

THE CHURCH BEFORE AN OPEN DOOR

The Message to Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

⁷ *“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

*These are 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:*

⁸ *“I know your works. Look, 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. ⁹ I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹² If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

Brief historical context:

Philadelphia was a prosperous town until it was struck by a cataclysmic earthquake in AD 17 — so cataclysmic that Rome exempted Philadelphia from tribute for five years. Philadelphians were hoping for a bit more from Rome but that help was not forthcoming so they felt somewhat neglected by the emperor. That neglect turned into a deep sense of betrayal when Domitian decreed that all of the vineyards in the region should be destroyed. The vineyards were the backbone of their economy. They were so good that they competed with the vineyards in Rome. So Domitian said to get rid of theirs so Rome’s vineyards could be the front-edge of commerce. In doing that, Domitian broke the backbone of their economy and Philadelphians felt deeply betrayed.

The early Jewish Christians in Philadelphia felt betrayed as well, so you can imagine what it must have meant to the church to have received a letter from Jesus saying: **“I am the holy and true one”** — that Jesus was totally “other” and in that otherness he was perfect, he could do no wrong, that he would never betray them — but also that he was **“true”** — he would be absolutely faithful to them, never neglect them or betray them. This was indeed the word that these Jewish Christians desperately needed to hear.

Jesus’ allusion to **“open doors and shut doors”** perhaps suggests that the Jewish Christians have been kicked out of the synagogues and the doors were slammed shut behind them — this meant real trouble for them. The background to this is that the Jews who were persecuted fled all across Asia Minor and settled down and established themselves in little towns and would build synagogues, where they would meet for fellowship and worship. Early Jewish Christians who came to these parts would also meet in the synagogues because in the early days Christianity was really a Jewish sect welcomed into the synagogues.

But in time as Jewish Christians began to preach the resurrection of Jesus, that Jesus is the true Messiah, and as their evangelistic fervour began to bring in new converts, the Jewish Christians were finally expelled and excluded from the synagogues.

This meant that Jewish Christians became alienated from family and friends because the synagogues were the centre of social life for Israeli Jews. This sense of exclusion would have brought a deep sense of shame upon the Jewish Christians but also, their names were struck off of the synagogues' registers and this also meant that their lives were at risk. In the early time of the empire, Jews were exempt from having to say Caesar is Lord — but, in the synagogues, these Jewish Christians names would be struck off from the synagogues' books — and maybe, this is a reference to that statement in Sardis where Jesus says "**I will never strike your name from the Book of Life**" — Jesus was perhaps suggesting that they would always belong to him. Being struck off of the synagogues registers meant that their lives were at stake as they proclaimed 'Jesus is Lord' over Caesar.

Jesus' Identity:

"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:" Jesus is alive forever and he holds the keys of the destiny of all creation.

Message:

I know your works...I know you have little power... but you have kept faithful. I am coming soon...holdfast to what you have so no one may seize your crown — a reference to the *Parousia* (the second coming)...

Reward:

Jesus said to the Church of Philadelphia (the Church of brotherly love), "**I hold the keys of David**" — perhaps suggesting that Jesus has authority over the House of Israel and he will open the door for them and it will never be shut.

Those who excluded them will someday bow the knee before them — "**I will make them come and bow down before your feet...**" — this certainly conjures up memories of the Joseph story and his brothers who betrayed him and then later bowed before Joseph begging for bread and sustenance, and where Joseph said to them "you meant it to me for evil but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20-21).

"**I will make you a pillar in my Father's House...**" — perhaps a symbol of steadiness and stability — no body moves pillars from inside a building — perhaps Jesus was saying to the Church of Philadelphia that they will never be removed from his Father's (God's) House. Paul used the term '**acknowledged pillars**' in Galatians 2:9 in reference to Peter, James and John, a common metaphor for those who represent and strongly support an establishment.

“I will put the name of God on you” (a clear sign that they belong to God) — and in the end, I will bring you into the New Jerusalem. Jesus offers his eternal faithfulness in return for their faithfulness to the end.

Relevance:

Today, there are many Christians around the world who are suffering this kind of alienation and exclusion because they refuse to deny Jesus Christ, and Christians have been paying the price of alienation and exclusion for centuries just like the Jewish Christians in Philadelphia when they were betrayed by the synagogues authorities. Remarkably, they chose to bear the shame and face the danger for Jesus Christ. Jesus applause faithfulness and consistency in following him and deeply appreciates loyalty.

Jesus Christ notices when you are alienated and or excluded because of your stance for him, and Jesus offers in return his eternal faithfulness to you.

Counter cultural reflective points:

- What does it mean to stay true to Jesus in today's world?
- What does modern alienation or exclusion for your faithfulness to Jesus Christ look like?
- The words of Joseph to his brothers: “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good!” Does this ring true today?