

We've been studying the letters to the 7 churches in what we now call "Turkey" – when the book of Revelation was written, it was called "Asia". And today we've come to the 6th church on that 7-church-circuit – the church in Philadelphia.

Out of the 7 churches, there were only 2 of them, that Jesus didn't have anything bad to say about. And the church in Philadelphia, is 1 of those churches. So, we've probably got a fair bit to learn from this church – "What are they doing right?", that Jesus would commend them...

So, let's have a look at what Jesus says to this church, keeping in mind, that as we read these 7 letters, they're not just addressing churches of John's day – they're addressing the church of today. And so we can be asking ourselves, "Is today's letter – is this letter to the church in Philadelphia, also a letter to us?"

Revelation 3:7-13

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.

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, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 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. 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.'

In the Gospel of John, Jesus healed a blind man. And when the religious leaders (in this case, the Pharisees) heard about it, they wouldn't believe that Jesus had healed him. And so they called the blind man's parents in, to question them. But his parents wouldn't tell them that Jesus had healed him, because they were afraid of being put out of the synagogue. John tells us that ^{John 9:22....} the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue"

"So what???", I might hear you might say... Well, we have to understand, that for a Jew, to be put out of the Synagogue, this was a 'cutting off from their community'. Everything of what it meant for them to be an Israelite – their very national identity, was all bound up in their acceptance at and the fellowship of the local Synagogue.

Imagine if **you** were in a position, where if you confessed Jesus to be Christ and Lord, you would be totally excluded...

- Excluded from all education possibilities.
- Excluded from paid employment.
- Excluded from sports clubs; and
- from the aisles of the local grocery shop.

Imagine if you were cut off like that... And so the blind man's parents, weren't going to risk that, by telling the Pharisees what Jesus had done.

But of course the blind man kept testifying that Jesus had healed him. And sure enough, he **was** put out of the Synagogue – that's worse than being “de-friended”.

And this incident with the blind man's expulsion from the Synagogue (Maybe I should say “the seeing man's expulsion”)... This incident happened, very soon after Jesus outright said to the unbelieving Jews, “Your father isn't God. Your father is the devil, because you don't believe in me”¹.

Any **person** or any **religion**, that doesn't accept that Jesus is the Christ, (and the only way to God), well they're not agents of God at all – their working for the Devil. And if this is the case with God's chosen people, why would we believe, that any **other** religion could lead to God?

Let's step forwards now, to the church in Philadelphia. Philadelphia, by the way, means “city of brotherly love”. But for the Christians in Philadelphia - well, they weren't feeling the love. The local Jewish synagogue hated them...

The Jews were the ones who claimed to hold the truth... They were the ones, who were supposed to be God's chosen people – the line – the lineage, who was supposed to descend, from King David, down to the Messiah... But when their Messiah came, they rejected Him.

And **some** synagogues, were places where people were open to hearing about Jesus. And they were the first place, where the early Christian missionaries always began to preach... But most Synagogues, like this one in Philadelphia, continued to reject Jesus as the messiah, and they became sources of persecution to **any**, who would name Jesus as the Christ. And so Jesus, was very cutting. They're not a synagogue of God at all – "They're a synagogue of Satan."

And I think that's why, in this letter, Jesus paints a very Jewish picture of Himself;

- **He** is the holy one. The true one.
- **He** holds the key of David.

Can you work out what's going on here? These are all Old Testament allusions.

The Jewish leaders in the local synagogue, are telling these Christians:

- "We're the connect, between our forefathers, and the Messiah".
- "You've been deceived.
- You're following a lie."
- **We're** God's people.
- **We** hold the truth...
- **We** have the way to God.
- And you're **wrong**.

And they threw them out and shut the door in their face.

And Jesus flips all that on to its head. **I'm** the holy one. **I'm** the true one. **I'm** the source of life in the Kingdom of God."

I have the key of David. **I** open the door, and **I shut** the door...

And I hold the door open for you...

So, that's the **external** factors, impacting on them, but what's the church in Philadelphia like?

Well, as I read this letter, once again, (and I shouldn't be surprised by this anymore) I'm **struck** that what **Jesus** values in a church, can be **so very** different to what **we** value in a church.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that when we were on holidays, we were looking for a church to visit, and as I looked at the web sites of the various churches, I noticed a number of them, claimed to be "a church of influence". They were a church of influence, and if you joined with them, you could be a person of influence....

And that sounds good – that sounds appealing... But is that the sort of church that Jesus found in Philadelphia? No. Jesus said: "**I know that you have but little power**".

Generally, when **we** look for a church, we're looking for a **strong** church – We're looking for a church that has **power** and **influence** in the community – a church that makes people sit up and take notice of them... But here was a church that had very little power. They didn't have much influence at all.

They weren't looked up to in the community,,, in fact they were frowned upon.... , but it was a church that Jesus valued.

A month or so ago, we read the letter that Jesus wrote to the church in Sardis. And **they** had a reputation for being alive, but as far as Jesus was concerned, they were just about dead – they were weak. Do you get this? Humans would look at a church, and say, “They’re alive. They’re on fire for God. They’re strong. They’re really pumping for God.”... But Jesus sees them as weak and dead...

Whereas the church in Philadelphia appeared to have very little strength, but as far as Jesus is concerned, they’re just right...

What is it that Jesus congratulated them for? Jesus said, **I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ... you have kept my word about patient endurance**

Two things: They endured – no matter what they had to suffer – no matter how much they were looked down upon; persecuted; and cut off from their community. They endured.

And they did not deny Jesus' Name. Jesus values, “a steadfast witness”. Jesus values a church, who will not shrink inside of itself, because they’re too afraid to testify to the Name of Jesus in a society that **despises** the Name of Jesus...

Do you think maybe, “This could be relevant for us”? We live in a society that despises the Name of Jesus. And Jesus is looking for a people who will not shrink from testifying to His Name, despite the opposition...

And here was this church in Philadelphia, in a society that very much despised the Name of Jesus, but they did not deny Jesus' name – do you know what that means? **They openly shared the Gospel in the community around them, no matter how much they were shut out because of it...**

Because even though the doors in their community were being shut to them, Jesus held open a much more important door – a door that nobody else could **ever** shut.

You know, modern evangelism today, we often look for some kind of program, or some kind of activity or some kind of service, that the community wants, and we put a lot of work into it, so that somehow, the community really value us... And then maybe this week or maybe next week, we might be able to get a tiny little word in there about Jesus...

But do you know what Jesus is after? Jesus is after a people, who could not imagine waking up to a day, where they're not going to personally share their faith with someone...

What kind of a church are we here? Will we only proclaim to the world, that Jesus is the Christ, – the Son of God, if we feel that the world sees us as a people of power, or a people of influence??? Or a people who have earned the right to tell them about the Messiah??? Or are we willing to proclaim this from our weakness? Are we willing to proclaim to the world,

that Jesus is the Christ, even if they shut us out because of it???? What kind of church are we here?

Here's a truth we need to be aware of – and we need to know this, **before** we set out to follow Jesus... : To follow the path, that opens the doors of heaven, will very often mean, that the doors of the world will slam in our face.

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But isn't it worth it? All this church in Philadelphia has to do, is to keep on doing what it's already been doing. Jesus said to them: ¹¹ **I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.**

Do you understand what He's saying? He's talking about their salvation – their place in His new Kingdom. Jesus makes a promise in v10, that He will be with them **through** the trials and the persecutions. He talks about patient endurance. Trials and persecutions, is something that they will have to endure, but Jesus will keep them through it.

All they have to do, is to never deny the Name of Jesus – to just keep on proclaiming “Jesus is the Christ”.

And here's the reward: Jesus says, ¹² **The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.**

Yay, He'll turn them into marble... No.

We're told there will **be** no temple in the New Jerusalem...

Revelation 21:²² **And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.**

So, what's Jesus telling them?

Well, a pillar – we might see as a symbol of strength, but I think the image that's being portrayed here, is “permanence”. A pillar, is integral to a building. And thus, a pillar must be permanent.

And so what Jesus is saying here, is “If you endure – if you continue to be my witnesses, it doesn't matter how much the world cuts you off, and shuts you out, the door is open for you, to my Kingdom, and you will be permanently in me, and in the Lord God Almighty.

How's that for a promise???

Sometimes we refer to someone as being “a pillar of the church”. What that means is they are someone, who is so active in that church, and they do so much, that most people couldn't imagine that church even existing, if that person wasn't there. That church would either cease to be, or its entire character would change, if that person wasn't there...

But as a friend of mine says, “Cemeteries are full of people who the world couldn't live without.” And a healthy church, continues to live – it continues in its worship, and it continues in its service, even when those who we consider to be “the pillars of the church” are no longer there. Because a church –

a healthy church, doesn't just have one or 2 pillars – It's **full** of pillars.

And so I believe, “Today is a challenge for us, about, “What it means to be a pillar in God's church.””

To be a pillar, is to be a witness for Jesus Christ, not just in the ‘safe confines’ of a church, but out in the world.

- Always witnessing
- Patiently enduring
- Trusting in Jesus,

And being carried by Jesus, knowing that as the doors of the world slam in our face, the door to the Heavenly city – and fellowship with God, is open, inviting, and forever.

Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ John 8:39-47

ⁱⁱ Some commentators have affirmed that the way in which Christ will protect believers from the coming tribulation of 3:10 is by physically “rapturing” them from earth into heaven. This is primarily argued on the basis that this view best accords with the most logical and literal force of τηρέω ἐκ (“keep from”). However, Gundry has shown the improbability of this understanding by demonstrating parallels between Rev. 3:10 and John 17:15, which is the only other NT occurrence of τηρέω with ἐκ: there Christ prays, “I ask not that you take them out of the world, but that you *keep them from* (τηρήσεις αὐτοὺς ἐκ) the evil one.” Thus Jesus denies a physical removal from tribulation and affirms a spiritual protection from the devil (τηρέω [“to keep”] with ἀπό [“from”] in Prov. 7:5 and Jas. 1:27 has the same idea of protection from evil for those living in the midst of evil).

Beale, G.K., 1999. *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.