

An Exegesis of Revelation 3:7-13

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The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia

God Opens Doors. That, I was told, was to be the theme of this conference. It also, most likely, explains the choice of Revelation 3:7-13 as the exegesis paper, since in verse 8, it speaks of a door and in verse 7, it seems to assume a door. Thus let us consider how *God Opens Doors* in the letter to the church In Philadelphia.

Background

The letter to Philadelphia is one of seven letters of Jesus, letters recorded in the revelation He gave to the Apostle John while John was on the island of Patmos. A likely time was during the persecution by Emperor Domitian, about 96 AD.

The messages to the seven churches could be summed up in this way:

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| 1. Ephesus | “You are strong; but don’t forget your first love.” |
| 2. Smyrna | “In your tribulation, be faithful to death.” |
| 3. Pergamum | “In your strength, you are still permitting false doctrine, and this cannot be.” |
| 4. Thyatira | “You are tolerating in your midst an abomination that will bring judgment.” |
| 5. Sardis | “Dead church, repent; or else you will lose all.” |
| 6. Philadelphia | “I have opened the door for mission work before you.” |
| 7. Laodicea | “Realize your poorness; be ‘hot’ for me; or else I will spit you out.” |

Note that only the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia contain no criticism but only commendation.

Philadelphia was located northeast of Ephesus and about 30 miles southeast of Sardis. That was not always the name of this city which was built in the middle of the second century BC by Attalus Philadelphus. In 17 AD, it was destroyed by an earthquake and when rebuilt was renamed Neokaisareia. That name, however, did not stay and the city again became Philadelphia. It is still in existence and today is known as Alasehir.

The Greek Text

7 Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Φιλαδελφείᾳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἅγιος, ὁ ἀληθινός, ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυὶδ, ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει·

8 Οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα, ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ἐνώπιόν σου θύραν ἠνεωγμένην, ἣν οὐδεὶς δύναται κλεῖσαι αὐτήν, ὅτι μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν καὶ ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου.

9 ἰδοὺ διδῶ ἐκ τῆς συναγωγῆς τοῦ Σατανᾶ τῶν λεγόντων ἑαυτοὺς Ἰουδαίους εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ ψεύδονται. ἰδοὺ ποιήσω αὐτοὺς ἵνα ἤξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου καὶ γνῶσιν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἠγάπησά σε.

10 ὅτι ἐτήρησας τὸν λόγον τῆς ὑπομονῆς μου, καὶ ἐγὼ σε τηρήσω ἐκ τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ τῆς μελλούσης ἔρχεσθαι ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης πειράσαι τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

11 ἔρχομαι ταχύ· κράτει ὃ ἔχεις, ἵνα μηδεὶς λάβῃ τὸν στέφανόν σου.

12 ὁ νικῶν ποιήσω αὐτὸν στῦλον ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ θεοῦ μου καὶ ἔξω οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃ ἔτι καὶ γράψω ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ μου καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς πόλεως τοῦ θεοῦ μου, τῆς καινῆς Ἱερουσαλήμ ἡ καταβαίνουσα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μου, καὶ τὸ ὄνομά μου τὸ καινόν.

13 ὁ ἔχων οὐδὲ ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις.

Verse 7: *tade* – Demonstrative Pronoun – A. T. Robertson, p. 289.

Verse 8: *oti* can be translated “that,” “because,” or like a quotation mark. Translators of this verse vary between “that” and “because.”

ayneogmenayn – Perfect Passive Participle of *anologo*.

Verse 9: *dido* – *didomi*, Present Active Indicative, common in the vernacular koine – A. T. Robertson, pp. 135, 307, 311.

ton legonton – Genitive Absolute

gnosin – Future Active Indicative of irregular verb

Verse 10: *mellouses* – Present Active Participle

Translation

7. To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write,
These things says the holy one, the true one, he having the key of David, he opening and no one will shut, and shutting and no one opens:
8. I know your works:

Behold, I have placed before you a door that has been opened which no one is able to shut, because you have a little power, and you kept my word, and you did not deny my name;
9. Behold, I give from the synagogue of Satan, from those saying that they are Jews and they are not, but they deceive;

Behold, I will make them so that they will come and kneel in the presence of your feet, and they will know that I loved you.
10. Because you kept my word of steadfast endurance, I will also keep you from trial’s hour which is about to come upon the whole world to try those dwelling upon the earth.
11. I come quickly, hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown.
12. Him who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will by no means any longer go outside, and I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven from my God, and my new name.
13. Whoever has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

NIV Translation

7. To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him 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.
8. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.
9. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.
10. 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.
11. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.
12. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. 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.
13. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Points Where Interpretations Diverge

In verses 8 and 9 there are some differences. The open door of verse 8 is referred to mission opportunities by most of the few commentaries I checked. Dr. S. Becker, in his commentary on Revelation, however, sees this as “emphasis not so much on the mission opportunities,” but on the blessings the Savior will shower on them, saying that otherwise the reference to Eliakim in verse 7 would not be appropriate. In somewhat the same line Hengstenberg, in an old German commentary I have, speaks of the open door as the entrance to the house of David, the kingdom of God.

In verse 8, the *oti* is translated “because” by most and “that” by some.

There seems to be common agreement that “little power” (verse 8) refers not to spiritual strength but to outward impressiveness. An exception would be Dr. Becker’s commentary which refers to spiritual strength, and also translates *oti* with “that.”

In verse 9, “fall down at your feet” elicits some differences of opinion. Some see this as Jewish converts joining and worshiping with the Philadelphia congregation, or even as a reference to a universal return of the Jews. Others take this in the sense of the NIV translation, meaning more a recognition without necessarily joining.

In verse 10, “My command to endure patiently” is the NIV interpretation of the literal translation: “the word of my steadfast endurance.” Others say that the patience refers to Christ’s patience as he suffered, or simply that there is a relationship between Christ’s word and patience without defining that relationship.

Some refer the hour of trial (verse 10) to the immediate future and some to the last days of the world.

Looking Closer At This Letter to Philadelphia

Verse 7

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These things says the holy One, the true One, he having the key of David, he opening and no one will shut, and shutting and no one opens:

The angel – The stars of Revelation 1:16 represent the angels of the churches, as 1:20 shows. As the lampstands/churches represent actual physical churches, so the stars/angels represent actual individuals. An angel is a messenger from God. A pastor is such a messenger in a congregation. Jesus here, in this letter to Philadelphia, is giving the pastor the message he is to deliver.

Holy one, true one – The description of the author of this letter shows us he is divine. Who else, except God, is holy in the absolute sense? And is he really the true one for whom the generations waited, the one about whom even John the Baptist asked when he was in prison? “I who speak to you am he,” Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, even as he sent convincing proof to John. He is the true one.

The key of David – This is a reference to Isaiah 22:22. Shebna, as David’s steward, had that key of responsibility. But he seemed to be a self-serving person. God took that key from him and gave it to Eliakim. You may read more about this in Isaiah 22:15-25 and 2 Kings 18:18-19:2. Now onto the scene steps not a self-serving person, nor a temporary custodian of David’s key. This is the descendant of David so long promised, David’s Son and David’s Lord. As he is so much greater than Eliakim, so his key opens to far greater wealth, or leads to far greater loss if rejected. In 1:18, Jesus says, “I hold the keys of death and Hades.” While he entrusts the use of the keys to the church (Matthew 16:18; 18:18; John 20:23), he alone is the actual possessor of the key, for no one comes to the Father except through him. He alone is the source, the one to whom all judgment has been entrusted (John 5:22). And when he returns on Judgment Day, he will say, “Come,” and “Depart,” opening and closing. None will be able to change that, as Jesus clearly showed in his account of the rich man and poor Lazarus. Heaven – what a wonderful place to be, with no worry about falling away! Hell – what a terrible place to be, with no chance of getting even a drop of water past the chasm!

Verse 8 and 9

I know your works:

Behold, I have placed before you a door that has been opened which no one is able to shut, because you have a little power, and you kept my word, and you did not deny my name;

Behold, I give from the synagogue of Satan, from those saying that they are Jews and they are not, but they deceive;

Behold, I will make them so that they will come and kneel in the presence of your feet, and they will know that I loved you.

I group these two verses as a unit and indent portions because of something that struck me in the original text, something that is not evident in the NIV translation. The word *idou* (“behold”) is that something, a triple use prefacing the remarks following.

I know Your works. – Jesus knows as one who looks not only on the outside but also on the inside. He had this knowledge of the Philadelphia congregation now, even as that will be clear also on Judgment Day

when he in all accuracy will say “You did” or “You did not” (Matthew 25). John echoes this in Revelation 14:13 when he says, “They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”

Behold, I have placed before You a door that has been opened which no one is able to shut. – Let’s look first at the door. As mentioned earlier, some see this not as a door of mission opportunity but as a door that is like the situation referred to in verse 7, with the key (where the word door is not used). But need verses 7 and 8 be seen as talking about the same thing? Or could there be a progression so that the thought of Eliakim dispensing something from an opened door need not be carried through here? I believe there is a progression, that verse 8 picks up the picture of the key (verse 7) and now goes to another door, the door of opportunity. The context in verse 9 seems to call for this. Such a door of opportunity is referred to or pictured elsewhere in Scripture (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3; Acts 16:6-10). This door will not be able to be shut as long as the Lord leaves it open.

Because you have a little power, and you kept my word. and you did not deny my name. – Does power refer to spiritual or physical? Spiritual power, whatever the amount, could be a commendation supported by the next phrases (“kept my word,” “did not deny”), as well as by the opening words of verse 10 (“you kept my word”). John spoke this way also in 1 John 2:14 with these words of commendation, “I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” It may well be true also, as most seem to take this, that the congregation was not an impressive congregation in the eyes of the world, that it had just a little power when it comes to ability and prestige. Perhaps the Holy Spirit, by not specifically identifying this little power, was leaving this general. One thing, after all, is true, and that is that a little power of either kind is better than no power, even as a little faith is better than no faith. Whatever the little power was, this would simply accentuate the fact that the real power belonged to him who has the key, to him who could open a door that none but he could shut. “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9) applied to Philadelphia as well as to Paul. The similar thought is found in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” And how about David as an example? Goliath mockingly said that David was coming with sticks. But David’s response was, “I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty.” So Philadelphia with a little power, whatever the kind, would be enabled to do much with the Lord’s power.

Behold, I give from the synagogue of Satan. – This synagogue of Satan is mentioned in both of the letters that contain no rebuke. After mentioning those who say they are Jews and are not, Smyrna (2:8-11) was given the exhortation to remain faithful in the face of persecution. Philadelphia, on the other hand, was told that it would be acknowledged by them as being loved by God.

What was this synagogue of Satan, these Jews who were not Jews? In John 8, Jesus made that clear when he spoke with those who were descendants of Abraham and said their actual lineage went back to their father, the devil (8:44). Paul also spoke clearly of this: “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children” (Romans 9:6-7).

Behold, I will make them so that they will come and kneel in the presence of your feet. – Background for this, in reversed form, could be Isaiah 45:14 and 60:14. As non-Jewish people would acknowledge that Jerusalem was the city of the Lord, so at this time Jewish people would acknowledge God’s loved ones in Philadelphia. Does this mean that all became believers, members of the congregation? Not necessarily. Think of another situation. The jailer at Philippi did the kneeling, the acknowledging, first. In his case that was followed by instruction and faith. Perhaps some in Philadelphia did not go beyond acknowledging at this point or ever, like the Sanhedrin which had to acknowledge and could not deny a miracle of healing (Acts 4), but still continued in unbelief. At any rate the time is coming when all will kneel, one way or another (Philippians 2:9-11).

Does this coming and kneeling have anything to do with a universal return of the Jews, as some want to see that in Romans 11:26 and here? No. First of all, what is mentioned in Philadelphia is local and not universal. Secondly, if anyone tries to bring in a universal return of the Jews, then he does not know what Scripture speaks of with “all Israel” in the Romans passage. Another Romans passage (9:8) tells us what true Israel is: “It is not

the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."

They will know that I loved you. – Christians who keep God's word and do not deny his name will be recognized, will be known. "They took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). How can others tell? "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35). And from where does such practiced love come? From being loved by God. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Yes, "they will know that I loved you."

Verse 10

Because you kept my word of steadfast endurance, I will also keep you from trial's hour which is about to come upon the whole world to try those dwelling upon the earth.

Because you kept my word of steadfast endurance. – Earlier I referred to the three approaches interpreters take: 1) that we should endure patiently; 2) Christ's patience as he suffered; and 3) simply a relationship between Christ's word and patience.

Which is the way to go? Perhaps we have a clue when John speaks of this endurance or patience in the first chapter of Revelation: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours do Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Also in Revelation we could turn to 13:10 and 14:12 where it speaks of the patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. In the midst of difficulties, let them be patient. Let them overcome, as each of the seven letters urges. They know what the end result will be: "I will give you the crown of life" (2:10). But from where can we learn such patient endurance? Another passage that comes to mind is Hebrews 12:3. Here, speaking of setting our eyes on Jesus, it says, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Looking at such passages and the context, I would take "You kept my word of steadfast endurance" to refer to both the people as the ones who "kept" or followed this word, as well as to Jesus who is the source or example for patient endurance. The people did the keeping and are commended for this. But the word of steadfast endurance which they kept is called "my" word by Jesus. It is his steadfast endurance that shows the way.

I will also keep you from trial's hour which is about to come upon the whole world to try those dwelling upon the earth. – Some refer this to spiritual trials, others to physical. Some refer this to the end times, others to the immediate future. The arguments that would make this refer only to the end times do not seem, to me, to fit in with this verse. Then from what would the people in Philadelphia be spared, since they would not be around at that time any more? I see here both physical and spiritual, both immediate and future. Specifically for the Philadelphians in their lifetime they would be spared, for God's own reasons, what many others would have to endure during the persecutions against the Christians, such as carried out by Emperor Trajan from the year 98 on. Didn't God do the same thing with John? To our knowledge he is the only one of the apostles who was spared a martyr's death. So God, for his reasons, would spare Philadelphia in the face of both physical and spiritual dangers. While we have no such promise from God when it comes to physical dangers (some are spared, some are not), do we not have his promise that in all things he works for the good of those who love him? Do we not have his promise that no one will snatch us out of his hands? That applies now, for what was "about to come" is constantly reoccurring in history. It will apply at the end times, when it will no longer reoccur.

Verse 11

I come quickly, hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown.

I come quickly. – These words of Jesus are recorded also in the last chapter of Revelation – three times, as a matter of fact. If we think of “quickly” or “soon” as referring to length of time, then we must remember the rebuking words of Peter (2 Peter 3) to the scoffers, reminding them that “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” But if we think of “quickly” or “soon” as referring to the suddenness of Jesus’ coming, then we could look to many references Jesus made, for example in Matthew 24, closing his remarks with, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” And when he comes quickly, think of how quickly something else wonderful will take place: “We will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52). How eagerly we should respond to Jesus’ words about his coming soon by saying, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown. – Hold on! Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” What precious truth had been conveyed to them, truth which they had held to (verse 8), the truth of him who is also the way and the life. In Christ they had been set free – free from the law’s condemnation, free from sin’s wages, free from the grasp of death itself, for Jesus was their life, their resurrection. Picturing that life with a crown was done already in 2:10, “I will give you the crown of life.” That crown of life we don’t ever want to lose by unbelief. Instead with Paul we want to say, “There is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that, day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). Hold on. Be on guard against any temptations that try to take from us our crown.

Verse 12

Him who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will by no means any longer go outside, and I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven from my God, and my new name.

Him who conquers. – The previous verse describes this person as one who has held on to what he has, whose crown has not been taken away.

I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will by no means any longer go outside. – Apparently there was a custom in Philadelphia to name a pillar in honor of some people, perhaps the way we name federal buildings in honor of some officials. That, however, is perhaps not the thought here. Rather a pillar gives us a picture of permanence, of being a solid part of a building. God’s people are not going to be like furniture in his building, furniture that can be rearranged or even thrown out. His people are going to be with God, a permanent and solid relationship. While Samson could grasp pillars of an earthly building and bring them and the building down, this will never happen with God’s pillars, God’s building. We will “by no means any longer go outside,” but be with our Lord and Savior.

And I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven from my God, and my new name. – Why do you write your name on various items? It is to identify those items as belonging to you. Sometimes you write down not only your name, but also your street address, and you may well add city, state, zip code, and even phone number. All of these identify the owner of the items thus marked. And so we have been marked by God. We are God’s, bought at the price of His Son’s blood. We have an address far better than any earthly address which is always temporary. It is the new Jerusalem, Jerusalem the Golden. And our identification with Jesus includes his new name. Ah yes, we’ve always known Jesus, the promised one, the fulfiller of God’s promises. But we do not yet know him as the

fulfiller of all of God's promises. We will, however, after "the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). There is Jesus' new name, the exalted Jesus with his assignment totally completed. That name and everything it stands for is ours. We belong to Him. "Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Verse 13

Whoever has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Whoever has an ear, hear. – The exhortation is simple enough. Do you have an ear, then listen! Actually we all have two ears. But the problem is that sometimes those are itching ears that want to hear many other things instead of God's full truth. May our ears, both of them, remember to listen to him who created and owns them.

Hear what the Spirit says to the churches – Jesus gave this letter to John. Yet this Scripture, like all Scripture, was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Through this letter to Philadelphia he is speaking to us also today, bringing us the message from God the Father and his Son.

Conclusion

In conclusion, permit me now to rewrite, with a great deal of liberty taken, the words of the letter to the church in Philadelphia.

To the pastors of the churches in the Metro North and South Conferences:

I have some things to say to you, and I speak with full authority. You see, I am God, I am the fulfiller of all of God's promises, and I am the one to whom all judgment has been given.

I know your works. Yes, I know also your weaknesses. But I know that you have contended in the past for my word, that you have stood up for me and have not denied me. As a synod, or as conference congregations, you may not seem to have much power to offer when compared with the prestige and programs and ear-itching satisfying power of other churches. Yet your little power is my power. That's why in the past, in the Synodical Conference controversies, I gave you an open door to let my power reach out to others. I gave you open doors to reach out into all states and into many lands. Thereby I have enabled you to gather, in many who did not know me or had opposed me, and have enabled you to gain the grudging respect of others for the strength of your convictions. Since I alone am to shut doors, and I will do that only when I know that is the correct thing to do, I want you to keep on using the open doors I place before you, wherever they may be. That certainly includes local doors, as I promised that to Philadelphia.

Keeping my word, using the open doors I place before you – that won't always be easy. But I'll be with you. I will keep my promise not to leave you in hours of trial. You know that from the past when also outwardly I richly blessed you as a synod. Keep on working, and continue in the trust that I will keep you, that in my wisdom I will watch over you in difficult times as well as in good.

Yes, keep on working, for the time will come when that is no longer possible. I will not tell you the day or hour I plan to come. But I will tell you I'll come quickly whenever that is. For many that will be before Judgment Day itself, since death can take place at any time. So hold on to what you have. Don't lose your doctrinal concern. Be faithful even to the point of death. I have a wonderful crown for you. I want you to wear it with me, to be kings with me, the King of kings.

And then what? You'll be with me. You'll be mine. I purchased you, remember. It cost me my body given and my blood shed. But by that sacrifice I reconciled you to God. I made you mine. My name is on you. I'll never let you go. Nor would you ever want to go once you are in Jerusalem the golden.

Are you listening? I didn't have the Spirit write this letter just to one church, I addressed it to the church in Philadelphia. But did you notice that I closed this letter by saying, "Hear what the Spirit says to the churches?" "Churches" – that's plural. That includes the churches of the Metro North and South Pastoral Conferences.

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

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