

True Perspective: Philadelphia

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[0 : 00] I could wish that all of you had to suffer what I have had to suffer this week, and that is look at these seven verses from Revelation and try and figure out what they mean.

You perhaps have the privilege of just reading them through and seeing they don't make much sense to me, and laying the book aside and going back to your detective story.

But it is the most enriching possible thing, if only by some discipline of mind or heart, you could be forced to look and to look and to look, until the whole thing begins to make sense in an amazing way, and you could wish that you could take these seven verses and write a hundred volumes, just to express all that is there.

It's in the language of symbolism, and it's got to be in the language of symbolism, because it's describing things that are so vastly beyond our imagination, so vastly beyond our understanding, so vastly beyond any structure that we can put on the things we know, beyond philosophy, beyond the attainments of the great and tragic ideologies that afflict our world.

The symbolism of the language of Revelation carries you way beyond all that. There were seven golden candlesticks.

[1 : 50] There were seven stars. There were seven angels. There were seven churches. And these are in the seven cities of the Roman province of Asia.

cities which apparently represented the centers of the imperial cult of Rome in the province of Asia.

There is in Revelation the wonderful description of the number of the beast, which is six, six, six.

That is, the power of evil manifesting itself in what appears to us to be near perfection, but falling short.

There are seven planets in the night sky. There are seven last words of Christ. There is the ecstasy of ultimate joy, which we describe as being in seventh heaven.

[3 : 03] The whole thing begins to fit together a complete picture. And the fact that there are seven, this represents the whole.

This is the microcosm of the seven, is to look at the whole reality of the church in Asia. The whole reality of the church throughout time and history.

The whole reality of the church in the world. And the strange thing is that in the midst of the sevens, there is a mysterious and powerful stranger that is described in very symbolic language.

And look at the picture of this stranger, if you will, in 113 on page 227 of the book of the Revelation.

This is the stranger described in this amazing and symbolic language. In the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with long robes, with a golden girdle around his breast.

[4 : 30] His head and his hair were white as wool, white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace.

His voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. And from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword.

And his face was like the shining of the sun in full strength. And that picture, the picture that the Apostle John, who wrote the book of Revelation, that's whom he saw.

He encountered this stranger. And he literally dropped dead. I fell at his feet as though dead.

But the stranger, instead of inspiring fear, wanted to inspire utter trust and confidence.

[5 : 54] So he introduces himself to John. And he says, Fear not. I am the first and the last, the alpha and the omega.

I die. Behold, I am alive. I have the keys of death and Hades.

I'll write what you see. What is and what is to take place hereafter. As for the mystery of the seven stars, which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.

And the seven lampstands are the seven churches. So on the basis of this encounter, and in submission to this command, John begins to write.

And he writes to the seven churches and gives instructions to them. He begins the letters to the seven churches. And how those seven churches look to him.

[7 : 29] Now you have, in the course of the last several weeks, looked at five of the churches. And the assignment for today is to confront the sixth of the churches, which is the Church of Philadelphia, and which is described in verses 7 to 13 in the third chapter of the book of Revelation.

All of the churches, and remember this is, this is a picture of all of the churches, but of all of the church at the same time. And the church had, each had represented one acute problem at the heart of their life as a church.

The first had the problem that they had abandoned the love they had at first. The second was forced to suffer tribulation, poverty, and slander.

It was so displaced among the nations of the world. The third, they had succumbed to listening to false teachers. And these false teachers led them, perhaps, where they wanted to go. to spiritual and sexual immorality. The fourth, they had admitted into their presence a seductive teacher by the name of Jezebel.

[9 : 19] And the accumulation of her teaching in that church is described as leading people into the deep things of Satan.

Fifth church had the problem that it had a reputation for being alive, but was in fact dead. And the church we have to deal with today is a church the most distinguishing characteristic of which is that it is pathetically weak.

Next Sunday you have the church where the people thought of themselves as rich, prosperous, and in need of nothing. While they were in fact wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

that's why I would come to the evening service next week if I was here. But this is a description of the church, the raw material among which stands this totally amazing stranger acknowledged by a few and despised by many.

So for in the church in Philadelphia, it was in spite of its weakness, it was not condemned but commended.

[11 : 08] It was said of that church that its deeds, the thing it had been able to accomplish, were known by him from whom no secrets are hidden.

It was a church that stood in a place of unique opportunity in spite of its weakness. It was a church which could offer its strength, could offer its weakness to be made strength.

Jacques Elul, who's one of the commentators on Revelation, has said of the church in Philadelphia, that it was powerless. And he said, God likes that which is powerless.

It's the power of men and the spirit of power that is in opposition to the purpose of God. Interesting part. It says again that this church in its weakness had kept my word and had lost in a world that had lost the ability to listen to it.

It was a church that did not deny my name in a world that is ashamed to confess the name of Jesus Christ.

[12 : 38] It was a church which is seen by those around as being this weak little church nevertheless is seen as being the object of the love of God.

They had a divine command in their situation to endure patiently. and in a world conflagration that was coming they had the promise that as they had kept God's word they themselves would be kept from the trial to come.

They are aware of the Lord's promise of his coming soon. They have the promise of a crown which in spite of their weakness they had won that crown by keeping the word and not denying the name with patience endurance.

And the result of that is that they of that church would be subjected to heavenly honor not to earthly honor.

you know how in our society we talk about Mr. this or Mr. that or Mr. somebody else and say of him he's a great pillar of our society.

[14 : 17] We owe much to him. We think greatly of him. He is a pillar. And that was the tradition to inscribe the names of great men and women on a pillar of the temple that they built.

But these people in Philadelphia are given the promise that their name is going to be on a pillar of the temple of God in heaven.

Philadelphia was very subject to earthquakes. and so the pillars put up in the honor of men had crumbled before there was a city destroying earthquake in 17 that is AD in living memory of many people.

But they said this pillar is going to be something quite different than that. And they and the word to them is that on that pillar in the temple of God in heaven will be three names.

And the first will be the name of God. Lots of people believe in God who have no idea what his name is.

[15 : 50] This pillar will be commemorating one who knows the name of God. This pillar will have the name of the city of God.

That's where your citizenship is. That's where you belong. You bear the name of God. You live in the city of God. And you confess the name of the risen and ascended Lord.

Those three names are on the pillar and that's what is the object of their patient endurance. Well, so you see the church caught in stress lines of weakness.

There was pressure from the imperial cult. There was the constant threat of earthquakes. There was the impact of Greek philosophy which had come through Alexander the Great.

There was the imposition of Roman rule and law. There was Babylonian astrology. All these conflicting pressures were putting the church under enormous pressure.

[17 : 20] But there was among them this stranger. And we're told about this stranger that he is the holy one and true.

He is the holy one one. And he is the true one. You see, that had particular significance because of what's spoken of in verse nine.

And if you look in verse nine, you will see, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie.

you see, the Christians in the first century regarded themselves as the true Jews.

And they were the true Jews because of them, to them had come, they had inherited all the promises of God throughout the Old Testament.

[18 : 35] they regarded themselves as being those who received the prophecies and the promises and so that to them, any true Jew would demonstrate that he was a true Jew by claiming the inheritance which was left to him.

and the inheritance which was left to him is described here as the holy one, the true one, described here as the son of David, the root of Jesse, the one who possesses the keys that can open so that nobody can shut, and the one who can shut and nobody can open.

And they denied that Jesus was the holy one, that Jesus was the true one. They were faced by the fact that their Jewishness should be measured not by some ethnic continuity, but should be marked by their willingness to receive the promised and prophesied inheritance which belonged to them in Jesus Christ.

And they had rejected that. And you see, because they had rejected that, they're spoken of, quite frankly, in verse nine, as the synagogue of Satan, because they claimed to be the people of God, but had ignored the inheritance which God had given them.

And so, it is concluded that they were building their faith on a lie, a lie which denied Jesus Christ.

[21 : 00] You see, that was further complicated by the fact that in the Roman Empire where there was this imperial cult and the worship of the emperor, in that the other.

The Jews had carefully excluded themselves from having to worship the emperor as everybody else in the empire had to do because they paid a temple tax to the temple of Jupiter in Rome.

City set on seven hills. And they had paid that and so they were not required to submit to the worship of the emperor.

But they found that the Christians were saying we are Jews so we don't have to pay to worship the emperor.

Members of the synagogue of Satan said they're not Jews make them conform. So the Roman authorities turned on the Christians and told them they had to bow in obedience and that's where the persecution of the church which required patient endurance began in Philadelphia.

[22 : 43] You see he was not only that the holy one and the true one and the inheritance that belonged to God's people not ethnically but spiritually but he also had the keys of David and with the keys of David their doors were some doors were locked and you know that some people spend the whole of their lives pounding and pounding and pounding on a locked door that ever never

opened Jesus said I have the key to open the door to the kingdom I have the key to bring you to the place of reality so that's what he does he says

I will leave this door open well that's the place of the church the raw material of the church the the results in the church of in spite of weakness keeping the word not denying the name patiently enduring persecution that was the church which represented for the world in which it lived an open door that it was to bear witness to even as I think we at this moment in history can point to an open door well that's our business this is remembrance day and we are on the brink of another war and we know that that war could so easily become a worldwide conflagration and like the one spoken of in these scriptures the difficulty is that we understand war and you know if if I was the president of the

United States and I had a country whose loyalty and whose unity I would I would seek then to put before them the challenge of a war would unite them all and make them into one people that's I think why why on remembrance day Sunday we sing the national royal anthems and we sort of remember the reality of being a Canadian and the reality of being British and the reality of wars which were great wars to end all war and we think of that noble aspiration we think of the valiant hearts we think of all that and did those great wars not accomplish all that we could hope apparently they didn't and the threat of going back to war is on us again because

I don't think we understand any alternative to war war is the only thing which really makes sense to us we've got to come to it and so we struggle on and 400 thousand people meet in Florence yesterday I think and to protest the war against Iraq but there was no indication that among those 400 thousand people there was anyone who knew any alternative to war you know there were ideologies of various kinds represented and there were all sorts of potentially violent people protesting against violence all that was happening in our world with which we can identify but how do we stand in relationship to war and I want just to give you this illustration you see that window up there you can't see it probably and there's another one up here and there are beautiful windows beautiful beautiful colored glass you should come up and see them before you leave now that glass is glass from

Coventry Cathedral and there was once a lady in this congregation who in England at the end of the war went around the ruins of Coventry Cathedral and put smashed stained glass in a bag and brought it back to Canada and some skilled artisan took it and put it together in a complete jumble of fragments and tried to get some order and some structure into it and you know I mean you look as you can't make anything of it you can see certain segments which you think might be this or that but it's all a jumble of fragments and I think that the responsibility of the church in Philadelphia the responsibility of the seven churches the responsibility of the whole church is to go around and pick up the fragments of a broken world and try and put them together so that they make some sense and we've tried and failed many times but we're called to have the confidence that ultimately the design which was there in the first place and which was lost in human wars might someday be restored and you could see the design that's that's why we look at our world in its brokenness and we see the fragments put together and not quite fitting not quite working up and we can't see the design that is there and yet we are called to pray thine is the kingdom power and the glory and nothing will replace the reality of that kingdom and one day all the pieces will begin to show the original design shining through and we will recognize what we have long waited for stranger that stands among us will have brought together and accomplished what we can never by human effort accomplish that will be the kingdom of

[30 : 54] God and we are to declare that to that kingdom the door is wide open into the possibilities of human beings making sense of the human situation the door is shut and locked amen