

## THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA: DOORS

### Revelation 3:7-13

Long before Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, there was a Philadelphia in Asia Minor. This Philadelphia was established in 189 B.C. by King Eumenes of Lydia, who named the city Philadelphia to honor his young brother, Attalus II. Philadelphia comes from two Greek words: *philos*, meaning love or affection; and *adelphos*, meaning brother. Hence, “the city of brotherly love.”

Located twenty-eight miles southwest of Sardis, ancient Philadelphia stood on a low, broad hill near the base of Mount Tmolus. In one respect, Philadelphia’s location brought it many advantages. The city was situated on a major road of commerce and communication, making Philadelphia very wealthy.

Philadelphia’s prosperity was also enhanced by its own products: wool, textiles and leather, and especially the lush vineyards made possible by rich volcanic soil. The vineyards resulted in a booming wine industry; and also the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, agriculture, fertility, and performing arts.

With a commanding view of the Hermus River Valley, Philadelphia was important militarily and easily defended. And yet, the same location that brought the city enormous wealth also brought the city enormous danger. Philadelphia was founded directly over a seismic fault. In 17 A.D., the city was completely destroyed by a major earthquake; and, after being rebuilt, continued to experience earthquakes, tremors, and aftershocks for more than twenty years.

According to one biblical commentator, no city in Asia Minor suffered more from violent and recurring earthquakes. In fact, the ancient historian Strabo, who lived 64 B.C. to 21 A.D., wrote of Philadelphia: “Philadelphia has no trustworthy walls, but daily in one direction or another they keep tottering and falling apart.”

If you’ve ever experienced a significant earthquake, then you know how unsettling the aftershocks can be. You stop, wait, watch, and wonder: “Is this the beginning of another major earthquake? Will the building crumble?” Imagine enduring twenty years of aftershocks, as happened to the people of Philadelphia and its first Christian church.

Consequently, Philadelphia was a city “on the edge;” a city of jittery nerves; a city always expecting—as the inhabitants of Los Angeles and San Francisco still say: “The Big One.” Amid such shaky circumstances, imagine how comforting these words of Jesus must have been: **“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it,”** Revelation 3:12. A pillar. Words of strength

and stability and immovability. As if an enduring testimony to this promise of Jesus, one of the few things still standing in the ruins of Philadelphia is the pillar of an ancient church.

While we don't know who founded the First Christian Church of Philadelphia, whether the apostle Paul, the apostle John, the great orator Apollos; the husband-and-wife missionary team, Aquila and Priscilla; or perhaps members of other Christian churches in Asia Minor—we can learn much about the Philadelphian congregation from the letter it received from Jesus Christ.

In certain respects the church in Philadelphia was remarkably like the church in Smyrna. Both were suffering churches. Both were being persecuted by hateful, hostile Jews—those whom Jesus described in both His letter to Smyrna and in His letter to Philadelphia as a “**synagogue of Satan,**” Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

And both churches were told to expect more persecution. Jesus told the church in Smyrna, “**Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days,**” Revelation 2:10. But He also told the church in Philadelphia, “**Since you have kept My command to endure patiently, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth,**” Revelation 3:10.

The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were also the only two churches out of all seven churches in Revelation to receive NO REBUKE from the risen Christ. Said differently, the two churches that suffered the most experienced the least spiritual problems. Is there a connection? Indeed, as much as we dislike opposition to our faith, does that opposition play a part in strengthening our faith? Of course it does. The Bible states plainly, even boldly: “**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything,**” James 1:2-4.

According to the letter of Jesus, the church in Philadelphia was a small, struggling church. A church facing great odds and great opposition. A church with little strength. Little membership. Little budget. Little statistics. Little prospect. How many CLC congregations am I describing? This is why I feel such an affinity for that little church in Philadelphia; and why I take such comfort in the letter Jesus wrote to it.

A letter in which Jesus Christ introduced Himself as the one “**who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open,**” Revelation 3:7. A letter in which Jesus went on to say, “**See,**

**I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.”** This is what Jesus promised that little church in Philadelphia. This is exactly what Jesus promises our church in Lemmon. Consider the implications. What does Jesus want us to see?

And I’m not asking this question rhetorically. The word “see”—the Greek word is IDOU, an imperative verb—actually occurs three times in the original language of today’s text; though it is not always translated into English. Verse 8 is literally, **“See, I have placed.”** Verse 9 is literally, **“See, I will make.”** And verse 11 is literally, **“See, I will also keep.”** So, what must we see? Conversely, what do we so often fail to see?

**First, Jesus Christ is the one who opens and closes doors for a church ministry.** This, dear friends, is critical to realize. Too often we convince ourselves that we’re the ones who open the doors; that we are the ones who create the opportunities for growth; and that we are the ones who make opportunities succeed through careful planning, perfect timing, clever advertising, and massive budgets. Just the opposite is true.

In His letter to the church in Philadelphia Jesus said plainly, **“I have placed before you an open door.”** Jesus made the door. Jesus placed the door. Jesus opened the door. Do we understand the implications of this teaching? If an opportunity or ‘door’ is not from the Lord, it will inevitably fail. And no amount of money, pushing, pleading, or banging with both fists will make that door open. Conversely, if an opportunity is from the Lord, then no matter how small a congregation’s membership, resources, or budget, the opportunity will succeed. Ultimately, the message from Jesus is this: “I’m in charge. You’re not.” But isn’t this a comforting message?

I can’t even count the number of times over my ministry when I found myself thinking that I somehow had the power to effect change, or sustain faith, or save a troubled marriage, or comfort a grieving mourner, or grow a Christian congregation. I’ve never had that power. But God does. To think the former is a recipe for failure and early retirement. But to understand the latter is a means to peace of heart and mind. As God told Zerubbabel when he struggled to rebuild Jerusalem’s temple against overwhelming odds: **“‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts,”** Zechariah 4:6.

The apostle Paul was perhaps the greatest and most effective missionary to ever live—tireless in his travels; relentless in his efforts to share the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. He started many congregations, but he grew none of them. His success in ministry came only from God’s power, and in going through the doors that God opened for him.

In Ephesus God opened a great door of opportunity for Paul; as the apostle

explained in 1 Corinthians 16:9, **“But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me.”** And he also wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:12, **“Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me.”**

Conversely, at other times God closed doors for Paul too. According to Acts 16:6-7, **“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”** How comforting to know that when the Lord opens a door, it is the right door. And when the Lord does not open a door, or closes one, it’s the wrong door.

**Second, when the Lord closes one door, He often opens another door.** This was certainly true of Paul. It was true in Philadelphia. And it was also true in the little church I served in North Port, Florida. After thirty years in existence, through a variety of circumstances—limited financial resources, declining membership—the congregation was faced with the prospect of discontinuing its ministry. But at the very time the Lord was closing one door, He was opening another door.

One day, while going through church documents in preparation for ending our ministry, I stumbled across the business card of a realtor containing a scribbled message: “Interested in buying the church property.” When I found that card, the realtor’s interest in our property was already years old. But I gave the card to our congregation’s president, who contacted the realtor. And a short while later, we sold the church property. In the process we acquired enough capital to go on ministering, go on serving the community, and go on preaching the gospel. for several more years. Jesus closed one door while opening another door.

**Third, when the Lord opens a door of opportunity for us and leads us to walk through it, He will not let us fail to accomplish His purposes.** Why? Because the Almighty never opens a door for His children without empowering them to walk through it.

And here I could use myself as an example. After nine years in the public ministry, I left it in 1987 with no intention of ever returning. Then, in 2010, when I finally moved to my home state of Florida—the very first Sunday I attended church Pastor John Schiernbeck was waiting for me at the front door, hand extended, a smile on his face. “Mark,” he said, “I have a proposition for you. Would you consider serving

as a vacancy pastor at a small congregation in south Florida?”

Uh oh, I thought. And uh oh was right. By the time I received this proposal, I had been out of the ministry for twenty-three years. My theological mindset was as dusty as my theological books. And yet, when I carefully evaluated the circumstances—how I had lost a corporate marketing job in Illinois; how I had not been able to secure another job; how I had been forced by finances to relocate at the very time that small congregation in south Florida had lost its pastor—I realized that the Lord had opened a door for me to return to the public ministry.

In fact, I realized that the Lord had opened this door this so loudly, so obviously, so strongly, that it had nearly fallen off its hinges. And once I understood that He had provided the door and that He had opened it, I knew that He would give me the strength to walk through it. And He did. **“I will,”** Jesus said three times in His letter to the church in Philadelphia. “I will. I will. I will. If I called you to walk through this door, I will empower you to do so.”

Friends, God hasn’t asked anyone of us to go out and raised the dead, move a mountain, or heal a single case of leprosy, or make anyone believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. He has simply said, “Leave everything to Me. Trust Me.” That is true of our church work. That is true of our problems. That is true of our eternal salvation.

Frankly, I bristle when I hear well-intentioned pastors declaring at well-attended mission festivals: “God needs you to spread the gospel. God needs you as a worker in His kingdom. God needs you to win souls for Jesus.” Newsflash. God doesn’t need us for anything. We need Him.

Imagine how overwhelmed and intimidated that little church in Philadelphia was by the opposition of the hostile Jews; by the worldliness of city-life in Philadelphia; by the presence of pagan temples; and by the constant earthquakes and aftershocks. And yet, each time Jesus asked something of these Christians in His letter, He directed them to Himself as the absolute source of power, success, and protection. **“I will,”** He said. Not you.

**Fourth and finally, everything Jesu said about opening and closing doors for a Christian church and Christian ministry also applies to Christian individuals.** While we’ve come to call buildings churches, the biblical definition of church is not a building but the assembly of individual believers in Jesus Christ.

And how has Jesus opened doors for us as Christian individuals? There are too many doors to count. But the psalmist certainly made a good beginning when he wrote: **“Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise**

**the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases and redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed,”** Psalm 103:1-6.

The Lord opened the door of life to you when He formed you in your mother’s womb. The Lord opened the door of new and eternal life to you, when He led you to faith in Jesus Christ, who said in John 10:9, **“I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved;”** and also in John 14:6, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”**

And when the Lord closes the door on this life earthly life, he will open the door to eternal life; the life that will never end, and the door that will never close. The eternal life which Jesus pictured in His letter to Philadelphia, saying: **“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will He leave it.”**

Doors, blessings, opportunities from God; and perhaps best summarized by words in Christ’s letter to the Laodiceans: **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me,”** Revelation 3:20.

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