as He was on earth, but as He now is as a Man in heaven. All that we are as being sinful and sinners was dealt with by Him on the cross, and has been removed for ever from the sight of God. But the One who at Calvary was "made sin" has so perfectly dealt with sin (2 Cor. 5:21), that He is now seen as "the Holy One" in heaven.

The key of David

The various Churches have proved themselves to be untrue because they were not maintained in the character of "golden lamps" set to shine in this world. They have not been genuine in their profession. But Christ is "the True". In whatever way we see Him, He was absolutely genuine, whether it was Godward or manward. He is the true Light (John 1:9), the true Bread (John 6:32), the true Vine (John 15:1), the true God (1 John 5:20), and the true Witness (Rev. 3:14). In whatever way we look at Him, He is the perfect setting forth of that truth according to God. Everything that God had in mind as regards man has been seen and displayed in Him to perfection.

The title "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shall shut, and shuts and no one shall open", is clearly a reference to Isaiah 22. There we have, under the figure of Shebna and Eliakim, the complete rejection of all that was offensive to God on the one hand, and the establishment of what would be to God's glory on the other. "Behold, Jehovah will hurl thee with the force of a mighty man, and will cover thee entirely. Rolling thee up completely, He will roll thee as a ball into a wide country: there shalt thou die, and there shall be the chariots of thy glory, shame of thy lord's house!" (Isa. 22:17-18). It would be difficult to find a more striking figure of rejection than this. But He also speaks of "my servant" who has the key of the house of David upon his shoulder, and who opens and shuts so that no one can reverse what he does (Isa. 22:20-22). Christ sustains all the glory of the house of David. The Lord Jesus, as having died and risen from the dead, and having gone into heaven, has secured everything for God's glory.

An open door

The works of Philadelphia are very precious in the sight of the Lord Jesus. We cannot miss the repetition of "my" in every case. "Thou hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (v. 8), and then again in verse 10, "Thou hast kept the word of my patience". It is because of this that He says, "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength". If the Lord Jesus places before us an open

door of opportunity, then there is no power of Satan that can stop it on the one hand and on the other no need of human support to maintain it. Because of this we should all covet this "little strength". The fact that what is valued by Christ is being kept by the believer is that which produces this little strength. In the believer is not a great show of power in the world that will cause a stir and perhaps move hundreds emotionally, but a spiritual power exercised in cherishing all that is infinitely great and precious in regard to Christ and His Church.

His word, and His name

His word is the expression of Himself and the revelation of God as Father. He came into the world to declare God, and no one except the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, could do that. His word is not quite the same as His words, or His commandments which although very important have to do largely with our relationships with one another. His word, however, is that revelation which came into this world in His *Person* as the Son. The One who is equal with God as to His being, but having become a Man, is able to bring to us the full revelation of God. In one sense there is no truth greater than this. What could be greater than the full knowledge of God?

His name suggests that He is personally absent. He is no longer in this world but has gone into heaven as a glorified Man. So this term brings before us all the blessing that flows down to us from heaven in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. It recognises that down here we have nothing, but up there we have everything, because we have Him in the presence of God. All the blessings we have, the forgiveness of sins, being justified before God, being brought into favour and knowing God, are all dependent on His being alive in heaven. We have no priest on earth, but our Great Priest has passed through the heavens to appear in the presence of God for us. The great truth of His Lordship is based on God having raised Him from the dead and having given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. The fact that He is the Head of the body, the Church and all the truth of the mystery which Paul writes of, are all dependent on His being in heaven. The "not denying my name" would involve all this, and our responsibility to confess His name requires us to maintain everything that is due to that name now.

The word of His patience

"Because thou hast kept the word of my patience" — the whole story of His rejection by the world is bound up in that statement. His rights have all been refused here, and He sits at God's right hand until His enemies are made His footstool. He is waiting in patience to have His rights and glory in another day, and His saints in Philadelphia are marked out by keeping the testimony of His patience. They do not reign like kings in a world where He had nothing but a cross and a grave; they wait for One who will set aside the whole political system of this world by His own power and kingdom. This world hopes that things will get better. All around we see politicians and governments striving to this end. But those who are keeping the word of His patience realise that these will all fail. Only the Lord Jesus can solve all the problems in this world and they live according to this hope.

Before He does this, there will be a period of unprecedented trial upon the whole habitable world, to try them that dwell on the earth. How vain it is to trust in the stability of anything that men are doing, knowing that the Bible teaches quite clearly that it will all end in judgement. The Church at Philadelphia, and also every true believer, will be kept from this time of trouble. We will all be taken from this world at the coming of the Lord Jesus for His Church to receive us unto Himself. So those who keep the word of His patience are kept out of the turmoil and instability that marks the world all around us. To such He assures an opened door, which no power, earthly or infernal can ever shut. So the Christian perseveres in his witness and service for Christ.

I come quickly

How blessed to hear Him say, "Behold, I come quickly". This does not refer to a period of time, but it is the attitude of love that expects it to happen at any moment. Then there is the exhortation to "hold that fast

which thou hast, that no man take thy crown". The Philadelphian values so much what is precious to the heart of Christ, that it is likened to "a crown". Those who hold fast in this way will be marked out from those all around, and are reckoned worthy of honour in His sight. Although what is held fast is not specified, those who have it know that He is coming quickly.

This speaking then in an individual way to "him that overcometh" emphasises the fact that each one of us is responsible to do this. It is not a matter of what somebody else is doing. An overcomer has Christ before him alone and regulates everything in his life, in order to be approved by Him.

A pillar in the temple of My God

And so he has a reward: "I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and my new name". Notice the four-fold repetition of "my God".

The idea in Scripture of a pillar is something stable and decorative. You remember Solomon's glorious temple had two pillars at the entrance called Jachin and Boaz (1 Ki. 7:21). Jachin means, "He will establish", and Boaz means, "In Him is strength". This gives us a clear idea of what God thinks about the overcomer and assures him that He will give him that place in a coming day when everything will utter His glory.

I will write upon him the name of My God

We usually think about the Lord Jesus as the great Speaker for God, but here He is the great Writer. He is the One who even now is writing Christ upon our hearts in the power of the Spirit, in order that we might be true "epistles of Christ" (2 Cor. 3:3). What is spoken by Christ is the word of God, but what is written of Christ is that same word worked out in our lives so that it can be "known and read by all men" (2 Cor. 3:2). But this reward looks forward to a day when that writing will be perfect and complete and will be used by God to display His glory eternally. We often see people today wearing T-shirts with various names and images on them, but how marvellous to think that I can move through this life with the name of God written not just by words but by actions, on me. So much so that others can see Christ in me.

The name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem

The name of the city of God, "the New Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God" brings before us a city where everything is pure and transparent and will be able to display the glory of God eternally. These Scriptures emphasise that all the hopes of a true lover of Christ look to the future, to a heavenly scene, not an earthly one. There everything that man has accomplished will have come to an end in judgement. In its place will be everything that God has done through the Lord Jesus Christ and because of this will never go wrong. God's work will always be living and fresh, sin and death and sorrow will never be known there, and it will go on for ever.

My new name

Perhaps the last of the four promises is to our hearts the sweetest: "I will write upon him my new name". He had a name that was given to Him at His birth: "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). That name expresses His ability to deal with every need that we have in a way that satisfies God. But this is not exactly the name that is written on the overcomer. It is a *new* name. Sin and death have come in here and made everything old. He has remedied all that by His death and resurrection. His new name has to do with everything that is entirely and eternally new. It speaks, too, of God's answer to His becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Philippians 2:9 goes on to say, "Wherefore God hath also highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name". We

see then that a new name carries with it the appreciation of the giver for what the one who receives it has done. How wonderful it will be to be so thought of by Christ, that He writes on me His new name, and counts me worthy of displaying that name eternally. This, if nothing else, should give our hearts that impetus to go in for being an overcomer. Let each of us face up to the challenge of whether I have an ear that is listening to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church.