

# Followers of the Way

## Philadelphia – Being pillars in the temple of God

**Philip Quenby, 5-11-23**

**Revelation 3:7-13, Revelation 21:1-8**

This is the last but one in our sermon series on Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation, this time looking at the letter to the church in Philadelphia. All the letters are extraordinary, but this is one of the most amazing of all. As with the letter He sent to the believers in Smyrna, here Jesus has only encouragement and praise for this church. The letter contains none of the criticisms directed at the other five churches. In fact, as we will see in just a moment, Christ seems to esteem the congregation in Philadelphia even more highly than the one in Smyrna, and that is saying something! All in all, this church gives us a high standard to aspire to and aim for. In these days when God is doing a powerful work of restoration in His Church in our nation to bring it back to its original beauty, purity, holiness, and power, the example of Philadelphia is one we need to study and learn from.

The name Philadelphia has a special resonance, because this was the city of brotherly love – from the Greek words *philos* (meaning, beloved, dear, or loving) and *adelphos* (meaning, brother or brotherly). Now called Alashehir in modern Turkey, the city was given its Greek name by the ruler of Pergamum, Eumenes II, in honour of his loyal brother Attalos. So great an inspiration was this church to later generations that the Quaker William Penn chose Philadelphia as the name for the city he founded in the US state that bears his name, Pennsylvania.

It is all very well having an inspiring name, of course, but living up to it is another matter entirely. Yet the church in Philadelphia does not seem to have fallen short in what was required of them. While the (exemplary) church in Smyrna was warned they would “suffer persecution for ten days” (Revelation 2:10), Jesus told the believers in Philadelphia, “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also 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). (A word of caution here because, although this or a similar variation is how Revelation 3:10 is usually rendered, the original Greek could be translated either as “keep you *from undergoing*” or “keep you *through* the [coming] hour of trial” – so it is not a Scripture to build a whole End Times theology on. There is much concerning the Rapture and other End Time events which believers can disagree on in

good faith, and that we need to hold lightly. Whichever way we cut it, though, Jesus is making a wonderful promise to His people in Philadelphia.)

In fact, it is hardly going too far to say this church in Philadelphia stands head and shoulders above all the rest of those who receive letters. Whilst Jesus uses the phrase, “I know your deeds” (Revelation 3:8) to four of the other churches – those in Ephesus (Revelation 2:2), Thyatira (Revelation 2:18), Sardis (Revelation 3:1), and Laodicea (Revelation 3:15) – it is only in the case of Philadelphia that these words are spoken without any negative qualification. Although they had “little strength, yet [still they had] kept [Jesus’] word ... [had] not denied [His] name” (Revelation 3:9), and moreover had “[endured] patiently” (Revelation 3:10). There follows a beautiful symmetry in the language of the letter between this acknowledgement on Jesus’ part and what comes only two verses later, where He says, “Since you have kept ... I will also keep” (Revelation 3:11). The writer to the Hebrews reminds us, “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.” (Hebrews 6:10). And here we see this principle in action. If you are ever feeling discouraged and downhearted about your faithful service seemingly going unrecognised, just remind yourself God sees all, and will honour and recompense you in due time. That same principle likewise holds true for people who do wrong, of course, because “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” (Galatians 6:7-8).

Now, we should not get the impression all was sweetness and light with the Philadelphia church. Far from it. Like all the churches Jesus wrote to, they were under severe pressure in a time of persecution, and faced challenges comparable to the other congregations. Their “little strength” (Revelation 3:8) suggests their resources were few. The fact Jesus talks about how they had “kept my word and have not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8) indicates they were just as much tempted to compromise with the pagan culture around them, and to save themselves from torture and death by sacrificing to the emperor, as any of the other churches in the region. And, like their brothers and sisters in Smyrna, Philadelphian believers had to contend with a “synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9, 3:9) right on their doorstep. The ones in Smyrna were spreading slander (Revelation 2:9), and those in Philadelphia were obviously cut from the same cloth, as they are described as “liars” (Revelation 3:9), “who claim to be Jews though they are not” (Revelation 3:9). Writing to the early Christians in Rome, Paul explained, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.” (Romans 2:28-29). It seems believers in Philadelphia were catching it in the neck from both sides – under attack by the Roman authorities for failing to worship Caesar, and intensely criticised by Jewish believers for their failure to follow the Mosaic law in its entirety.

To stand firm when your enemies are against you is one thing. To do it when the people who should be your friends are piling in is something else altogether. The Philadelphia church must have longed for Jesus to encourage them and build them up, and that is precisely what this letter does. As with the church in Thyatira, Jesus tells them, “Hold onto what you have” (Revelation 3:11, compare Revelation 2:25). But note the difference. The Thyatira church was told to hold on “until I come” (Revelation 2:25), whereas for Philadelphia it was a case of holding on “so that no-one will take your crown.” (Revelation 3:11). It is worth taking a moment to digest those words. Jesus tells the church in Smyrna, if they will “be faithful, even to the point of death ... I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10). But he did not have to make this promise to His people in Philadelphia. They already had the crown, and all they needed was to hold onto it. What a body of believers they must have been!

With this as background, let us explore what this letter has to say to us today. Because it tells us things Jesus has done, and things He will do; things His people are, and things His people will (or should) be. It emphasises that it is by virtue of what Christ has done that we are enabled to become what we were made to be, and to enter all He is now calling us to step into. Paul says, “God gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.” (Romans 4:17). We need to pay close attention to what God is wanting to call into being at this time, and to see with spiritual eyes – to see the consequences of what is and what has been are the things which will be, but are not yet. We will look at:

- coming up higher;
- receiving God’s transformative power; and
- being pillars in the temple of our God.

### **Coming up higher**

Jesus tells the believers in Philadelphia (and us) what He has done. “What he opens no-one can shut, and what he shuts no-one can open.” (Revelation 3:7) He speaks as the God who is utterly reliable, the messianic King who will fulfil all prophecy – the one “who is holy and true, who holds the key of David.” (Revelation 3:7). His words are a direct reference to Messianic prophecy concerning the line of David, the king of Israel who foreshadows the kingdom reign of Christ Himself: “I will place on his [the Messiah’s] shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no-one can shut, and what he shuts no-one can open.” (Isaiah 22:22). It is, of course, precisely because the Messiah-who-is-King has this key that He can open and shut the door, and why He is able to say, “See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.” (Revelation 3:8). The door is the door to the kingdom over which this Messiah-who-is-King rules and reigns – the kingdom of heaven.

In the vision God gave him whilst he was imprisoned “on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” (Revelation 1:9), the apostle John “looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take

place after this.” (Revelation 4:1). The invitation (perhaps more accurate to call it a command) to “Come up here” is one that applies to us, too. Jesus promised His disciples, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:51). The martyr Stephen experienced this when he was on the point of death, exclaiming, “Look! ... I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56). And later in his vision, the apostle John “saw heaven open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True.” (Revelation 19:11).

Today Jesus is issuing a call for His people to come up higher – to **see** things from a heavenly vantage-point, to **operate** from a position of knowing we have direct access to the very throne-room of God, to **move** in the power of a prophetic understanding of what is unfolding before us in the natural realm, to **hear** the voice of God and to put into practice what we hear, and to **speak** with authority in the name of Jesus to drive out demons, heal the sick, proclaim the Gospel, and manifest the kingdom of God. This call from God is an invitation, but it is also a command, requiring a conscious act of obedience on our part to make it happen. For too long, the Church in the West in general has been content to operate at a fraction of its potential in Christ. We need a massive step change, because we are in times when anything less will not do. This is coming up higher – to receive God’s transformative power.

### **Receiving God’s transformative power**

God’s power is always transformative. Paul talks of our being “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind” (Romans 12:2), of how “the Lord Jesus Christ ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21), and of how we “who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is transformative power available for individuals, and transformative power available for the Church as a Body, but we must choose to access it.

We do not access the transformative power of God by sitting on our hands, but through taking a step of faith. Now, just to be clear, this does not mean we should immediately start running around doing whatever comes into our heads, pursuing things conceived out of our own so-called good ideas. That way lies burn-out, irrelevance, or worse. Deeds worthy of the name come out of a place of prayer and intimacy with God, and in response to His prompting. When the apostle Peter walked on water, it was in response to Jesus saying, “Come.” (Matthew 14:29). But, like they say: if you want to walk on water, you need to get out of the boat.

God’s transformative power was at work in the Philadelphian church with ever-expanding results and consequences that will ripple through eternity – causing people who had opposed these believers to “fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I [Jesus] have loved you” (Revelation 3:9); bringing those who had stayed faithful through thick

and thin to a new level of fellowship with God; and giving them a place of honour in His heavenly city.

To the one from Philadelphia who overcomes, Jesus says, “I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.” (Revelation 3:12). Those who remained faithful in Pergamum were told Jesus would give them “a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” (Revelation 2:17). That is a great promise, but it pales alongside what was in store for the Philadelphia church. The names they received were not to be written on a stone, but directly onto them. They will bear for all eternity the names of God, of the heavenly city, and of Christ Himself. And when Jesus speaks here of a new name, it is not a new name of the believer, but the new name of Jesus. (Compare Revelation 19:12, 19:13, 19:16.) Talk about being transformed into the likeness of Christ! Talk about a new level of fellowship with God!

### **Being pillars in the temple of God**

For these overcomers, there is also a place of honour in His heavenly city. Revelation contains sixteen references to the temple, and in each case the word used indicates the inner sanctuary rather than the outer precincts. In other words, what is being talked about is the place where the very Presence of God dwells. When Jesus speaks of His people being pillars, it evokes those “who have come out of the great tribulation [who have] washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore ‘they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; the one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.’” (Revelation 7:14-15). Ezekiel speaks of pillars in his vision of the temple (Ezekiel 40:49).

Pillars can be real structures used as supports, ornaments, or memorials. In a figurative sense, they can also be people who act as chief supports of an institution, movement, or what have you. We use this figurative sense when we talk about someone being a pillar of the community. Describing how he came before the church leaders in Jerusalem after his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul told the Galatians, “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me.” (Galatians 2:9). And to his friend Timothy, Paul wrote, “you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15). These are the kinds of pillars Jesus is talking about in His letter to the church in Philadelphia – pillars of righteousness, pillars of truth, pillars of holiness, and pillars of justice. Pillars that are an ornament to the temple of God, but also pillars that are integral to the structure and perform a vital function of sustaining and upholding. Are not these the sorts of pillars we should aspire to be?

Not only does Jesus promise to “make [each Philadelphian believer] a pillar in the temple of my God, [but also that] Never again will he [the believer] leave it.” (Revelation 3:12). They will each rest in the Presence of God for all time, held for all eternity by His

“everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27) – a witness and a proclamation for all to observe, like the two pillars Solomon set up in front of the temple he built to the LORD in Jerusalem. Those pillars were given the names Jachin and Boaz (1 Kings 7:21 and 2 Chronicles 3:15-17, see also 1 Kings 7:6, 7:15, 25:17) – Jachin (meaning, *He establishes* or *He will give certainty*). Boaz (meaning, *in strength* or *by strength*). So, *in strength God establishes* and *by strength God will give certainty*.

### **Conclusion**

Why are we prepared to settle for so little when God has so much more He longs to give? The call is to come up higher, to receive God’s transformative power, and to be pillars in the temple of our God. Will we answer?

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:13).

Amen

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What will help us see, operate, move, hear, and speak from a heavenly perspective and in greater prophetic power?
2. How is God calling us to get out of the boat?
3. Are there ways we can be more like pillars in the temple of our God?