

Revelation, Part 5

The Church at Philadelphia

Rev 3:7 “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”’: 8 “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. 9 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. 10 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. 11 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. 12 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, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. 13 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’

The church at Philadelphia was 28 miles southeast of Sardis. It was located in an area noted for its agricultural products but afflicted with earthquakes which destroyed the city several times, most recently about AD 37. The city was named for a king of Pergamum, Attalus Philadelphus, who had built it. “Philadelphus” is similar to the Greek word *philadelphia*, meaning “brotherly love,” which occurs seven times in the Bible (Rom. 12:10; 1 Thes. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7[twice]; Rev. 3:7). Only here is it used of the city itself. Philadelphia continues today as the city of Alasehir.

Most Christians left the city after WWI, though there is probably still some Christian presence in the city. It is noteworthy that that the letter to Philadelphia has the unusual characteristic of being almost entirely one of praise in sharp contrast to the churches at Sardis and our next church, Laodicea.

Rev 3:7 “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”

Christ characterizes Himself as “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”. He is preeminently the Holy One and the One who remains true. As such He alone is qualified to judge and to call those of the church at Philadelphia to faith in Him and a corresponding life of holiness.

1 Peter 1:15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Christ demands the same level of holiness He exhibits, and that seems impossible on the surface. But is it? Not when you consider we have the same spiritual assets He had and used during His time on earth: the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. If we tap into that power, the Divine Dynasphere, we too can be holy as He is holy, at least during that period when we do utilize the power He left for us in the Comforter.

The allusion to the key of David may be a reference to Isaiah.

Isa 22:20 ‘Then it shall be in that day, That I will call My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah; 21 I will clothe him with your robe And strengthen him with your belt; I will commit your responsibility into his hand. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem And to the house of Judah. 22 The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; So he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open.

Eliakim had the key to the treasury of the king, which I think is a picture of Christ. Eliakim could open or close doors and, controlling the key, he controlled access to the treasures of the kingdom. Likewise, Christ holds the keys to truth and holiness as well as to opportunity, service, and testimony. The church at Philadelphia was surrounded by heathendom, but Christ assures them He has the power to open and close according to His will. Christ is He who opens and shuts doors of opportunity. This is one method He uses to providentially guide the believer walking in the Spirit through life. He closes doors He does not want us to enter and opens the ones where we can find the most opportunities for fruit

production that glorifies Him. Our responsibility is to remain in fellowship with Him looking for the open or shut doors.

Rev 3:8 “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. 9 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.

In keeping with His promise to open or close doors Jesus tells this church He has placed an open door before them, and no one can shut it! One expositor sees this as a geopolitical situation that this church in this city found itself in. Philadelphia sits at the upper extremity of a long valley, which ascends to the great plane of the Central Plateau and the main access to Asia Minor and the East in general. Philadelphia was, in effect, a gateway to the riches of the East. Likewise, I think it represents a figurative doorway or gateway to the riches of Heaven.

Christ says they have little strength. Does this mean they are spiritually weak and this is a rebuke? I don't think so. Spiritual power comes from God and is always sufficient. They are recognized as having some spiritual power, and I would guess this is a reference to their small number, and they face an adversary who wields great power. They may not have a lot of strength, but they have kept His word and not denied His name. They kept the truth in the face of false doctrine, and they are assured a continuation of their testimony through the door He has opened for them. Because of their testimony, they are promised the synagogue of Satan will not prevail and will eventually be forced to bow down to them. While the Jews were the chief persecutors of the early church in this region, I think this is a reference to the Judaizer types, or legalists, who plagued the church in this area. They brought false teachings of salvation plus works, saying, “You are not really saved unless you submit to circumcision and enter into the Law as a system of living.” There is no evidence of persecution of the church at Philadelphia, so evidently they prevailed over these false teachers

Rev 3:10 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.

The church at Philadelphia received no rebuke from Christ. Instead they are commended and given a promise because they had been willing to endure patiently. That word “persevere” is that same word we keep encountering, *hupomoné*, which means to be steadfast, feet firmly planted, to stand firm and, in this case, stand firm in the truth. Because they stood firm in the face of this persecution by the synagog of Satan, they will be kept “from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”

Some interesting words are use here. This is translated “keep from the hour of trial”. The word translated from is *ek*, which should be translated “out of”. This is not a deliverance *through* trials; it is a deliverance *out from* trials. Furthermore, it is a deliverance out from the *time* of trials. “Hour” is a word that refers to a “period of time”. The only time in Scripture that is seen as a period or time of trial to test those who dwell on the earth is the Tribulation. If I was a betting man, I would say this phrase here refers to the Tribulation. The church at Philadelphia does not go through the tribulation, which implies they are removed by the Rapture before it begins.

Some biblical scholars have attempted to avoid this conclusion in order to affirm post-tribulationism, but the combination of the verb “keep” (*tērein*) with the preposition “from” (*ek*) is in sharp contrast to the meaning of keeping the church “through” (*dia*), a preposition which is not used here in the Greek. The expression “the hour of trial” (a time period) makes it clear that they would be kept out of that period. It is difficult to see how Christ could have made this promise to this local church if it were God’s intention for the entire church to go through the Tribulation that will come on the entire world. Even though the church at Philadelphia would go to glory via death long before the time of trouble would come, if the church here is taken to be typical of the body of Christ standing true to the faith, the promise goes beyond the Philadelphia church to all those who are believers in Christ. I think it is hard to truthfully draw any other conclusion. This passage supplies some support for the hope that Christ will come for His church before the time of trial and trouble described in Rev 6-19. This time of trial will overtake the entire world as God inflicts His wrath upon unbelieving Gentiles and Christ-rejecting Jews.

Rev 3:11 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

In addition to the promise they will not endure the wrath that is to come, they are urged to hold fast to what they have, which can only be defined as the truth of the Gospel and faith in that. If they hold fast, they are promised a crown.

Rev 3:12 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, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

Here comes the promise to the overcomers — they get a “pillar” in the Temple of My God. Pillar is the Greek *stilos*, which can be a pillar of a building or a clay tablet upon which historical events are recorded.

In the GrecoRoman culture those who were victorious in life in some way, great military leaders or heros, or politicians, some saw their accomplishments written on a column of a building or temple for future generations to read about, kind of a public biographical history. If this is to be taken literally, and I see no reason why it should not, then these victorious believers will have a pillar in heaven where their spiritual accomplishments will be written and forever on display. It may be the only time we ever learn of what some believers have accomplished. They did God’s work in silence and without notice here on earth, but they will get recognition in heaven.

The “city of my God” is the Heavenly Jerusalem where resurrected believers will live, which we will look at closer later in our study.

“And I will write on him My new name.” Because these believers publicly identified themselves with Christ, He will do the same in eternity.

Rev 3:13 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The church at Philadelphia seems to represent the church that came out of the Protestant Reformation. These believers stood firm in the truth of

God's Word against those who taught the false gospel of works and persecuted the reformers. But they really represent all true believers throughout all of church history who stood firm and withstood persecution and false teachings. They will be blessed for their faithfulness and recognized for it in eternity.

The Church at Laodicea

Rev 3:14 “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: 15 “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— 18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’ ”

We come to the last of the seven churches — Laodicea. The city was founded by Antiochus II in the middle of the third century before Christ and named after his wife Laodice. It is about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia on the road to Colossae. Laodicea became wealthy under Roman rule from the production of wool and was noted for an unusual black wool. It was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60 and rebuilt. There was a church there as late as the fourteenth century, but both the church and city are in ruins today.

The economic sufficiency of the church at Laodicea lulled it into a condition of spiritual sleep. There is no evidence Paul ever visited this city, though he does make reference to it in other epistles such as Colossians

2:1. In Colossians 4:15 Paul mentions a letter he sent to the church at Laodicea, but we have no copies of this letter.

Rev 3:14 “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

Christ describes Himself as the eternal and faithful witness and, in an usual way, as the “Amen”. In this title He indicates His sovereignty over all things as creator of all things. The word for “beginning” is *arche*, signifying beginning, supremacy of power or prime source. There is also the sense that Christ is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of every creature (Col 1:15) And the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18). However one views this, Christ is declaring His supremacy.

Rev 3:15 “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

Here is the indictment — they are lukewarm. This is an interesting word picture. The church at Laodicea is said to be neither hot nor cold but rather lukewarm, and Christ says He will vomit them out of his mouth.

This should have resonated with the Laodiceans. The city is in a valley, and water from the hot springs in the mountains is brought down to the city by aqueduct. By the time the mineral laden water reaches the city, it is only lukewarm and no longer very therapeutic. Nor is it cool and refreshing — not very drinkable — more like gag-able. You are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

It can be said there are three spiritual conditions:

- Cold - meaning there is no interest in things spiritual.
- Hot - meaning there is great interest in things spiritual much like when you were first saved and were certain everyone else wanted to know what you just found out, but they were mostly cold. This is “spiritual heat” that indicates a fervor for the Lord and His Word, an intense interest in all things spiritual. You become focused on God and less on self.
- Lukewarm is not a condition on the way from cold to hot, rather it is a condition in between that indicates some level of interest in things

spiritual but certainly not the fervor that should be associated with a believer.

The church at Laodicea has no spiritual fervor. It is neither hot nor cold. It is lukewarm. How were they lukewarm?

Rev 3:17 Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ —and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

They think they are rich, and they are wealthy and need nothing.... The Greek words translated “wealthy” and “in need of nothing” or “increased with goods” in the KJV, are both words that speak about material wealth. This church has been materially blessed and sees that blessing as sufficient, because they seem not to understand they are not truly wealthy, at least not in the things that really matter — spiritual blessings. They do not know they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. That stands in extreme contrast to them saying I am rich, wealthy and need nothing.

Wretched and miserable in the Greek can and sometimes are both translated “miserable” but they are not the same words. They both suggest a deteriorated state that most of us would find miserable. The first one translated as “wretched” suggests a state of enduring toils and troubles. They have problems but are clueless they have problems. The second word translated as “miserable” has the added connotation of being pitied. It comes from a word that means to have mercy. They are miserable, under trials and don’t know it, and are so bad off as to be in need of pity and mercy. This is a seriously bad condition!

They are rich (materially rich) but they are poor! The Greek comes from a word that means to crouch or cower as a beggar. The word means to be reduced to a state of utter debasement — worthless — and it can also refer to spiritual poverty, which is likely the intention here.

Blind is a word that literally refers to physical blindness but figuratively means unable to understand. They are under trial, miserable to the point of pity, spiritually destitute, and don’t even understand their real condition.

What's more, they are naked. The word means to be poorly clothed, to be without proper clothing and perhaps clothed in the rags of poverty or only partially clothed such as at a dinner party in one's underwear. I think this word was chosen to point out they had some of the trappings of the faith but didn't have enough to be considered fully dressed.

This church sees itself one way, but it is not reality. They think they are wealthy, successful, prosperous, maybe even righteous, but in reality, they are spiritually destitute.

I am reminded of the fable, "The Emperor's New Clothes". The emperor's vanity was appealed to, and he thought he had the finest clothes in the world but he was deceived, and it took the innocence of a child to remark that the emperor was actually naked. This church is so vain it cannot see its own spiritual nakedness. They are lukewarm. They have the trappings of Christianity but they are at a formal dinner party dressed only in their skivvies. They may look like they are a real church, but they are spiritually destitute and do not even realize their poverty.

Rev 3:18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

Jesus says, "I advise you to buy from me refined gold." I think this is sanctified sarcasm. If you think you are rich then buy some gold refined in the fire. Gold refined in the fire is pure gold. I think this gold is a direct reference to the gold found in the gold, silver, and precious stones at the Bema fire test of the believer's "works". This suggests their works might be wood, hay, and stubble and they need to "buy" gold. "Buy" is a word that means to purchase in the marketplace and is sometimes translated "redeem". If they are so wealthy (and they aren't really) they need to buy refined gold, so they might be rich. Our riches are not earthly, rather they are heavenly, and I think this is suggesting sarcastically they should use their earthly riches to buy heavenly riches, which is, of course, impossible.

That they might be clothed in white garments that cover their spiritual nakedness. White garments are reserved for the righteous, those in the possession of the righteousness of Christ. It sounds like this group is not

saved because they need to “buy” white garments. But I am not sure this should be taken literally. More sarcasm? Possibly.

And as if this isn’t enough, they need to buy some eye salve to deal with that blindness mentioned in verse 17. Ironically, Laodicea was famous for medicinal preparations used for the treatment of eye problems found in the Middle East. It was sold as a powder and as an eye salve. More sarcasm? Being blind, you can’t see the truth so use some of that famous eye salve you make, apply it, and open your eyes to the truth!

“That you may see” is a Greek word that is usually translated “to see” but has an underlying meaning of to perceive or understand what is seen. Open your eyes and *understand* the truth, grasp the fact of your true spiritual condition!

Laodicea saw itself one way — wealthy and in need of nothing. In reality they were like the emperor who had no clothes; they were spiritually naked. They had some garments, the trappings of the faith, but in reality, they need to become spiritually productive and store up riches in heaven. They are spiritually dead and spiritually non-productive! I think many are Christians in name only, and the ones who are actually saved are essentially spiritually dead like those who are not saved.

The church at Laodicea is typical of a modern church unconscious of its spiritual needs and content with beautiful buildings and all the material things money can buy, but they are spiritually blind to the truth and unproductive for God.

Rev 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

This is probably a reference to Hebrews 12 where we see the same thing.

Heb 12:5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; 6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.” 7 If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8 But if you are without

chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

Look at the words used as “son”: “Speak to you as sons” and “my son” in verse 5, “scourges every son” in verse 6, and in verse 7 “Deals with you as sons,” “what son is there whom a father does not chasten?”, “then you are illegitimate and not sons”. In every case “son” is the Greek word *huios*, which is a word that means “adult son” with adult responsibilities. It is a word that is often used for believers and the expectation that the believer will be responsible for his actions. It is the same word used over in Galatians when Paul does the metaphor of the pedagogue.

Gal 3:24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

The issue with the Galatians is they were saved by faith but were adding works in the form of the Law as their spiritual walk. Paul says no, once we came to Christ through faith we became adult sons (*huios*). Like the son (*huios*) in the metaphor puts on the toga *virilus* symbolic of his graduation from “Pedagogue High”. The adult son believer is to put on Christ. The believers in this group seem to be deeply involved in human good. They have not acted like *huios* — adult sons — and put on Christ.

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” I am going to be honest with you and say I am not sure what Jesus is saying here. Is he saying they do not qualify for rebuking and chastisement because they are not believers? But this letter looks very much like rebuking and chastisement to me. Or is He saying they are believers but they are outside the will of God, a casualty in the Spiritual War and combat ineffective? Jesus calls for them to repent and be zealous, which means to set one’s heart on something, “whole hearted” we might say.

I think this church is seen as a real church and it contains at least some believers. Obviously, they have deluded themselves into thinking they are right with God and clearly they are not. Jesus calls for them to repent — change their minds about what they think and become focused on Him.

Rev 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

If we take the position this church is largely lost, then this would have to be interpreted as an evangelizing passage. I stand at the door and knock — receive me on the basis of faith and become a believer. This is the way many expositors translate this passage, but if this church is indeed made up of some believers who are in a delusional state concerning their spiritual relationship with the Lord, then this is a message about fellowship. Christ is then saying, “I am here for the dinner party and prepared to come in and sit down in the fellowship of a meal with you, so open the door,” which would be repentance as called for in the verse above, and confess your sins and enjoy that restored fellowship. “If” is in the Greek third class condition, meaning maybe they will hear and maybe not.

Repentance and spiritual growth would ultimately result in the “purchase” of that purified gold that has been tested by fire, genuine spiritual production. With Christ on the outside, there can be no fellowship or genuine wealth. With Christ on the inside, there is wonderful fellowship and sharing of the marvelous grace of God. I think this was an appeal to Christians rather than to non-Christians.

This raises the important question concerning the extent of one’s intimate fellowship with Christ. To those who respond, Christ promises to give the right to sit with Him on His throne and share His victory.

Rev 3:21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

This is an offer of spiritual victory over daily sin, and we use the same process Christ used to gain that victory, faith in the guiding and enablement of the Spirit, which this church seemed not to be doing.

Rev 3:22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The Church at Laodicea was a church that saw itself as prosperous and blessed of God with great riches, while in reality it was spiritually destitute and in need of healing. It could not see its spiritual condition for its own blindness of arrogance.

This spiritually unproductive condition pretty well sums up the condition of the church today, both Catholic and Protestant. By and large the main line Christian denominations outwardly appear to be successful. They own large buildings, schools, even TV studios and networks but they are doctrinally dead and lack any real production that will pass the fire test at the Bema. Notice there was absolutely nothing positive said of this church? They are so lukewarm they are seen as vomit inducing. The church and the individual Christian should never be lukewarm. Lukewarm is a non-productive condition and believers are called to produce fruit. Like the mineral waters of Laodicea, which arrived in the city no longer hot enough to be therapeutic or cool enough to be refreshing, it was so useless as to induce the gag reflex.

This should tell you how the Lord feels about the lukewarm Christian. This is not a call to dash out and get involved in a lot of human good, and probably this church at Laodicea was like that. I am sure they had youth programs, missionaries, fairs, full orchestras at huge services, and pot luck dinners. But is what they are doing really what God is calling them to do? And are they doing it for the glory of God or for their own glory?