

To the Church in Philadelphia

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Date: 05 March 2023

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[0 : 0 0] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.

I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles this morning. We're going to be back in our Revelation series. We're going to go to Revelation chapter 3. We're going to be in verses 7 through 13 this morning. This is the letter to the church of Philadelphia. Revelation 3, 7 through 13. This is the word of God.

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 that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

[1 : 1 9] Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and 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. 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 has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. May God bless the preaching and hearing of his word.

Armando Valadez was in Cuba during Fidel Castro's Marxist revolution. In 1960, at the age of 23, he refused to put an I'm with Fidel sign on his desk at work.

[2 : 4 8] Shortly after, he was arrested by political police and was eventually given a 30-year prison sentence. Early in his imprisonment, he was offered political rehabilitation, as it's called.

If he renounced his faith in God and embraced the atheistic political revolution, he would be set free and could go back to society. Valadez refused the offer.

Choosing rather to hold fast to his faith, he went on to experience 22 years of beatings and torture in prison. Reflecting on the experience, this is what he writes.

When I was 23 years old, I refused to do something that at the time seemed very small. I refused to say a few words. I'm with Fidel. First, I refused to say a few words.

First, I refused the sign on my desk at the postal office that said that. And after years of torture and watching many fellow fighters die, either in body or in spirit, I still refused to say those words.

[3 : 58] If I just said those three words, I would have been released from prison. They did not keep me in jail for 22 years because my refusal to say these three words meant nothing.

In reality, those three words meant everything. For me to say those words would constitute a type of spiritual suicide.

Even though my body was in prison and being tortured, my soul was free and it flourished. My jailers took everything away from me, but they could not take away my conscience or my faith.

Armando Valadeiros was a man of little power. He was oppressed and exploited for years.

However, he refused to deny what he believed. Then in 1982, outside the walls of the prisons where he was, the president of France got wind of the situation and advocated for his release.

[4 : 58] After 22 years of torture, the door to his cell was flung open and he was ushered to a plane that flew him out of the country and definitively to freedom.

Well, our text this morning bids us to something similar. There are endless pressures to acquiesce to the culture around us.

Things that would let us fit in more comfortably and quietly, seamlessly. Whether it's softening on gender and human sexuality or giving credence to the idea that our feelings are superior to objective truth.

Or even more subtle pressures like, it's fine to be involved with church, just don't get too carried away with it. Eventually, we drift from our convictions of living for our king's purposes.

We're lulled to sleep with no zeal in our hearts, no direction for our feet, and no saving word on our lips.

[6 : 09] Well, this letter was written to help us know where our allegiance lies. It was written to help us cut through the mirage of earthly powers to see the one who has all power and authority and to cling to him with all of our might.

It was written to strengthen our resolve that to deny the name of Christ for any other name would be spiritual suicide. This letter was written to help us endure, faithfully in Jesus Christ, no matter what comes.

I believe that the main point the Lord wants us to embrace from this letter is to hold fast to the name of Jesus Christ who loves us and will secure us in his presence.

Hold fast. We're going to break this into two points. The first being the open door that cannot be shut. And then the second, the loved ones that Christ will keep.

So, the open door that no one, that cannot be shut. One of the extraordinary things to note here is that only two churches out of the seven who receive these letters, there's only two that receive no rebuke or correction.

[7 : 27] The first was Smyrna in chapter two, which Walt preached a couple weeks ago. And the second one is here, the church in Philadelphia. So, it's, I think, fitting and wise of us to lean in and to listen.

What is it that they are doing right? Well, verse eight tells us three striking things about the church in Philadelphia. Here they are. They have little power.

They have kept my word, and they have not denied my name. So, when it says that they have little power, it's important to clarify what kind of power that they lack.

The Philadelphians did not live in an influential metropolis of any kind. The city that they lived in was ravaged by an earthquake just a few years earlier. And afterwards, people spread out and attempted to rebuild their lives, but they reverted to kind of like a more agricultural farming lifestyle.

So, in the eyes of the world, the city as a whole had lost forward progress. And there really wasn't anything impressive about it. Not only was the city not that powerful, this letter was written to Christians inside that city, who, as we've seen in other letters, were an anomaly.

[8 : 42] They didn't fit into any of the neat cultural boxes of belief. In fact, they were seen in large part as like a bizarre subset of Judaism. So, they're kind of a minority within a minority.

And even the local Jews joined in maligning the Christians to the point they were ostracized, both socially and economically. So, really, in every possible way, these people were at a disadvantage.

According to the world's categories of power, they had very little in terms of resources, manpower, influence, wealth.

And if we're honest, we probably wouldn't be very impressed with them either. But they are not rebuked for their lack of worldly power.

In spite of their powerlessness, they've kept the word and not denied the name. What's highlighted here is faithfulness.

[9 : 46] The church has something precious in their possession and they have refused to let it go. They kept it. So, what is it that they kept? It says right here, my word.

That's kind of a funny thing to say, isn't it? It didn't say they kept their word. Usually when you're making a promise of some sort, you would say something like, I promise I'll keep my word.

Right? Scout's honor. But in this case, the Philadelphians are keeping someone else's word. Someone else has made the promise. Someone else's name is showcased here as the one they have refused to deny.

Apparently, they've had opportunity to deny this name. They have been confronted with the why are you living like that? kind of questions.

What is it that you believe in? Who do you follow? They have an authority over them. This is what the Philadelphians are holding on to.

[10 : 48] So, whose name are they standing with? If not Caesar, if not Zeus, then who is it that they refuse to deny?

Well, look at verse 7. It says, the words of the Holy One, the true one. We know from the very first verse of the book of Revelation, the titles holy and true are associated with the Lord.

Even in Romans 6.10, it says, they cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

So, in our letter, Jesus Christ is being linked to the same names assigned to only God. The titles associated with God himself.

In other words, he's more than a man. He's more than a good teacher. He's more than a prophet. This is what Jesus claimed about himself during his earthly ministry.

[12 : 00] He wasn't nailed to the cross because he was a nice teacher and everybody liked him. No, he claimed divinity through both his words and his actions.

And what's more, he says that he is the true one. Remember, Jesus famously said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Nobody comes to the Father except through me. He has been denied and denounced over and over again as a false Messiah.

And yet, he is true. Truth is not established by a popular vote, but by God himself.

So it's likely that this particular title was chosen to reassure these feeble Philadelphians that in spite of the oppression that they face, Jesus is who he says he is.

[13 : 01] Well, if that wasn't enough, he also claims to have the keys of David and the ability to open and shut doors that nobody else can. So what's that all about?

What's he talking about? Well, this is a reference to Isaiah 22, which is where God establishes a leader over Israel named Eliakim. And this is what it says in Isaiah 22 about Eliakim.

And I will clothe him, speaking about God, will clothe Eliakim with your robe and will bind your sash on him and will commit your authority to his hand.

And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder, here it is, the key of the house of David.

He shall open and none shall shut. He shall shut and none shall open. Direct connection. You see, God's favor and authority are on this leader to rule over God's people.

[14 : 07] Having the keys to the house of David is this allusion to having access to God's kingdom. And this leader alone has authority to open and shut the doors to that kingdom.

So Eliakim is to be understood as looking forward to Jesus Christ. The point is that whereas Eliakim once ruled over Israel, now Christ rules over the church, the true Israel of God.

Jesus Christ alone determines who will and will not enter God's kingdom. That's what it's driving at. I was reminded recently, just thinking on this, my oldest son, Banner, wanting to put new batteries into his remote control car.

It was one of those that had like the little small panel and these like microscopic tiny screws that you can't do anything with. They're so small. It didn't matter if he tried to pry it off with his fingers or stuff a paper clip down in there or a penny.

He just couldn't get into these screws. Nothing was going to open that little panel. It was shut. But once he asked me for the little screwdriver,!

[15 : 18] It was done. Just like that. The panel was open, a battery was installed, and that car went from death to life. Right? Well, in a much greater way, Jesus reassures those without power that he has ultimate power to open the door to the kingdom.

Access to life is granted to those who come to the one who has the keys. That's what he's getting at. Jesus Christ is speaking to the Philadelphian church, but he's also speaking to us.

What implications does this have for Trinity Grace Church? Well, it's as if he's saying to us, Trinity Grace Church, I know that you have but little power and influence.

You don't have your own building. I know that. You don't have a ton of influential people or wealth or social capital, but don't be discouraged and don't be distracted.

There's something far more important than that kind of power. power. It's the name Jesus Christ. Oh, you of little power, Trinity Grace Church, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth and I am for you.

[16 : 40] I'm with you. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Trinity Grace Church, don't shrink back. Don't wait.

Do not be ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation. Hold fast to the name for there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved.

There's no other name under heaven by which people of McMinn County can be saved, including us. Trinity Grace Church, do we want to be a church first and foremost characterized by faithfulness to the one who has all power?

Is that what you want? Do we want to be a church characterized by living for the gospel that saved us? Do we live lives that require the power of God?

We don't have to wait for this. No building fund required. You don't have to wait for this. Jesus Christ has swung open the door to the kingdom and he bids us to come and live in his power today, each and every moment.

[17 : 52] But who is eligible for that? Who is it that can enter the kingdom and what is it that Christ is promising? Point number two, the loved ones that Christ will keep.

The loved ones that Christ will keep. Verse nine says, Behold, behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and 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. Well, this is the second mention in the letters about antagonism from a local Jewish community against Christians.

You remember just a couple weeks ago, Walt talked about this Jewish opposition to the church in Smyrna back in chapter two. The Jewish communities were trying to kind of distance themselves from being associated with these Christians.

Well, it's striking that in both letters, these Jews are referred to as being of the synagogue of Satan. Some strong language. A synagogue would have been associated with Jewish worship.

[19 : 07] However, Satan is the ancient enemy of God's people and purposes. So to say that these Jews are of the synagogue of Satan twists the place intended to worship God into the place that worships the arch enemy of God.

But aren't the Jews the people of God? How could this be said of God's chosen people? Well, look again at verse nine.

They say they are Jews and are not but lie. So are these ethnic imposters? Are they just pretending to be Jewish but they're actually Gentiles?

Well, if that were the case, the exact same thing could be said about the church in Philadelphia which was composed of ethnic Jews and Gentiles. So this accusation wouldn't make any sense at all, would it?

So if they are indeed ethnically Jewish but are being accused of not being Jews, the question then must be what does it mean to be a true Jew?

[20 : 17] Well, there's another distinction being made beyond biological ancestry and the distinction is this, belief in Jesus Christ.

That's the distinction. You remember in John chapter eight when Jesus banters back and forth with the Pharisees who are biologically Jews. He says that he knows they are physical descendants, biological descendants of Abraham.

He recognizes that, but spiritually they are children of the devil. This is Jesus talking to other Jews. Spiritually you're children of the devil. John 8, 44, you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him when he lies. He speaks out of his own character for he is a liar and the father of lies.

This is Jesus talking to Jews, holy Jews. So a biological Jew who is a descendant from Abraham physically can have one of two spiritual fathers, God or the devil.

[21 : 32] he's saying that they take after their spiritual father, the devil, and are liars just like him. This is strikingly similar, isn't it, to the language we see in Revelation we see associated with these Jews in Philadelphia.

They lie. So what is the linchpin for Jesus? How does one have God as his spiritual father?

If not on the basis of biology and descent from Abraham physically then what? Well Jesus says it very clearly in John 8 42.

Here it is. If God were your father you would love me. For I came from God and I am here.

I came not of my own accord but he sent me. This is it. How do you have God as your spiritual father? How are you a true Jew? Do you love Jesus?

[22 : 35] Do you receive Jesus? Do you proclaim his name or do you deny his name? This is the distinction between a true Jew and a false Jew.

What is your relationship to the claims of Jesus Christ? Do you need to be saved from sin? Then this is the way the truth and the life. He's here. Jesus. In the old covenant people were saved by faith looking forward to the Christ who would come.

In the new covenant people are saved by looking back to the Christ who has come. This is how Paul can argue in Galatians 3.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say and to offsprings referring to many but referring to one and to your offspring who is Christ.

And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring. Heirs according to the promise.

[23 : 42] If you are Christ's you are Abraham's offspring. God is your father, your spiritual father. This is the distinction between true Israel and false Israel.

it's a spiritual distinction based on faith in Jesus Christ. So if you continue to look at the verse, Jesus says, I will make them, talking about unbelieving Jews, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, talking about believing Jews and Gentiles together, aka Christians.

And they will learn that I have loved you. So this comment right here is drawn from Isaiah 60 14. Look at what Isaiah 60 14 says, the sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you and all who despise you shall bow down at your feet.

They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. You see the parallels? You see what is being said in this letter?

This is so vital to understand for so many reasons. Isaiah prophesies that Gentiles will come and bow down before Israel in the last days.

[25 : 07] In Isaiah's prophecy, the Gentiles are associated with unbelievers while Israel is associated with God's people. That's what's going on in that text.

But notice the reverse of this fulfillment in our passage. The Gentiles of Isaiah are now fulfilled by the ethnic Jews in Philadelphia while Isaiah's Israel, referring to God's people, is the mostly Gentile church in Philadelphia.

It's reversed. it's vital to understand that at the forefront of our text this morning is the truth that Jesus Christ is unashamedly and unreservedly loving his people.

He loves his people. He will leverage his power to care for and to vindicate his people. People from every tribe and tongue.

People from the poor and the powerless. People who need a Savior and have found a Savior in Jesus Christ. Oh, brothers and sisters, if God is for us, then who can be against us?

[26 : 20] If you are in Christ, he is for you. He is for you. In verse 10, we see that because they have been faithfully witnessing to Christ in spite of opposition, Christ promises to keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world.

Now, there are some who see this verse through kind of like an end times lens, and they think that this verse teaches a removal or a rapture of faithful Christians before a time of escalated physical judgment that comes on the whole earth.

this is the view that I personally grew up with, and I don't doubt that there are many of you in here that have grown up as Christians under teaching that would hold to this interpretation.

However, I do not believe that this text teaches that perspective. In fact, I believe that there are a number of reasons it would be actually counterproductive to the vitality of your faith to adhere to that teaching.

Many people hold to this doctrine thinking it's really going to get bad but God is going to get me out of here before there is any suffering and just get me out. I don't think that's what this text teaches but we need to ask a few questions to clarify what's being promised here.

[27 : 59] I want to know what's being promised here. The first question is who is the trial for? The purpose of testing is a judgment on unbelievers.

Those who dwell on earth is the phrase or other places is termed earth dwellers. It's a technical term used this way every time in Revelation and it refers exclusively to the unsaved especially to idol worshippers.

So a question would be must believers be raptured and not physically present for judgment on unbelievers to happen?

Well we know from past events such as the flood in Genesis and the plagues in Exodus believers unbelievers were together God can and does carry out judgment on unbelievers while believers are physically present.

Second when it says the trial will come on the whole world it could possibly be referring to final judgment however we have to remember that in the New Testament authors often use the same language in a localized sense I have a couple of examples for you Luke 2 1 in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered Acts 11 28!

[29 : 29] a great famine over all the global experiences so given those examples the testing being referred to here could be a localized trial in Asia Minor this region or more broadly throughout the Roman Empire thirdly I think it's worth questioning if this is a reference to a specific period of time reserved for the end of human history if so it seems strange to me that Jesus would promise one church in Asia Minor in the first century that they would be protected from an event that not one single individual from that church would ever see if we are still waiting for a rapture!

before the great tribulation thousands of years after this letter was sent to the church how would this promise be of any encouragement to those believers what relevance would it have to these believers in Philadelphia who received this promise especially since the promise is a specific reward to them for their specific faithfulness in proclaiming the word of God in the midst of a specific historical event so I do not believe that this text promises an extraction from a physical trial instead it seems to promise spiritual protection through the trial God would be more consistent with not not just this text but with the Bible's teaching as a whole God does not teach an escapist faith but an enduring faith in fact there's only one other place in the

New Testament where the same phrase keep from occurs and that is in Jesus' prayer for believers in John 17 this is a prayer for us John 17 it says this I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that here it is you keep them from the evil one it's the only other place in the testament where this combination occurs Christ is speaking here primarily of spiritual rather than physical protection believers are not promised immunity from physical suffering in contrast we are to expect it Jesus said in John 16 33 I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace in the world you will have tribulation but take heart I have overcome the world so verse 10 in my estimation does not speak of a physical rapture before the beginning of a great tribulation instead the

Philadelphian believers and all faithful believers to follow will endure physical suffering but the more glorious promise is that we will be kept spiritually safe in the midst of it the door of salvation that has been swung open by Jesus Christ is firmly!

fixed the point here is consistent with what's already been said for those who are in Christ there is nothing to fear not even death itself no amount of suffering or trial Romans 8 35 through 37 who shall separate believers in Trinity Grace Church from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword no no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us in all of these things so we forge ahead in the power of his might knowing that if we are in Christ Jesus we are being kept from spiritual destruction he is with you and he is for you no matter what nothing can separate you from the love of

[33 : 55] Jesus Christ to live is Christ and to die is gain so hold fast to the name no matter what may come not only will Christ keep us spiritually secure through all earthly trials he will also keep us relationally secure as a people for his own possession verse 11 and 12 they are intended to stir us up to endure Jesus is coming soon to set all things right hold fast to what you have that's the message hold fast to what you have align yourselves with him continue to live for him in all circumstances regardless of how little worldly power you have don't give up no matter how long the prison sentence or the pain you endure in this world do not deny his name to the one who conquers Jesus promises that he will be made a pillar in the temple of his

God this is in! contrast to the synagogue of Satan right the synagogue of Satan those who hold fast to Jesus Christ will be established forever an immovable pillar this is a permanent fixture in the temple of God doesn't doesn't go out this is a picture of just this unshakable belonging in the very presence of God will never be taken out of his presence again not only that but there will be names written on every believer this is like the name tags that we stick on the kids when we send them to the TG kids it's similar to that the name tag is connected to the parent who has guardianship over that child and that name tag is connected to a parent and a place called home every kid that checks in well in a similar way there in Christ and it has God's name God's home and

God's son printed on it these are all expressions of this eternal belonging with God and fellowship in him forever in his presence so for anyone who is not a believer in Jesus Christ I want to extend to you the offer of belonging to the family of God acceptance is not based on your biology or your abilities it is the free gift of God and Jesus Christ the only criteria is your sin that needs forgiveness Jesus the holy and true one went to the cross to pay for the penalty of sin so that anyone anyone who repents of their sin can align themselves with the name of Jesus Christ the door of salvation is firmly!

open and freedom in Christ is available so come come and for those who believe this morning oh I want to encourage you do not deny the name do not deny the name in the famous hymn a mighty fortress is our God pen by the reformer Martin Luther the last two stanzas wonderfully capture the enduring message of Christians whether in Philadelphia or in Athens Tennessee this is what it says and though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us we will not fear for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us the prince of darkness grim we tremble not for him his rage we can endure for lo his doom is sure one little word shall fail him that word above all earthly powers no thanks to them abideth the spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth let goods and kindred go this mortal life also the body they may kill

God's truth abide Still his kingdom is forever! So let us hold fast Trinity Grace Church let us hold fast to the name of Jesus Christ who loves us and is for us and will secure us in his presence forever and ever may God help us Lord we come to you now and praise you praise your name thank you that you have opened a door of salvation that he who is mighty has done a great thing he holds the keys to the kingdom and you have allowed the powerless the lowly the ones that are needy the impoverished ones you have invited them in and no one can take us out no trial no tribulation so lord we ask that you help us to endure help us to stride forward confident not in ourselves but in the one who has all power and authority in heaven and on earth and has undoubtedly committed himself to walk with us through every moment until you bring us home to glory

[39 : 29] Thank you! We pray these things in Jesus name! Amen! You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens For more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at