

Philadelphia: The Missional Church
LL&L
Revelation 3:7-13
10/22/23

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. Revelation 3:7-13. Pray.

We are continuing on in our series this morning through the first few chapters of Revelation. John, the last living apostle of Jesus, is in exile on the island of Patmos and he has a vision, where Jesus dictates to him **7 letters to 7 churches in 7 cities** that make up the ancient Roman postal route.

And we've been exploring what the letters from Jesus to these ancient churches have to say to us today as a church in Charlotte, NC in 2023.



And we turn our attention this morning to the penultimate letter - the letter to the church in Philadelphia. Like Smyrna, this church receives no correction from Jesus, only commendation for their faithfulness to Him.

They are suffering, trying to remain faithful to Christ in a hostile world, and Jesus comes to encourage them to persevere and hold fast to the promise of what is to come.

Philadelphia

Now, before we get to the letter, two important things you need to know about the city of Philadelphia.

The first, is Philadelphia's strategic location.

Philadelphia, **as you can see on the map**, is about 25 miles SE of Sardis. And it sat right on a main highway that linked the coastal city of Smyrna, about 100 miles due west, ran through Philadelphia, and then headed into the rest of ancient Asia Minor, what is now Modern Day Turkey.

So folks would enter the port of Smyrna with goods from places like Rome and North Africa, travel up the highway, and Philadelphia was sort of the last stop before heading into the rest of Asia Minor. It had earned the reputation, because of its location, as "the Gateway to the East". It was a city strategically located for the spreading of Roman culture and goods to the rest of the world.

The second important fact for you to know is that Philadelphia was a region living under constant threat of earthquakes.

I'll spare you the 10th grade science lesson about tectonic plates, just know that this area is set up for a good amount of earthquake activity. In 1969, this area, which is now the modern day city **Alasehir**, was destroyed by a massive 6.8 magnitude earthquake leaving 3,000 buildings destroyed and taking the lives of 50 of its citizens. In the century leading up to this letter, it had experienced two big ones. One in 17 AD and one, just as they were finishing rebuilding in 60 AD.



The destruction was so bad from these two earthquakes, that the Roman emperor Tiberius had to step in and help this city rebuild. Which of course, you guessed it, led to Roman loyalty and the worship of the Roman emperor and Roman gods which then of course led to persecution for the Christians.

So Philadelphia – strategic location. Lots of earthquakes. Keep that in the back of your mind as we head into the letter.

Jesus + The Open Door

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.’

Once again, we’re starting with a reminder about the work and nature of Jesus.

And here we see three things:

Holy – Pure. He’s undefiled. Jesus is perfectly righteous. | **True** – Genuine, faithful. He’s trustworthy.

But I want to focus on the 3rd phrase – The one who has **the key of David**. This is a reference back to a prophecy about Jesus in Isaiah 22 and its referring to Jesus’ sovereignty over salvation.. Having the “Key of David” means Jesus rules over the Kingdom of David, which is another way the Scriptures refer to the Kingdom of God. Jesus comes through the line of King David, He sits on the throne of David (Psalm 132) as He rules and reigns.

So when Jesus reminds Philadelphia – “I have the key of David” – He is saying, “I am the one who controls entrance into the kingdom of God.”

You don’t get into the kingdom of God apart from Jesus. **You don’t get forgiveness of sins, salvation, life forever with God except through Jesus.**

John 14:6 – “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus has the key of David, meaning Jesus is the only way to enter into God’s forever kingdom.

- Good works cannot get you into the kingdom of God.
- Sincere intentions to be a good person cannot get you into the kingdom of God.
- Putting your “faith in faith” as an abstract idea cannot get you into the kingdom of God.

Jesus is the entry door into the kingdom. He holds the keys. And it is only through faith in and surrender to him that we can come to know and be known by God.

Now, let’s see what the one with the keys of David says to this church in Philadelphia...

8 I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.

What does Jesus mean by an “open door”. Remember – whenever something isn’t immediately clear, we let Scripture interpret Scripture. *This idea of an “open door” is one used in several places in Scripture to refer to God-given opportunities for mission and evangelism. For sharing the gospel with those who don’t know Jesus, whether that be by going across the world, or going across the street.*

Look at a few of these examples...

- Acts 14:27 – **And when they (Paul and Barnabas) arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.**
- 1 Cor 16:8-9 – **But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.**
- Col 4:3 – **At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.**

An open door in the Scriptures refers to opportunities to make disciples – to introduce people to Jesus and then build them up in the faith.

So Jesus looks at the church in Philadelphia and says – I am the one who people must believe in to be saved. I have the keys into the kingdom of God. I know your works, I know your faithfulness – so I’m opening up doors for you to take the good news about me to the world, and no one can shut it. No one can stop you.

Philadelphia, this city strategically placed for the spreading of Roman culture, ideas, and goods to the surrounding world, the “gateway to the East”, Jesus says I want to use you, church, for the spreading of my gospel instead. You are in a strategic place, and I want to use that strategic place, I’m going to open doors, so that through you the gospel will spread, ***both in Philadelphia and beyond.***

Pastor Chuck Swindoll – **“As the geographic gateway to the East, Philadelphia sat at the crossroads of several languages, cultures, and people groups. From an evangelistic and missionary perspective, this dynamic, diminutive church had great opportunities for ministry.”**

Turn to Us

The church in Philadelphia is being invited by Christ to leverage the strategic place He’s put them for the advancement of the gospel both near and far. Both in Philadelphia and to the rest of Asia Minor. Jesus wants to work through this church for the advancement of His Kingdom.

I have set before you an open door philadelphia – gospel opportunities to further my kingdom. This is a Jesus-given mission he’s laying before them and he tells them — no one can shut it. No one can stop you. Step through! That’s the invitation. Step through! I want to use you to further my gospel, to further my kingdom in this world.

And here’s the Biblical reality, and we’ve talked about this before so if you’ve been around this isn’t new – Jesus says the same thing to you and to me. I want to use you to further my kingdom in this world.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you have open doors Jesus has set before you to take the gospel both near and far...and you are not simply invited ... but expected and commanded...to walk through them. To participate in ministry and evangelism. To participate in sharing the gospel, leading others to Jesus, discipling them, helping them follow Christ.

That’s a YOU thing if you’re a Christian. This is not for the special forces of Christians. This is not for the spiritually elite. This is every Christian taking up the God-given call and command to be a minister of the gospel near and far.

That’s the call on the church at Philadelphia – I have opened a door for ministry and evangelism.

That’s the call on Citizens Church, Jesus is saying to us – I have opened a door for ministry and evangelism.

So here’s the question we need to wrestle with this morning...

BIG QUESTION – Are you willing to be used by Jesus to further His Kingdom?

Do you see the open doors Jesus has given for you to take the gospel both near and far, and are you willing in courage and faith to walk through them?

Let's consider the first part of that question for just a second – do you see the open doors? Can I just take a few minutes, pastorally, to show you the open doors for the gospel that exist in our world today. The opportunities available to you to advance God's Kingdom purposes. Let's start zooming out, and then we'll zoom in.

THE WORLD

Joshua Project:

- **16,000 People Groups in the world today – common history, language, beliefs, identity**
- **7,000 are UPGs – < 2% of their population is evangelical Christian (3B people)**
- **3,000 are UUPGs – No churches, no believers, no missionaries, no Bible translation**
- **20-25% of the world's population - 1.5-2B people have no chance of hearing the good news of Jesus or access to the gospel**

OUR CITY

FOR CLT - State of Our City:

- **Between 2016 and 2021, the “churched” population CLT (attended 1x in 6 mo) declined from 49% to 37%.**
- **Between 2016 and 2021, the “de-churched” population (used to attend, no longer do) increased from 35% to 57%.**
- **In 2022, ~50% of our city can be defined as religious “nones” (no affiliation) – 1.35 Million people.**
- **Experts say we need to plant 40 new churches every year in our city just to keep up with population growth, which some statistics say have >100 people moving to the Charlotte Metro every single day.**

YOUR LIFE

- **Your neighbors – do you know their stories? Their pains? Their joys? Their names?**
- **Your coworkers – That one that for some reason has taken a liking to you and keeps stopping to chat even though you're super busy.**
- **Your friends, your gym buddies, your trivia team, your playdate moms, your kids.**

Do you see the open doors God has and is putting before you...

Excuses and Answers

...Are you willing in courage and faith to walk through them?

Here's where I think the letter to Philadelphia in Revelation 3 gets especially helpful for us this morning. Because in my experience, both as a pastor but also as a Christian with the same call as the rest of you to take the gospel to the world, some excuses start to arise in my heart.

Maybe I don't say them out loud but they're often there in the back of my mind as a way to talk myself out of stepping out in courageous witnessing, courageous evangelism. That keep me from even considering moving overseas, or walking across the street for the sake of sharing the gospel. And some of those excuses, I think could've been made by the church in Philadelphia.

So let's work through the rest of the letter, and let me pull out some of these excuses we might make and how the letter to Philadelphia answers them for us.

Excuse #1 – I'm too weak to share the gospel.

8 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...

It's likely that this church would've been nothing more than a house church. 30-40 people max. In a house. In a pagan city. Most of them would have been new Christians. Probably no big outreach budget. No flashy kids ministry. No high production worship. No great spiritual formation resources.

And I love Jesus here. He's just honest with them – I know you're tiny and weak and powerless.

Maybe you feel this in your own life. When you think about your own spiritual gifts and abilities and power. Maybe you feel like...**I have but little power...**

- I just became a Christian 6 months ago. I don't know anything about the Bible, how am I supposed to help others read it or understand it?
- I haven't studied theology. I haven't been to seminary. I don't know how to defend my faith when my friends ask questions.
- I have this sin issue, I'm fighting it but it's winning most days. How am I supposed to go take the gospel to my friends, when I'm struggling to believe it myself?

Like I'm stumbling along in my faith most days, and now you're saying I'm called to go share the gospel? I'm too weak. I'm too afraid. I don't know enough.

But here's the good news, church – **the power for ministry was never supposed to come from you.**

Here's the answer to our excuse:

Answer #1 – Our power comes from Jesus and His Word

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

Jesus isn't surprised by the weaknesses of this church.

- He doesn't say – I'm opening a door for you *because* you're powerful and strong, and have tons of resources and are super gifted in evangelism.
- He doesn't say "you think you're weak, but actually you're strong" in some attempt to puff up their self-esteem.

What does he say? You're weak. You've got little power. That's a fact ... and ***yet I am opening the door because you've kept my word and have not denied my name.***

The power for ministry, the power for evangelism, comes not from us ... but from Jesus and His Word.

- It is His Word which is sharper than any two edged sword and divides the heart.
- It is His Word which calls forth in Ezekiel to make dead bones live again.
- It is His Word which goes out and raises up dead means to walk in the newness of life with Christ.
- It is His Word which goes forth in power.

And it is the power of Christ, who reigns over the enemy, who reigns over death, who reigns over sin – who moves in power as we are faithful to step in and share the gospel. As we are faithful to go to those around us who do not know Him.

The expectation is not – do this in your power, do this because of your power. Jesus knows you're weak – He's the one who is strong.

In fact, and here's the beautiful thing about how our God works – the power of Jesus and His Word, works not despite our weakness ... but through our weakness.

2 Cor 12:9 – But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2 Cor 4:7 – But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The most valuable treasure the world has ever known, the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – and he puts it in “clay pots” – fragile, breakable, weak, stumbling us.

He chooses to use us, in our weakness, in our inability, in our doubting, in our fear – to show that it was never about our power in the first place. The power belongs to God. He is the one who can save. He is the one who changes hearts.

So yes we're weak. ***But that's not a bug. That's a feature!*** So that Christ may get the glory as He shows Himself powerful through our weakness and frailty in evangelism.

Excuse #2 – I'm not in a season where I can share the gospel.

I'm too busy. I have small children. Work has me here, there, and everywhere. Whatever label we want to put on the season, it can become an excuse for why “mission just doesn't work for me right now.”

I think an excuse I see often, both in myself and in others is – I'm in a season of suffering and hardship. I can't think about sharing the gospel when I'm focused on surviving the week, the month.

This is easily an excuse the church at Philadelphia could have made. Just like Smyrna, they too are facing what Jesus calls “the synagogue of Satan.” They too are being betrayed by the Jewish community in this city. ***Now again, this is not anti-semitic language.*** This is Jesus pointing out that these Jewish people, the friends, family members who would have at one point been in close relationship with these Christians, now that these Christians have professed faith in Christ they are doing the work of Satan by turning on them, betraying them, ratting them out and handing them over to the Roman rulers to be persecuted.

So it would be easy for the church in Philadelphia to shrink back from the mission of God, because, after all, look at how much they're going through. I'm supposed to engage in evangelism? I'm just trying to not get killed for my faith. It would have been easy to think their suffering exempted them from the call of God to take the gospel both near and far.

And we can give the same excuse as well. As we experience very real, painful hurt...suffering that comes from living as broken fallen people in a broken fallen world, we begin to shrink back from engaging in the mission of God out of self-preservation. I'm just trying to survive this situation, this circumstance, I can't even think about extending help to others right now, sharing the gospel with others right now.

Now there are certainly seasons of our lives in which we need extra healing, extra time for soul care and rest. To grieve and to process what the Lord is doing.

This past summer when we walked through immediate grief and pain of our miscarriage, I took a step back from ministry for a bit. I didn't preach for about a month, I stepped back from a lot of ministry responsibilities in that initial hit to get rest and to process and be there for my family.

I get that. I really really do. But the experience I had, at least in my own heart, is that I noticed how easy it was for **my suffering to become an excuse for selfishness.**

And to miss what Jesus promises, even here in Revelation 3...

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. 10 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.

Because of their faithfulness to patiently endure, to seek out the mission of God, to hold fast to Christ and His Word even in the suffering...Jesus says I'm going to use that to show to the world, and to your enemies – how much I love you.

There's a way in which Jesus is going to use the faithful, patient endurance of Philadelphia in the midst of the season they are in to further His kingdom purposes in the world.

In other words, though the excuse might be – I'm not in a season where I can share the gospel...

Answer #2 – Jesus uses our seasons for kingdom purposes.

What if our season is not something meant to keep us from mission, but rather something God wants to use, among many things to propel the mission forward? ***I think about Paul + Silas in jail (Acts 16)...***

- What if your season of little kid craziness, God can actually use to open doors into the lives of other families with young kids for the sake of sharing the gospel?
- What if your season of work travel chaos, God can actually use to open doors into the lives of your coworkers for the sake of sharing the gospel?
- What if your season of suffering and pain, God can actually use to open doors into the lives of your neighbors, friends, and family members who have suffered in similar ways.

I was reminded this week of the words of the hymn writer Isaac Wardell, in his song taken directly from psalm 126:

**Although we are weeping, Lord, help us keep sowing
The seeds of Your Kingdom, For the day You will reap them
Your sheaves we will carry, Lord, please do not tarry
All those who sow weeping will go out with songs of joy**

So I ask you...

Are you willing to be used by Jesus to further His Kingdom?

Do you see the open doors Jesus has given for you to take the gospel both near and far, and are you willing in courage and faith to walk through them?

We may think we are too weak to obey God's call to take the gospel to the world, but Christ is magnified in our weakness.

We may think our season is too big of a barrier to obey God's call to take the gospel to the world, but Christ wants to work through and in our season.

Promises

And here's the promises for those who hold fast to Christ. To His Word. Who are faithful to His mission even in the midst of suffering. Even though we are weak with little power...

11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 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. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

We started today by talking about Philadelphia's earthquake problem. Twice in the century leading up to this letter, the city was devastated by earthquakes. And yet both times, there was one temple that stood strong. One temple and its pillars never gave way.

Jesus points to that picture and says – to those who conquer. Despite your little power. Despite the synagogue of satan coming after you. For those who cling to my Word and my name. To those who step out in faith for the sake of my kingdom mission – ***you will be a pillar***. I will make sure you do not crumble. I will make sure in the temple of God, in the new Jerusalem which will come down out of heaven – you will stand forever.

Jesus starts his letter to this frail, weak, stumbling church – I have the keys to the kingdom.

And he ends his letter to this frail, weak, stumbling church – I am coming again soon and you will be with me forever.

And keeping our eyes on him and on those realities – who He is, what He will do – is what propels us forward into His kingdom mission, to take the gospel to the world, to see these open doors for evangelism, for ministry, for disciple making – and to step through them in confidence because King Jesus rules and reigns over all and He is coming again.

Pray.

Interview

Before we move into our time of response, I want to introduce you to some new friends of mine and show you this letter lived out in a tangible way.

Zach + Katie Russell – Missionaries to the Middle East

Q1 – Tell me a little bit about your background, was intl missions in a place like the middle east ever on your radar growing up?

Q2 – When you first sensed a call to the nations, what were some of your hesitancies/push backs?

Q3 – Tell us a little bit about your family dynamics, why on the surface does this make very little sense?

Q4 – Tell us a bit more about the work you'll be doing.

Q5 – How can folks get involved?