

The Seven Letters (7): The Church in Philadelphia

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[0:00] Let's read now from the Word of God in the book of Revelation and chapter 3. The book of Revelation and chapter 3, and from verse 7, you'll find this on page number 1029 of your pew Bible.

Page 1029, Revelation 3, from verse 7. 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 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 but 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.

[1:24] 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 is an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Heavenly Father, bring your ancient and powerful word into the present so that it can be heard and delivered with all the freshness of a new day, with all the immediacy of a friend's embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Of all the churches to which Jesus wrote letters, of which would you like most to be a member?

Perhaps of Ephesus, the largest of the churches. Perhaps of Laodicea, the wealthiest of the churches. But surely not Philadelphia.

[2:42] Philadelphia, the smallest and weakest of all the churches. Surely not them. How careful we must be not to judge churches by appearances.

In his biography, the Christian pastor Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, tells the story of how top leaders in his denomination falsely judged churches by appearances.

Every year, Peterson had to return a statistical schedule of the number of people in attendance at his services and the financial income of his church.

And in addition, on the backside of the A4, he had to write a report of the spiritual life of his congregation he served, together with an account of his own growth as a Christian and as a pastor. Over the years of doing this, Peterson became convinced that the top leaders in his denomination were only reading the statistics in his report, and not the reports on his own spiritual life or his congregation's spiritual life.

[3:54] So he decided to put his doubts to the test. And so the next year, as well as submitting his statistical schedule, he wrote a report detailing how numbers in the congregation had grown extensively since he had started serving magic mushrooms instead of communion bread.

True to form, his denominational leaders didn't come back to him. It was proof that the only thing they were interested in was judging by appearances and income.

Measurable things. If we were to judge by appearances, measurable things, we might conclude that the church in Philadelphia was the least important of all the churches in Revelation.

It was probably very small, very poor, and yet out of them all, along with the church in Smyrna, it was the greatest and the richest.

Not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of the only one who truly matters, the Lord of the church, Jesus himself. Whereas some of the other letters Jesus wrote to the churches in Revelation are kind of downbeat, as we've seen, the letter he writes to Philadelphia, here in Revelation 3, 7 through 13, fills us with desire, admiration, and aspiration.

[5:23] A desire to be like the church in Philadelphia, and an aspiration, not to judge by how we may appear to others, but only how we appear to Christ.

I want us for a short time this morning to focus our attention on three things in this letter. A trustworthy Lord, a determined church, and a strong future.

Trustworthy Lord, a determined church, and a strong future. Attendances and income may, they may not be important, who knows, but to us, what must be of first importance is that we serve a trustworthy Lord, we are a determined church, and we look forward to a strong future.

So first of all then, a trustworthy Lord, a trustworthy Lord. Jesus opens this letter by describing himself as the Holy One, the True One, who was the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens.

At some point, I'm minded to preach a series of studies on the names Christ gives to himself in this book of Revelation. Of them all, these are among the greatest.

[6:44] In the book of Isaiah, God is often referred to as the Holy One of Israel. In Revelation 6, verse 10, the souls of those who have been martyred for the sake of Jesus cry out, O sovereign Lord, holy and true.

How long? God is referred to as the one who is holy and true. And here in Revelation 3, verse 7, in his letter to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus is assuming for himself titles which belong only to God.

The Jesus who wrote this letter is the Lord of the church. And when we say Lord, we mean more than mere master or leader. He is the God of the church.

The God the church worships and depends upon for his existence. Later in this letter, we're going to learn that the church of the Philadelphians was persecuted by the Jewish synagogue in the city, those Jews who believed that Jesus was a fraud.

But Jesus is reminding these Christians in Philadelphia that he is the true God of Israel. He is the God who rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

[8:01] He is the God who brought them back from their captivity in Babylon. He is the God who made them into a nation and who was worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem.

Which means that to be genuinely Jewish means to follow and trust in Jesus Christ because he alone is God, the Holy and True One, the Lord of Israel.

And we too must remember this when we feel downcast about the state of the church in Scotland.

The Lord of our church is the God of all things, the Lord of glory himself.

Combine together all the church's enemies and they are like grains of sand on the balance compared to the mightiness of our God. We have nothing to fear with our Father as our Lord.

Jesus knows what he's doing with his church in Scotland today and he's working all things together for our good and for his glory. And he then says of himself that he has the key of David who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens.

[9:13] Again, this description has an Old Testament background. In Isaiah 22, verse 22, one of the stewards of Judah is spoken of as having the keys of David.

He alone has the right to declare who is a member of David's kingdom and who is a foreigner, who is a citizen and who is an alien. And in an even greater way, the Lord Jesus Christ has the keys to the kingdom of God.

He opens the doors of the kingdom to one and no one can shut that door. And he closes the doors of the kingdom to another and no one can open that door.

Those Jews in Philadelphia who were persecuting the Christian church were convinced of their membership in the kingdom of God by virtue of their ethnicity and their adherence to rabbinic tradition.

And they poured scorn on the Christians for saying that it's by faith alone in Christ that a person becomes a member of the kingdom of God. But Jesus, the Lord of the church, is saying here, he alone determines who is a member of the kingdom of God.

[10:30] not Moses, not the rabbis, only Jesus Christ, the God whose kingdom it is. It is our approach to him which defines our membership of the kingdom of God, not our ethnicity, not our

family background, not our traditions, but our faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.

So these Christians, hard-pressed by the Jewish synagogue in Philadelphia, rejected by the world, they may have been told that they are not the people of God because they are now Christians.

They may be told you are outcasts and strangers from the nation of Israel, but they're here being told that they are members of a greater kingdom, the kingdom of the living and eternal God which has no end, the kingdom of grace, of glory, of light, of love, of beauty and of wonder.

No man is a loser for being a stranger in this passing world if he is a member of the world to come.

No man is a loser for being a stranger in this passing world if he has a home in the world to come.

Do you? It's a trustworthy Lord. Secondly, in this letter we see a determined church, a determined church. Of all the churches to which Jesus wrote letters in Revelation, Philadelphia was the one most to be admired if nothing else because of its determination to remain faithful to Jesus whatever the opposition.

[12:17] Under Roman law, the Jewish religion enjoyed protected status which meant that Jews were protected. But Christians who were thrown out of the synagogues by the Jews by definition no longer enjoyed that protection and were therefore persecuted.

Christians were vulnerable. They were not protected. And by extension they needed perseverance and endurance if they were to maintain their witness as a Christian church.

And in this, more than anything else, they demonstrate their superior nobility. For while the other churches compromised with the society in which they lived, the Philadelphian church stood firm.

It was determined. And Jesus here in this letter characterizes it in five ways. First of all, he characterizes it in terms of opportunity.

Opportunity. He says, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. The door of the synagogue in Philadelphia had been shut to these Christians but the Lord God of the church places before them an open door which no one can shut.

[13:39] Now some take this as a reference to the work of mission. In the New Testament the words open door are most often used to describe the mission of the gospel.

So for example in 1 Corinthians 16 verse 9 the apostle Paul writes these words. He says, an open door for effective work has been opened to me.

Philadelphia was at the confluence of five major trade routes a perfect place from which the gospel of Jesus Christ could be spread all over Asia Minor.

So the mission opportunities for this church were vast. From their hub location they could spread the gospel far and wide, plant new churches, expand the kingdom of God in Asia Minor and Jesus says to them I have placed before you an open door which no one can shut.

In other words I'm going to open hearts and minds before you so that the gospel will take firm root wherever it goes. It is the risen Christ who opens the door of mission and that's why we want to commit ourselves as Crow Road Free Church to praying for him, praying to him to do that heart opening work so that when we share the gospel we share it with a people whose hearts have already been divinely prepared to receive and accept it.

[15:06] So that's a reasonable interpretation. An open door means mission but it's probably not the right one. It's a nice one but not the right one. Given that the previous verse talks about Jesus having the keys of David, those keys which open the door of heaven and salvation, Jesus is referring here to no matter how hated they are by the Jews, no matter that the doors of the synagogue have been locked against them, Jesus himself has opened the door of heaven and salvation to them and no one can shut it.

Nothing can take our salvation from us because our salvation isn't about how we opened the door to heaven by our good works and our religion but how Christ opened that door for us through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave.

The apostle Paul says, nothing shall separate us from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. No persecution, no poverty, no pressure for Jesus has opened the door and nothing can shut it.

as we've already said, those who hate the church in Scotland today and all over the world, they may be powerful but they're like grains of sand that are balanced compared to the mighty power of the Lord God of the church.

Nothing shall take our salvation from us. We have every reason to endure and persevere in the faith of Christ for in so doing we walk straight through that door into the beauty of Christian salvation. [16:46] opportunity. That's the first aspect of it being a determined church. Weakness is the second. Weakness. The church in Philadelphia was the weakest of the seven churches to which Jesus wrote letters.

It was the poorest financially, probably the smallest. It had no status in society and that's why Jesus says, I know that you have but little power. I know that you have but little power.

It was so very vulnerable like a small palm tree in the direct path of a mighty tsunami. The tidal wave breaks upon it and for all the world it would seem that it would be uprooted in fall.

Our church is one of the largest in Glasgow but it's tiny compared to the opposition ranged against it. We are but a pinprick.

We are but a small palm tree in the direct path of a mighty tsunami. we have but little power. But the issue isn't of how big we are, how wealthy we are, of how much status we have in society.

[17:57] The issue is whether in the face of all that is against us we are willing to follow in the footsteps of the church in Philadelphia of whom Jesus says in verse 8 yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.

In other words our role is to keep the word of Christ not to deny the name of Christ. And you know in many ways weakness as a church is a very good thing because it forces us to rely upon the powerful grace of Christ which is again why we gather together on a Wednesday afternoon and a Wednesday evening to pray that in our weakness we may keep the word of Christ and not deny his name.

Third aspect of the church being determined vindication. The Jewish synagogue had expelled Christians from among them so these Christians were no longer afforded the protection that Jewish people received at the hands of the Romans.

The Jews hated the Christians and in particular they hated the Christ the Christians worshipped.

They poured scorn on how anyone could bow down to a crucified Christ.

Christians in their view are no longer Jewish but the Lord God of the church Jesus Christ was the perfect Jewish man.

[19:34] He was the true son of Abraham, the true follower of Moses, the true fulfillment of David. Those Christian Jews who had been expelled from the synagogue on account of their faith in Jesus, they too are true Jews.

Those remaining in that synagogue who denied Jesus, they are the synagogue of Satan. And they will in time to come, Jesus says, be forced to bow down before the feet of the very Christians they cursed and acknowledged that the God of Israel loves the church of Jesus Christ.

For all now that the church in Scotland seems to be so weak and hated, for all that we appear to be doomed to history's oblivion, one day we shall be completely vindicated by our Lord.

And that's another reason we want to endure to the end, is it not? It shall be the church, not the forces which so mock and belittle us, which shall be vindicated.

Not them, but us. Fourth aspect of the determination of this church, their strength. Their strength.

[20:59] For all the weakness of the church in Philadelphia, they were dogged in their perseverance. They kept the word of Jesus about patient endurance. To all appearances, they had nothing to gain from maintaining their Christian profession, but with stubborn determination, they kept going.

They endured because they knew a great trial was to come upon the whole earth. We're looking here at verse 10. And that only if they should remain in Christ, should they be kept from it.

The trial of which Jesus speaks in this verse is his end time judgment. That of which we speak when we recite the creed together, he shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.

And with that end time judgment in mind, the promise that they would not be condemned in the judgment, but rewarded the enduring faith. now if you've traveled north recently, you'll know that the A9 dueling project has required clearing vast amount of forest beside the current road.

It won't be until I'm dead that it's finished, but never mind. trees which have been there for decades are being cut down to make way for the new carriageways. How foolish you would be to build a house beside an uncleared section of the A9, because the house would stand for about a matter of months before it would be demolished to make way for a new dual carriageway.

[22:29] How stupid you would be to sink every penny of your savings into building a house which so quickly would be destroyed. Why then should we invest our whole lives into a world which shall so soon be judged by the Lord God of righteousness and holiness?

Is it not better, despite all we may have to suffer here and now, to doggedly cling to the Lord of the church and his promised salvation?

King Jesus, for in that day of trial we shall be kept and rewarded not condemned and destroyed.

And today for us all is that day of decision because Jesus says, behold, I am coming soon.

Then the last aspect of the determination of the church is its endurance. Its endurance, Jesus concludes by saying, hold fast to what you have so that no one may seize your crown.

hold fast to what you have so that no one will seize your crown. As we've already seen from the other letters, hold fast to what you have is Jesus code for saying, stick to the word of God.

[23:47] Stick to the truths of the gospel. There's no secret to enduring in our faith in Christ. Here's the plain truth. It is following the plain teaching of the Bible and growing in our confidence in the glory and love of the gospel in which Jesus, the God of the church, loved us and gave himself for us on the cross.

It is following that majestic truth that he rose again in the third day to new and eternal life. And Jesus says to us, you hold fast to those truths.

You tenaciously cling to them. Though the world be laughing at you for believing these things, and though your own days may seem dark and long to you, cling to the beauty and the power of the cross.

And Jesus says to us, go forward in your faith by going back to Calvary. Look back to that cross and the empty tomb that you might endure in your faith. Some may call us simple and naive, but holding fast to what you have in the gospel is the key to endurance in the Christian life.

sometimes holding fast is a joy and sometimes it's a struggle. But hold fast we must. The Kenyans, who are the most celebrated of all long distance runners on our planet, have a saying, if you want to run fast, run alone.

[25:22] If you want to run far, run together. run fast, run alone. If you want to run far, run together. That's why we need each other.

Because our holding fast is a community enterprise. We need each other's encouragement and engagement, each other's strength and solace as a church and as a family.

Though the Philadelphian church had such small power, stuck together and it endured. And we must imitate them in this, that whatever happens to us, we too shall stick together and endure.

So you see, you can't judge a church by its appearances because as you can see from Jesus' perspective, the church in Philadelphia was the strongest of all the churches to which you wrote letters. Not because of its superior strategies, but because of its stubbornness.

Not because of its vast wealth, but because of its faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A determined church. Well then thirdly and briefly and lastly, a strong future, a strong future.

[26:38] Trustworthy Lord, a determined church, a strong future. Forty years ago, when I first became a believer, given demographic and statistical schedules, studies, studies rather, not schedules, it was predicted that the evangelical church would have no future at all, 40 years ago.

Walk into any church in 1986 and it was declining. It was full of older people and all the younger people had walked away from the church. The church in Philadelphia, to all appearances, had no future.

future. But in reality, because it was in Christ, it had the strongest of futures. Jesus says to them, to the one who conquers, I will make a pillar in the house of my God.

Never shall I go out of it. And I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God which comes down from my God out of heaven. And my own new name, I'm going to write these things on that pillar.

And there are three promises here very, very briefly. Stability, Status, and Security. Three promises. Stability, first of all. The city of Philadelphia was very prone to earthquakes.

[27:51] One of the great historians of the age, Strabo, called it the earthquake city. It had been destroyed in AD 17 and then rebuilt. To speak of the church as being a pillar is something the Christians in Philadelphia would have understood very well.

It's a picture of stability. That even as a mighty pillar would not fall in an earthquake. So the church as a pillar means that though it may have been shaken by the troubles and persecutions, it would

not fall.

We have this promise that in the words of Psalm 46, though the seas roar and the mountains shake, though the nations should be in turmoil around us, God shall be in the midst of his church. And we shall stand firm. Second, status. Status. In ancient cities, pillars often had the names of prominent citizens who had sponsored their construction written upon them.

Now the church in Philadelphia had no status in that city at all. It was hated and rejected. It was troubled and persecuted. But Jesus promises that in the house of God they shall have status and importance.

[29 : 19] Churches in Glasgow today do not feature on any of the top places to visit or top ten things to do in our city. We have little or no status. We're often considered to be unpleasant annoyances.

but we as the church have the brightest of futures of anything in Glasgow. For though we may be little in the city's eyes, through Jesus Christ we shall be much in the city of God.

And then lastly, security. Security. Jesus promises his beleaguered people in Philadelphia about their future presence in the house of God. He says to them, never shall he go out of it.

Never shall he go out of it. Hated and weak, the persecuted Christians of Philadelphia were strangers in their own city, but not in the kingdom of God. They were threatened by exile from the city of Philadelphia, but not from the kingdom of God.

God, because they are at home. They're not strangers there, they're sons and daughters who belong. They're going to be there in that kingdom forever and ever, experiencing the joy, the delight, and the pleasure of the presence of Jesus, the Lord God of his church.

[30 : 39] Now these are greater promises than the threats of the world around them. Far greater promises, and that's why they endured. The church in Philadelphia endured longer than any of the other seven churches to which Jesus wrote letters.

It endured even up to the 15th century as a thriving church, and perhaps even later as small groups of Christians. There may still have been Christians present in Philadelphia when the Reformation was taking firm root in Western Europe.

church. We must not judge churches by appearances. Churches which look huge today may be gone tomorrow. Churches which are tiny today may still be here in a hundred years' time.

Our aim as Crow Road Free Church is to imitate the Philadelphians in this, their dogged, stubborn endurance in their faith in Jesus Christ. Christ. That is what we shall work for.

That is what we shall pray about. Because we really want God to get all the glory out of our faithfulness to him. Let us pray.

[31 : 54] We worship you Lord for the church you planted in Philadelphia and for the endurance that you gave to these blessed Christians who for your sake had been exiled and estranged from their own ethnic people, cast out to the synagogues but found a home in you, a greater home than ever they had in this world.

And we pray Lord that you would make this home a strange place to us. Rather you would give us a longing for our real home where we are sons and daughters in the house of our God. We pray for anyone here today who is not yet a believer that hearing what they have they may be convicted of their need to put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and find in him the security, the stability that they have never had before.

We ask these things in his name. Amen.