

The Church at Philadelphia: The Feeble Church (Part 1)

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Date: 03 July 2013

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[0 : 00] Let me go ahead and read the text. Revelation chapter 3 starting with verse 7 through 13.

! And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ! These things says he who is holy, he who is true, he who has the key of David, he who opens and no one shuts and shuts and no one opens. I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it, for you have a little strength, have kept my word, and have not denied my name. Indeed, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say they are Jews and are not, but lie. Indeed, I will make them come and worship before your feet to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept my command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly. Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out no more.

I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, and the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and I will write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. All right, there's the letter, the sixth letter.

Sixth out of seven, the letter written to the churches is the sixth church in Asia Minor, Philadelphia, Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, is what the word basically means. And it's been named, keeping in our scheme, the feeble church. And I'll go ahead and tell you, not feeble spiritually, but feeble in other ways, but the feeble church. All right, now, the letter to the church at Philadelphia really stands out among all the other letters in the church of the seven. This one stands out for a pretty obvious reason. There is not even a hint of rebuke in this letter. We could look at Smyrna and say that, you know, that perhaps there's no rebuke there, but there were some problems at Smyrna, but there's no rebuke here. Now, you might be thinking, well, what does feeble then have to do with it? Or having a little strength. You may have heard me say that or read that a moment ago when I was reading through the passage. That's a different thing. That's not a rebuke. It's not a spiritual weakness or something they've come behind on. And so, the church really has, I think, not even a hint of any rebuke. And it really seems that the Lord has only praise for this church. I think there's a reason for that. And it goes back to something we studied or I've mentioned early, early on in our study. And that is when we kind of ran through the idea that each of the churches, the letters to the churches, each of the churches, the seven churches represent seven eras in church history. I would say ages in church history, but it's the church age as a whole, but there are eras or segments of church history. And so these letters are prophetic of those ages. We're in one right now. I believe it's the last one. I think it's Laodicea, but we'll get to

Laodicea. Not next time, but eventually. We're going to take a couple of Wednesdays to look at Philadelphia. All right, so each of the churches represent ages or periods, eras in church history.

[4 : 24] The Church of Philadelphia, just to remind you of something I said early on, this church was prophetic of that era in church history that is commonly known for revival. Revival, spiritual awakening.

And like the days, you know, I'm talking about the days of George Whitefield and the Wesleys and of course Moody and Jonathan Edwards, many other personalities, some lesser known. And so it kind of represents that period of time. It also, by the way, represents a period in church history when the church experienced the birth of worldwide missions, what is commonly referred to as the modern missions movement that I think effectively started with William Carey. I think, I really believe that you can pinpoint William Carey as kind of the father of modern missions. And God used him

mightily, and then many others have come after him. But you have William Carey and Adoniram Judson and David Brainerd in our own country, probably less known by most of us here. But if you ever have a chance to get his biography, it's incredible how God used David Brainerd and David Livingstone. And we could go on and on with the list. And so the Great Awakening was, without a doubt, a glorious time in church history. It wasn't only experienced in our country, but experienced in many other places in the world. The Church of Philadelphia, oh, and by the way, represents that glorious time in church history. And yet, we need those times again. We need those times again. I don't know that we'll ever, especially if we believe that these letters are prophetic of ages in the church, I don't think we'll ever have an age of Philadelphia again. We can have pockets of it. I mean, for example, our own country could experience revival. National Revival and Great Awakening. We very much couldn't think we ought to pray for it and do whatever God leads us to do to be a part of it. But to have that age again during the Great Awakenings, I don't know that we'll see that again. But we would like to have those days here. You can have it in Bartlesville. You can have it in Oklahoma. You can have that in the United States. We ought to be praying for that. Now, the Church of Philadelphia, then, was the kind of church we need to be. We need to be. Any church needs to be, like the Church of Philadelphia. They had, you know, you could really identify it kind of threefold. They had an outward vision, evangelism. They had an inward vision. This is pretty easy. Inward vision, spiritual growth, revival. They had an upward vision, all right? An outward, inward, upward vision. They were looking for Christ's coming. And the Lord grants a promise in regard to that here in this very letter. And that, I think, aptly describes the Church of the Church of the Great Awakenings. The Church of the Great Awakenings, the Church of the Great Awakenings. The Church in those days was looking for the coming of Christ. And so, we need to be that way today. The question is, are we in the age of Philadelphia? No, I don't think so. We're more, I think, in the age of Laodicea, but we'll discuss that at another time. All right, let's look then at what Jesus says in this letter to the Church of Philadelphia. And we'll take one point. I have three things to say as we've kind of picked this letter apart. We'll just take one of them tonight and then save the rest of it for next Wednesday. First one is Jesus' call to behold. [8 : 48] To behold. Behold something. Behold a number of things, actually. To behold what? Well, first, to behold the Savior Himself, the Lord of glory. Because in the opening parts of this letter, Jesus, I think, provides His readers with a brief vision of Himself. That's how it begins.

I mean, it's pretty easy to notice that. And so, right at the very beginning, He begins to reveal some things about Himself. First of all, His holiness. His holiness. Verse 7, these things says, He who is what? Holy. He who is true. Absolute truth. He's holy. He's true. Remember, Isaiah was given a glimpse of the Lord's holiness in Isaiah chapter 6. We're not going to turn to that passage, but remember what the angel cried out. The angel cried, Holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory. And holy, holy, holy, we see that appear not only in Isaiah, but we see it again in Revelation. Why the repetition? Well, it's called a Hebrew superlative. So not just holy, not just holy, holy, but holy, holy, holy, holy. Three times holy God. And it's a superlative. And what's His message? It's absolute in His holiness. And so, this is what He reveals about Himself.

We like to speak about some of the other attributes of God, don't we? Especially what? His love. I think we probably would rather dwell more on that attribute of God than anything else. [10 : 47] And there's nothing wrong with that because God is love, right? He is. He's not just part love and part other things. He's all love. So, all God's attributes are absolute. Whatever He is, He's all of it.

Now, you know, you try to figure that out in your own mind, but what we need to consider is that God's prime attribute is not love, it's holiness. It's holiness. We might even conceptualize it in this sense that His overarching attribute under which all other attributes fall or make any sense is His holiness. And His holiness speaks of His moral perfection.

God is absolutely righteous. Not righteous, just righteous in what He does, but in who He is. His moral perfection.

Now, we can name it that way, but we can't really define what that means. We want to be and strive to be moral people, but at no time could we ever reach a place of moral perfection.

Even when we die and we receive glorious bodies, we're not perfect even in that sense. Not in the sense that God is perfection in His moral perfection. He's holy, totally set apart from anything, anyone else. His moral perfection.

[12:32] His holiness also speaks of His absolute impeccability. Now, there's a big long word. I started to fill in the blank the word impeccability, but since I can't hardly spell it, I wouldn't expect you to.

And then what does it mean? Well, I think I added on your notes underneath there His inability to sin. Impeccability. Impeccability of God, and I believe the impeccability certainly of Christ, He is the Son of God, means that not only did He not sin, but He could not sin.

He's absolutely perfect. And so one might think, well, then that doesn't make Him very human. Well, He was human at the same time. And so the temptation that was directed toward Him, because He could not sin, was more intense than any kind of persecution, or any kind of temptation you and I could ever, ever experience.

Jesus was tempted to the absolute max. Actually, there was no max for Him. And so the weight of the temptation and His suffering was greater than anything you and I could ever imagine.

This is a quality of holiness that God in all of His persons possesses. Moral perfection, absolute impeccability, and His holiness speaks also certainly of His transcendence.

[14:03] He's the holy other. He's above. Not like us. In fact, God is so transcendent that that's what makes the incarnation of Jesus Christ so absolutely incredible.

That He would condescend and come and dwell among us. To take on and clothe Himself with human flesh and to live among us. Apart from the condensation, not condensation, the condensation of the transcendent God, we could never be saved.

We would never even know we needed salvation. We could never even know the one true God. If He had not condescended and come to meet us.

And I'm always reminded of Squire Parsons, a Southern Gospel singer. I guess he's still singing. A voice like Squire Parsons. And I believe he, I don't know if he wrote this psalm, but I've heard him sing it a number of times.

When I could not go to Him, He came to me. And that's descriptive of salvation. You and I cannot go to God on our own. He came.

[15:13] He took the initiative. And that's a quality of His holiness. He's transcendent. He is moral perfection.

He is absolute in His impeccability. So, the holiness of God. We also notice something else that the Lord reveals about Himself. And the second thing is His wealth.

His great wealth. His absolute wealth, I guess you could really say. It all belongs to Him. Every bit of it. And in verse 7 it says, He who has the key of David.

This is a quotation. That's not the whole quotation. But it's from Isaiah 22 and 22. Did I put that verse on there? Isaiah 22, 22. Which is a messianic prophecy.

And so, Isaiah prophetically spoke of what Jesus is confirming in this letter. So, Isaiah 22, 22. The key of the house of David, I will lay on his shoulder.

[16:14] So, he shall open and no one shall shut. And he shall shut and no one shall open. There's a whole lot to the meaning and the implication of that verse.

But essentially, Jesus is the one who holds within His hands all resources. Everything. And that's what's meant by this expression, the key of the house of David.

It means, well, you know, David's the king. And to have his keys meant that you had access to the king's treasury. And if you had access to the king's treasury, then that meant you possessed control over all the resources and wealth of the sovereign monarch of the kingdom.

So, that's what the expression is rooted in, this whole idea. But the magnitude of that, the far-reaching implication of that is that Jesus has it all.

I mean, you know, owns the cattle on a thousand hills. But He owns the hills too. And everything. All right, so He is the one who holds within His hands all resources.

[17:28] And, you know, really, when you think about it, aren't you glad to know that when it comes to serving the Lord, nearly everybody in this room is involved in some way serving the Lord through this church.

In fact, really everyone in here that I'm looking at. Serving in some way, aren't you glad that you don't have to come up with your own resources to do that? And I've often said that to people when I've asked them to do something, to lead in some way, and they say, well, I just don't think I have it in me to do it.

And I say, well, you don't. But God will give it to you. God's in this and leading you. He's going to give you what you have. So, He not only has all the resources we need, He also freely provides it, the resources.

Third, His sovereignty. His sovereignty. His sovereignty. We're beholding the Savior here. His sovereignty. Verse 7. He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.

Now, that's the remaining portion of Isaiah 22.22. A tremendous verse of Scripture. Tremendous testimony to who the Lord is.

[18 : 37] And it means that all things are under His absolute authority. All things. And all means all. There aren't any exceptions to that.

In fact, I was thinking earlier today, even the spider. Something flying around right in front of my eyes here. That's not what I was thinking about earlier today. I was thinking earlier today, as I was looking over this, that He's sovereign over all things, even the weeds that grow in my yard.

He's sovereign over those things. They're under His sovereignty, and they don't escape His notice. And they live and die under His sovereignty. And I wish they would just simply die, you know, and go away.

But then I have so many of them, my yard would be pretty brown after that. I guess as long as it's green, we'll just let it grow. But more significant than, of course, weeds, the rise and fall of nations and entire civilizations are subject to His absolute sovereignty.

Now, the nations don't know that. I think at one point our nation did. I don't think we believe that anymore. We, I say we, as a general consensus of the people of this great nation, our leaders particularly, our government, they don't think that our nation rises and falls under the sovereignty of God.

[20 : 04] But we do. And there have been many other great nations that have, you know, been raised up to be world powers, and they're gone.

You know, just, you know, do a little history study of the Greeks and the Romans and great, great superpower nations that came to power and then have gone by the wayside.

Nations rise and fall under the sovereignty of God. All right, so we behold the Savior. That's first. And then behold the saints. Behold the saints.

All His saints are under His control. I always feel like I've got to explain this, and I guess every time I have the occasion to use the word saints, I'm compelled to say something just in case somebody is misunderstanding.

I'm not talking about St. Francis of Assisi or, you know, St. Jude or St. this or that. I'm talking about us, born-again believers.

[21 : 17] We're all saints. That is, we're all sanctified. We're all separated, set apart. By Christ. Saints is not a term to describe how good we are.

It's a term to describe who we are in Christ. And so, all the saints are under His sovereign control. Again, the latter part of verse 7 and then going on into verse 8.

He who opens and no one shuts and shuts and no one opens, I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door. That's a wonderful thing for a church to hear the Lord say.

I've set before you an open door and no one can shut it. For you have a little strength, have kept my word, and have not denied my name. I think it's safe to conclude, even though, you know, obviously some of this we have to see by implication or read a little between the lines.

This church apparently lacked material wealth. I think that's the idea behind you have a little strength. Not talking about spiritual strength or moral strength or anything related to their commitment and love for Christ and so forth.

[22 : 37] If this was a physical thing, they had a little strength. It could be that they were small in number as well. We don't really know. Small in number, lacked a lot of resources. But they had the sovereign power of God for ministry.

And we know that because it says He opens doors. He opened doors for their ministry. And He opens doors. There's no power on earth or in hell can shut those doors.

And this is giving an assurance to the people of the church of Philadelphia. They're under His control. And He has opened doors for them.

And no one's going to shut it. And you know, when you think about that in contrast, if there's any... If there's one thing, the 21st century American church, and I want to kind of just isolate, narrow that down to just the American church, the 21st century American church, needs to learn.

There's something we need to learn. And it is that our success is never, never dependent upon wealth. Now, all you have to do is go to another country and work with a church or believers in most every country in the world.

[23 : 59] And you're going to find out that they have nothing, nothing compared to what we have. And yet God is blessing and growing them and multiplying them. You just take the church in China.

There's just no way to even put an estimation, any kind of accurate estimation on the growth of the church in China. And yet they meet him in, you know, some places in the middle of squalor. And they have church and the church is growing. And so I think it's something we need. You know, it doesn't depend upon how much money we have in our bank accounts. You know, most churches in America get really nervous when they don't have a good reserve in the checking account. And not only that, but a savings account and CDs and things. And when that starts to dwindle down and get real low, we're all concerned. Not that we're going, you know, somehow we're not going to be able to minister.

We're more concerned about an air conditioner breaking down. We don't have enough money to fix it. When churches, I assure you, churches in Ukraine don't have air conditioners in their churches and yet they go on.

[25 : 08] Now, you know, we're trapped in that. We can't totally break out of that in our thinking because it's just what we're used to. But we need to think about this.

Our prosperity, someone has said, has become our curse. And in our thinking, here's the downside of this, this being so wealthy by the standards of the world.

In our thinking, we become self-sufficient. Now, we're not self-sufficient. And God sometimes is gracious to show us just how insufficient we are not only as individual believers but as a church as well.

God can bring us down just like that. And one preacher, you probably have heard this before, but one preacher was kind of bragging about prosperity of the church and he said, well, at least we don't have to say gold and silver, have we none?

And the other fellow said, he said, well, yes, that's right, but neither can we say, arise, take up your bed, and walk. You know, we may have all the wealth that we need and more, but yet nothing spiritually is happening.

[26 : 26] No spiritual power is the idea. And I think that is indicative of many churches in America. Now, according to verse 8, the church of Philadelphia had two things that we must have that only God can provide.

And both these things come from God. The first one is His Word, God's Word. He says, you've kept my Word. See, this is praise.

This is God's, the Lord's praise for this church. There's no rebuke here. They have a little strength. He's recognizing that they really struggle. I think struggle financially. Maybe they don't have a lot of people and maybe not a real adequate place to have worship.

Who knows what's behind that. But what they did have was very effective. And they had God's Word. They've kept His Word no matter what.

And they also have God's name. They've kept His name. They've not denied His name. He said, you have not denied my name. And then, behold the sinners.

[27 : 30] Behold the Savior. Behold the saints. Behold the sinners. The sinners. All sinners are under His control. It may not seem that way.

It may seem like, especially in our culture today, sin is rampant. I'm starting to do a study on human trafficking.

Not so that I can preach it. I can't imagine how I could preach a sermon on human trafficking. But I'm writing an article for the messenger. And the more I read about it, it's just incredible.

Appalling. In fact, I've decided to name the article not in my backyard. And yet it is in our backyard. Right here in Oklahoma. In fact, Oklahoma ranks way up there. In fact, I've read one article and it's a little dated.

It said we were number one. It's on human trafficking. You believe that? Well, not in my backyard. It is happening right here. And so we might be thinking, well, you know, I think our culture is out of control.

[28 : 34] Sinners are out of control. They're still under God's sovereignty. And there's going to be a payday someday, as the great R.G. Lee used to preach.

Verse 9 says, Indeed, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say they are Jews and are not, but lie. Indeed, I will make them come and worship before your feet and to know that I have loved you.

There were a number of unsaved people in the church. And I want to make a correction here. I went back and since I've made the notes and studied a little bit and I have, really have come to the conclusion that the synagogue of Satan that he's referring to there were outside the church. Unlike Smyrna, I think it's Smyrna, you have a very similar thing set here. Not Jews, but other synagogues of Satan. It seems to be in that letter they were inside the church and there were factions and causing troubles.

But it could be here that we're talking about Judaizers outside the church that were really giving the church of Philadelphia grief and trying to tempt their members to fall in line with this, the keeping of the law to be a good Christian or rather to be a Christian you have to be a good Jew to keep the Old Testament covenant.

[30 : 07] That's what the synagogue of Satan I think was. They were the Judaizers. And he called them liars too. I think primarily they were outside the church.

There may have been some in the church, but it was not to the degree where the church was being swayed and they were duping a large number of the membership.

and I think not like it was in Smyrna where the people of the church were just kind of turning a blind eye to them and allowing that to persist and fester in their church.

I think this is more of an influence from the outside. And yet, we'd have to admit that some churches are ruled by cliques of ungodly people in churches.

I don't think that's the case here at all. Praise the Lord. But when I say that, I mean ungodly people who are in places of leadership that are actually the ones that are moving the church in ungodly ways.

[31 : 05] But again, he's highlighting here what Jesus is saying is he's in control of all of these things because the sinners, whether they're inside or outside the church, their day's coming.

It's coming. God is in control. And if they are in the church, God can and does move people like that out. I mean all the way out sometimes.

I mean out of this world. And we know that God does that. We know maybe even some personal instances of that. Let me wrap this up. Behold the Savior.

Behold the saints. Behold the sinners. And finally, behold the situations of life because all situations are under his control. verses 10 and 11.

Because you have kept my command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly.

[32 : 06] Hold fast what you have and no one may take your crown. We're going to not flesh out all of these two verses tonight, but suffice it to say that Jesus is telling them these things and his reason is twofold.

There's an immediate need for this kind of promise and encouragement. There's also a great aspect of this, a feature of this that points way out in the future because what Jesus is referring to here is the great tribulation.

which, when the letter was written to this church in Philadelphia, that time had not come and did not come in their lifetime. It hasn't come for now 2,000 plus years and still counting.

We've not seen the great tribulation and by the way, we won't see it. I don't think God's going to make us suffer to let us see it from heaven. But, that's what he's talking about.

So this is a promise that you and I his church will not have to experience the great tribulation. He said, I will keep you from the hour of trial, not keep you through it.

[33 : 25] There's some who think that the church is going to go through the tribulation so he's going to keep us safe through it, but he says, I'm going to keep you from it, from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.

Alright, now, here's the point how this becomes an encouragement for them, for the Philadelphia church, then, I mean, when they receive this word, if Jesus has absolute control over that situation, the great tribulation, and he does, then he is in control over all other situations of life.

And that's how we ought to take this. And so, I think we really need to spend some time and reacquaint ourselves with the awesome fact that God is sovereign. No matter what happens, where we are, what we're experiencing, God is absolutely sovereign over every situation in our lives,

regardless of how hard some of those may be.
Thank you.