

DEAR CHURCH,

Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation

Bible Fellowship Discussion Guide

To the Church in Philadelphia - Revelation 3:7-13

Open It

1. *What are some examples of progress we've seen at our church in the last ten years?
2. What groups would you cite as the biggest present-day enemies of the church?

Explore It

1. What did Christ say about His power? (3:7)
2. By what descriptions or names did Jesus call those who claimed to be Jews? (3:9)
3. What humbling act did Jesus say He would force the enemies of the church of Philadelphia to perform? (3:9)
4. What worldwide event was predicted by Christ? (3:10)
5. *What was promised to the church at Philadelphia because of its patient endurance? (3:10)
6. *How did Jesus instruct the believers in Philadelphia to prepare for His coming? (3:11)
7. What did Jesus promise at the conclusion of this letter? (3:11-12)
8. How did Jesus challenge us? (3:11-13)
9. What promises were made to "him who overcomes" in Philadelphia? (3:12)
10. In addition to the church at Philadelphia, who else was encouraged to heed this message? (3:13)

Get It

1. What difference does it make to you that Christ is "holy and true"?
2. How can we obey Christ and keep standing up for Him even when we are physically and mentally exhausted?
3. How might you persuade a friend that Christ is the ultimate power in the universe?
4. *What can we do to prepare for Christ's return?
5. Why can we rejoice even when we are persecuted by hostile anti-God forces?
6. Why are some Christians seemingly more able or better equipped to "endure patiently"?
7. How is our church most like the church in Philadelphia? How is it different?
8. What advice would you give to a Christian friend who expressed physical exhaustion and a lack of spiritual strength?

Apply It

1. How can you share what you have learned so far in Revelation with a non-Christian friend who is looking for spiritual answers?
2. In what areas of your life do you need to turn away from wrong attitudes?
3. Where can you go for the encouragement you need to keep walking with Christ in a hostile world?

Brief Commentary on Revelation 3:7-13

By Matthew Henry

The same Lord Jesus has the key of government and authority in and over the church. He opens a door of opportunity to his churches; he opens a door of utterance to his ministers; he opens a door of entrance, opens the heart. He shuts the door of heaven against the foolish, who sleep away their day of grace; and against the workers of iniquity, how vain and confident soever they may be. The church in Philadelphia is commended; yet with a gentle reproof. Although Christ accepts a little strength, yet believers must not rest satisfied in a little, but strive to grow in grace, to be strong in faith, giving glory to God. Christ can discover this his favour to his people, so that their enemies shall be forced to acknowledge it. This, by the grace of Christ, will soften their enemies, and make them desire to be admitted into communion with his people. Christ promises preserving grace in the most trying times, as the reward of past faithfulness; To him that hath shall be given. Those who keep the gospel in a time of peace, shall be kept by Christ in an hour of temptation; and the same Divine grace that has made them fruitful in times of peace, will make them faithful in times of persecution. Christ promises a glorious reward to the victorious believer. He shall be a monumental pillar in the temple of God; a monument of the free and powerful grace of God; a monument that shall never be defaced or removed. On this pillar shall be written the new name of Christ; by this will appear, under whom the believer fought the good fight, and came off victorious.

Extensive Background on Revelation 3:7-13

By Enduring Word Commentary - *David Guzik*

Jesus' letter to the church at Philadelphia

1. (7a) The character of the city of Philadelphia.

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,

a. **Philadelphia:** The name means *brotherly love*, and this city was the youngest of the seven cities, and was originally founded as a missionary outpost for Hellenism, the culture of ancient Greece.

i. “The original purpose behind this key city was to make it a center for spreading Greek language, culture and manners throughout the Asian provinces.” (Hocking)

ii. “Philadelphia had been built with the deliberate intention that it might become a missionary city. Beyond Philadelphia lay the wilds of Phrygia and the barbarous tribes; and it was intended that

the function of Philadelphia should be to spread the Greek language, the Greek way of life, the Greek civilization, throughout the regions beyond.” (Barclay)

iii. The city gained its name after its founder – Attalus the Second – who was nicknamed *Philadelphos*.

b. **Philadelphia**: This was a *prosperous* city. “Philadelphia commanded one of the greatest highways in the world, the highway which led from Europe to the East. Philadelphia was the gateway from one continent to another.” (Barclay)

c. **Philadelphia**: This city was also known for beautiful buildings (it was called the “little Athens”) and her earthquakes, which required frequent evacuations.

i. “To walk through its temple-scattered streets was to be reminded of Athens, the center of worship of the Olympian gods.” (Barclay)

2. (7b) Jesus describes Himself to the church at Philadelphia.

‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”:

a. **These things says He who is holy, He who is true**: Jesus reminded the church in Philadelphia that He was **holy** and **true**. These do not describe “tendencies” within Jesus, but His very being. They also show that Jesus is Yahweh, because He alone is **holy** in an absolute sense.

i. There are two ancient Greek words that we might translate **true**. One means “**true** and not *false*.” The other means “**true** and not *fake*.” The ancient Greek word used here for **true** (*alethinos*) is the second, with the idea of “real” or “genuine.” Jesus is **true** in all of who He is; He is the *real* God and the *real* man.

b. **He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens**: Jesus showed He is also the keeper of the keys and doors. In this quotation from Isaiah 22:20-23, Jesus expressed His power and authority, especially to admit and exclude.

3. (8) What Jesus knows about the church of Philadelphia.

“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

a. **I know your works**: Jesus said this to each of the seven churches. The church at Philadelphia had served God well in difficult circumstances, and Jesus knew it.

b. **I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it**: The church in Philadelphia had an **open door** set before them. Often, an **open door** speaks of evangelistic opportunity (1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, and Colossians 4:3). Jesus told them He had opened the **door** of evangelistic opportunity, and they must go through that door in faith.

i. In its history, Philadelphia had a great “evangelistic” calling. The city had the mission of spreading Greek culture and language through the whole region. Now Jesus opened the door for the Christians of Philadelphia to spread the culture of His kingdom through the whole region.

ii. Jesus told them to **see** that they had this **open door**. Sometimes God sets an **open door** of evangelistic opportunity in front of us, but we don’t **see** it. A man once came to Spurgeon and asked how he could win others to Jesus. Spurgeon asked him, “What are you? What do you do?”

The man said, “I’m an engine driver on a train.”

“Then,” said Spurgeon, “Is the man who shovels coal on your train a Christian?”

“I don’t know,” said the man.

“Go back,” said Spurgeon, “and find out and start on him.”

iii. Once we **see** the **open door**, we then have to *walk through it*. God wants us to take every evangelistic opportunity that He gives us.

iv. There may be another sense to this **open door**. It seems Christians in Philadelphia were excluded from the synagogue (Revelation 3:9). The **open door** may also speak of their opportunity to enter God’s kingdom in contrast with exclusion from the synagogue.

c. **And no one can shut it:** The emphasis is on unhindered openness. There is nothing that can keep them from their access to this door. Since Jesus is *He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens* (Revelation 3:7), He had the authority to keep this door open for the Christians in Philadelphia.

i. “David could *shut* or *open* the kingdom of Israel to whom he pleased. He was not bound to leave the kingdom even to his eldest son. He could choose whom he pleased to succeed him. The kingdom of the Gospel, and the kingdom of heaven, are at the disposal of Christ.” (Clarke)

ii. God opens doors for ministry and ministers today. “I would like to bear witness that I have proved this Philadelphian promise of the open door through years of ministry and it has never failed. Promotion does not come from the south, east, or west, but from God; and if we commit our way unto Him and trust Him, He will bring it to pass... God’s man is not dependent on religious talent scouts nor is his ministry in the hand of ecclesiastical officials. His headquarters is heaven and his itinerary is made up by the Lord of the Open Door.” (Havner)

iii. Because Jesus has opened the door, He gets the glory for it. “Neither wealth or influence, neither promotional schemes nor the eloquence of its pulpit, nor the harmonies of its musicians can give it an effective ministry. The Lord alone has opened the door; the Lord alone ‘giveth the increase.’” (H. Morris)

d. **For you have a little strength:** The term **a little strength** does not imply weakness, but *real strength*. They were weak enough to be strong in the Lord. We can be “too strong” or “too big” or too sure of ourselves for God to really use us. The church in Philadelphia had the poverty of spirit to know they really needed God’s strength.

i. “It is not a matter of great strength, not great ability but great dependability. Samson had great ability but poor dependability. A little strength faithfully used means more than much strength flashily and fitfully used.” (Havner)

ii. The Apostle Paul was a great example of this dynamic of weakness and strength. God’s strength was made evident in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

e. **Have kept My word, and have not denied My name:** The church in Philadelphia was faithful to Jesus and His word. The idea behind **have not denied My name** is not only that they expressed their allegiance to Jesus, but that they *lived* in a way that was faithful to the name and character of Jesus.

i. Some churches that claim great faithfulness to the **word** of Jesus deny His **name** – His character. They represent the manner and style of Jesus as something very different from what the Bible shows.

f. Look at the features of the church in Philadelphia:

- Evangelistic opportunity (I have set before you an open door).
- Reliance on God (You have a little strength).
- Faithfulness to Jesus (**have kept My word, and have not denied My name**).

In some ways, these features seem unspectacular. They should be commonplace among churches. Yet Jesus was *completely* pleased with this church. He had *nothing* negative to say to the church at Philadelphia.

i. “The church of Philadelphia is commended for keeping the Word of the Lord and not denying His Name. Success in Christian work is not to be measured by any other standard of achievement. It is not rise in ecclesiastical position. It is not the number of new buildings which have been built through a man’s ministry. It is not the crowds that flock to listen to any human voice. All of these things are frequently used as yardsticks of success, but they are earthly and not heavenly measures.” (Barnhouse)

4. (9-10) What Jesus will do for the Christians of Philadelphia.

Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

a. **I will make those of the synagogue of Satan:** Apparently, the Christians in Philadelphia were persecuted by Jewish people (**the synagogue**). However, these persecuting Jews were Jews in name only (**who say they are Jews and are not, but lie**). In fact, they had no spiritual connection to Abraham or to the people of faith.

i. In this, Jesus did not speak against *all* Jewish people. It would be entirely wrong to speak of the Jewish people as a whole as **the synagogue of Satan** or those **who say they are Jews and are**

not. Jesus spoke of this specific group of Jewish people in Philadelphia who persecuted the Christians during that period.

b. I will make them come and worship before your feet: In this, Jesus promised that He would vindicate His people and make sure that their persecutors recognized they were wrong, and that Jesus and His followers were right. The idea is of vindication before self-righteous “spiritual” persecutors. God promised that the church in Philadelphia would be vindicated before their persecutors.

i. God promised Israel that Gentiles would honor them and acknowledge their God (Isaiah 45:14). Now the tables were somewhat turned, and these Jewish people “will play the role of the heathen and acknowledge that the church is the Israel of God.” (Mounce)

ii. 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 speaks of unbelievers falling down in the midst of Christians to worship God. This establishes that it wasn’t Christians who were being worshipped, but God was worshipped in the *presence* of Christians.

iii. **And to know that I have loved you:** As those who were once their enemies worshipped along side them, they were destroyed as enemies. They now knew that Jesus had **loved** these people they once persecuted. The best way to destroy the enemies of the Gospel is to pray that God would change them into friends.

iv. Persecuted people often long for justice against their persecutors (Revelation 6:10). A passage from a second century Christian shows this: “What sight shall wake my wonder, what my laughter, my joy and exultation? As I see all those kings, those great kings... groaning in the depths of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted in the name of Jesus, liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians!” (Tertullian, cited in Barclay)

c. I will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world: Jesus also promised them protection from the **hour of trial** coming on the **whole world**.

i. Most Bible scholars see this **hour of trial** as a prophetic reference to the Messianic woes, the Great Tribulation, which precede Jesus’ earthly kingdom. Jesus promised to **keep** these Christians from that **hour of trial**.

d. To test those who dwell on the earth: The test is directed against **those who dwell on the earth**. This phrase is used nine times in the Book of Revelation, and it speaks of those who are *not* saved in Jesus. Revelation 17:8 makes the term synonymous with the lost: *And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world*. This **test** is for *unbelievers*, not Christians.

i. **Those who dwell on the earth** “refers not to believers but to unbelievers who are objects of God’s wrath” throughout Revelation. (Johnson)

ii. Christians are different. Though we walk on this earth, our dwelling place is in heaven. We have been seated in heavenly places in Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). We do not **dwell on the earth**, our life is hidden in Jesus (Colossians 3:3).

e. **Keep you from the hour of trial:** Does this imply an *escape before* the Great Tribulation, or does it promise *protection in* it? Each side believes this passage easily supports their position.

i. Those who believe the church will be here on earth during this time of Great Tribulation focus on Jesus' **command to persevere**, and say the context demands seeing this as protection that enables the faithful to **persevere** in the period.

ii. Those who believe that Jesus will come for His church before this time of Great Tribulation note that protection is promised from the very **hour of trial**, not just the trial itself. They also point to the worldwide, inescapable cataclysm predicted in the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21 and Revelation chapters 6, 8-9, 16).

iii. However, **persevere** is in the past tense, showing it is something that the Christians had already done before the **hour of trial**, which has not yet come upon the world. The promise is a *reward* for past perseverance, not the *equipping* to persevere in the future. "As far as the Philadelphian church was concerned, the rapture of the church was presented to them as an imminent hope." (Walvoord)

iv. In addition, the ones tested by this **hour of trial** are not primarily believers, but **those who dwell on the earth** – whose home is this earth, who are not citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

5. (11) What Jesus wants the church of Philadelphia to do.

Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

a. **Behold, I am coming quickly:** First, the church at Philadelphia must remember that Jesus is **coming quickly**, and they must prepare for His **coming**.

i. "The expression 'quickly' is to be understood as something which is sudden and unexpected, not necessarily immediate." (Walvoord)

b. **Hold fast what you have:** The church at Philadelphia must not depart from its solid foundation, as described in Revelation 3:8:

· Evangelistic opportunity (*I have set before you an open door*).

· Reliance on God (*You have a little strength*).

· Faithfulness to Jesus (*have kept My word, and have not denied My name*).

These things can and must continue among the church in Philadelphia, but it will only happen as they **hold fast what they have**.

c. **That no one may take your crown:** If they failed to **hold fast**, their **crown** might be *given* to another. The idea is not that it might be *stolen* by another, but *given*.

i. This was not a crown of royalty, given because of royal birth. This was a crown of victory. Jesus encouraged His saints to finish their course with victory, to "play the second half" just as strongly as they "played the first half."

ii. “Never forget that the man most likely to steal your crown is *yourself*. ‘Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life’ (Proverbs 4:23). You are in no greater danger from anyone or anything than from yourself.” (Havner)

6. (12) A promise of reward.

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

a. **He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar:** Overcomers were told that they would be as a **pillar in the temple of My God**. Pillars were pictures of strength, stability, and dignified beauty.

i. The ancient city of Philadelphia suffered from frequent earthquakes. When a building collapsed in an earthquake often all that remained standing were the huge pillars. Jesus offers us this same strength, to remain standing in Him when everything around us crumbles.

ii. The pillar holds up the building. The only thing supporting the pillar is the foundation. True pillars in the church support the church, and they look to Jesus as their support foundation.

b. **He shall go out no more:** The overcomer would have a place of permanence and stability with God, in contrast to an uncertain place in this world.

i. “The citizens of Philadelphia lived an unsettled and tremulous life. Whenever the earthquake tremors came, and they came often, the people of Philadelphia fled from the city out into the open country, to escape the falling masonry and the flying stones which accompanied a severe earthquake shock. Then, when the earth was quiet again, they returned. In their fear the people of Philadelphia were always going out and coming in; they were always fleeing from the city and then returning to it.” (Barclay)

c. **I will write on him the name of My God... I will write on him My new name:** The overcomer also received many names – of God, the New Jerusalem, and the new name of Jesus. These names are marks of identification because they show who we belong to. They are marks of intimacy, because they show we are privileged to know Him in ways others are not.

i. This works together well with the image of a **pillar**. In the ancient world, having a special inscribed pillar added to one of the temples sometimes honored a faithful city servant or distinguished priest. “Philadelphia honored its illustrious sons by putting their names on the pillars of its temples, so that all who came to worship might see and remember.” (Barclay)

7. (13) A general exhortation to all who will hear.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

a. **He who has an ear, let him hear:** We all want to hear the praise and encouragement Jesus gave to the church at Philadelphia. If we will be like this church, we must stay on their foundation, which was Jesus’ name and Jesus’ word. We must also depend on their source of strength which was Jesus, not themselves.