

THE THINGS PRESENT, REVELATION, 2:1-3:22

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

- Grant Osborne, *Among the recipients of the letters in Revelation, Smyrna and Philadelphia were the great successes in the eyes of God and Christ, yet they were the smallest of the seven and had the least influence from an earthly perspective. But God does not judge on the basis of the world's statistics. God's criteria are spiritual and Christ-centered, and in this area these two churches were resounding successes!*
- Thomas Constable, *The Lord sent the letter to the church in Philadelphia in order to praise the Christians there for their faithfulness in spite of persecution and to encourage them to persevere.*
- Kendell Easley, *Christ encourages the congregation of Philadelphia to take heart that the open door to heaven is theirs despite human and satanic hostility and to "hold on" as Christ promises to protect them in the face of a coming worldwide trial.*

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA, REVELATION 3:7-13

A. Destination - Philadelphia (3:7a), ***And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:***

1. Background

- a. Philadelphia was 30 miles southeast of Sardis and founded under the reign of Attalus II, who ruled Pergamum from 159 to 138 B.C.
- b. William Barclay, *It was founded for a special purpose. It was situated where the borders of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia met. But it was not as a garrison town that Philadelphia was founded, for there was little danger there. It was founded with the deliberate intention that it might be a means of spreading Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia; and so well did it do its work that by AD 19 the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greeks.*
- c. Grant Osborne, *There was a strong grape and wine economy, and the patron deity was Dionysius, god of wine.*
- d. Warren Wiersbe, *The only major problem with the location was that the area was prone to earthquakes. Philadelphia sat on a geological fault, and in 17 B.C. it was destroyed by a severe earthquake that also destroyed Sardis and ten other cities.*

2. Progress of the Gospel

- a. Grant Osborne, *There is not a lot of extra-biblical evidence for a large Jewish population, but the problems in the letter indicate that was indeed the case.*
- b. William Barclay, *Three centuries before, Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond; and now there has come to it another great missionary opportunity, to carry to those who had yet to hear it the message of the love of Jesus Christ . . . It was the last bastion of Asian Christianity. It was not until midway through the fourteenth century that it fell; and to this day there is a Christian bishop and 1,000 Christians in it. With the exception of Smyrna, the other churches are in ruins; but Philadelphia still holds aloft the banner of the Christian faith.*
- c. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The message to Philadelphia has captured the imagination of Christians through the centuries because no other message (not even the one to Smyrna) is so rich in promises.*

B. The Lord (3:7b), ***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.***

1. Charles Ryrie, *The Head of the church presents Himself as holy, true, and authoritative. The last part of verse 7 is taken from Isaiah 22:22 [And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open], where authority was given God's servant Eliakim over David's house, just as Christ has authority over His church.*
2. John Walvoord, *Christ earlier had been described as the One who holds "the keys of death and hades" (Rev. 1:18). The reference here, however, seems to be to spiritual treasures.*
3. Warren Wiersbe, *Jesus Christ is holy in His character, His words, His actions, and His purposes. As the Holy One, He is uniquely set apart from everything else, and nothing can be compared to Him . . . But He is also the One who is true—that is, genuine. He is the original, not a copy; the authentic God and not a manufactured one. There were hundreds of false gods and goddesses in those days (1 Cor. 8:5–6), but only Jesus Christ could rightfully claim to be the true God . . . It is worth noting that when the martyrs in heaven addressed the Lord, they called Him "holy and true" (Rev. 6:10). Their argument was that, because He was holy, He had to judge sin, and because He was true, He had to vindicate His people who had been wickedly slain.*

4. William Barclay notes that there are two words for true in Greek, one means *true in the sense that a true statement is different from a false statement. It is the second of these words which is used here. In Jesus, there is reality. When we are confronted with him, we are confronted with no shadowy outline of the truth but with the truth itself.*
5. Kendell Easley, *For the first time in these letters Christ identifies himself by using a symbol not found in the opening vision of chapter 1: who holds the key of David . . . Christ alone has the authority to admit persons to his heavenly city. Because he is holy and true, no one can ever argue that his admission of some and refusal of others is unrighteous.*

C. Commendation (3:8), ***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.***

1. Jesus commends them for taking advantage of an open door.
 - a. Thomas Constable, *The Philadelphian Christians had received an open door of opportunity to be a spiritual blessing—perhaps the opportunity for evangelism (cf. 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3).*
 - b. Warren Wiersbe, *In the New Testament, an “open door” speaks of opportunity for ministry (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). Christ is the Lord of the harvest and the Head of the church, and it is He who determines where and when His people shall serve (see Acts 16:6–10). He gave the church at Philadelphia a great opportunity for ministry . . . Unbelief sees the obstacles, but faith sees the opportunities! And since the Lord holds the keys, He is in control of the outcome! So what do we have to fear?*
 - c. J. Ramsey Michaels, *Preachers who claim the promises for their congregations tend to interpret the ‘open door’ to mission or evangelism, as in Acts 14:27 . . . Yet the open door in the message to Philadelphia is more likely a door into heaven (see 4:1) or into the temple of God or into the new Jerusalem (see v. 12) than a door for evangelism. The open door is simply a guarantee of salvation or eternal life, like the promises to the ‘overcomers’ in all seven messages.*
 - d. Grant Osborne, . . . *in this context it is better to see this as entrance into the kingdom of God, with Jesus holding the keys that open the gate. He alone can shut the door, not these adversarial Jews.*
 - e. Kendell Easley, *While the Jews had closed their synagogue doors on earth, none could deny the Philadelphian Christians entry into heaven. They are to take heart that their Lord holds the true key of David.*
2. He knows they have little power.
 - a. Charles Ryrie, . . . *a little power (not so much an indication of spiritual weakness as of the few true saints in the church);*
 - b. Thomas Constable, . . . *Since there is no article before the word translated little in the Greek text, it is possible to understand their little strength as a reference to their small influence, evidently because of their small number.*
 - c. John Walvoord, *There is no word of rebuke, though Christ said, I know that you have little strength. These words, however, become a basis for His commendation that you have kept My word and have not denied My name.*
 - d. Kendell Easley, *The congregation of Philadelphia was small. Its members had little strength to oppose the forces of evil. Yet they had kept my word and . . . not denied my name (v. 8), also described as having kept my command to endure patiently (v. 10). What high praise from the Lord!*
 - e. Grant Osborne, *It is possible to take the little strength Jesus refers to as a rebuke, meaning they have “little (spiritual) power.” But that is hardly likely, for the entire context is positive. Rather, it means the Philadelphian church lacks authority or influence. Yet through all of their extreme difficulties they have “kept my word and have not denied my name.”*
3. Jesus acknowledged their obedience and faithful testimony to Him.
 - a. Charles Ryrie, . . . *keeping His word; and . . . separation from evil and faithfulness to Him.*
 - b. Thomas Constable, *They had faithfully obeyed God’s Word, and they had maintained a faithful testimony for the Lord in the past, presumably by word and by deed . . . They also enjoyed the prospect of an open door into the messianic kingdom because they had been faithful. This may be the primary reference in view.*
 - c. Warren Wiersbe, *Apparently, this was not a large or a strong church; however, it was a faithful one. They were true to God’s Word and unafraid to bear His name . . . It is not the size or strength of a church that determines its ministry, but faith in the call and command of the Lord. “God’s commandments are God’s enablements.” If Jesus Christ gave them an open door, then He would see to it that they were able to walk through it!*

D. Condemnation

1. There is no condemnation of the church at Philadelphia by our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Michael Wilcock, *Apart from Smyrna, Philadelphia is the only church with which Christ has no fault to find.*

F. Promises (3:9-11a, 12)

1. Jesus did not rebuke the church at Philadelphia but gave promises instead.
2. Jesus' promises
 - a. Their enemies would be forced to acknowledge that Christians are loved by Christ (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.**
 - 1) John Walvoord, *Christ referred to their enemies as the synagogue of Satan (cf. 2:9). They were Jews who opposed the believers' Christian testimony. False religion has always been a formidable antagonist against true Christian faith. The day will come, however, when all opponents of the faith will have to acknowledge the truth (cf. Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10–11).*
 - 2) Thomas Constable, . . . *their Jewish antagonists would eventually have to acknowledge that the Christians were the true followers of God (v. 9; cf. 2:9). These foes claimed to be the true followers of God, but they were not, having rejected Jesus Christ (cf. John 8:31–59). Eventually they would have to admit their error, at the judgment of unbelievers (the Great White Throne judgment), if not earlier (Isa. 45:23; 60:14; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10–11). However the future repentance of Israel at Messiah's Second Coming, which will result in the Jews' respectful treatment of Gentile believers, may be in view here (cf. Isa. 45:14; 49:23; Ezek. 36:23; 37:28; Zech. 8:20–23).*
 - 3) Warren Wiersbe, *How were these Jews opposing the church at Philadelphia? For one thing, by excluding Jewish believers from the synagogue. Another weapon was probably false accusation, for this is the way the unbelieving Jews often attacked Paul. Satan is the accuser and he uses even religious people to assist him (Rev. 12:10). It is not easy to witness for Christ when the leading people in the community are spreading lies about you. The church at Smyrna faced the same kind of opposition (Rev. 2:9).*
 - b. He will keep them from the Tribulation (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.**
 - 1) *hour of trial*
 - a) Charles Ryrie, *The church is also promised deliverance from the hour of trial that shall come upon all the world. The words "temptation" or "trial" are equivalents for "tribulation" (cf. Luke 8:13 with Matt. 13:21 and Mark 4:17). The verse indicates that this does not refer to the normal trials of Christians (John 16:33; Acts 14:22), but to a special "hour of testing," which will be worldwide. . . . This is the pretribulation view of the relation of the Rapture to the Tribulation; that is, the church will be raptured before (pre-) the Tribulation begins. . . . This is not a promise of protection while living through the Tribulation on earth but removal and transfer from earth to heaven (just as we have been transferred into His kingdom).*
 - b) Mark Hitchcock, *Revelation 3:10 is a key vers in the debate over the timing of the rapture. It is used by pretribulationists as a key support for their view that believers are exempt from the seven-year time of tribulation coming upon the earth. . . . Notice that Jesus tells the believers He will keep them "from" the hour of testing. The Greek preposition used here (ek) carries the idea of "out of, or from." This is inconsistent with the posttribulationists' idea of Christ protecting believers on earth "through" the Tribulation. Also, notice that Jesus promises to keep His people from the "hour" of testing that is coming upon the whole world. The Lord promises to keep His people not just from, or out of, the testing, but from the very "time" or hour of testing.*
 - c) Thomas Constable, *God has promised all Christians deliverance from that outpouring of His wrath (1 Thess. 1:10) . . . Other New Testament passages also teach a pretribulation Rapture (e.g., John 14:3; 1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13–18; 5:9).*
 - d) John Walvoord, *The promise was, 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. This is an explicit promise that the Philadelphia church will not endure the hour of trial which is unfolded, beginning in Revelation 6. Christ was saying that the Philadelphia church would not enter the future time of trouble; He could not have stated it more explicitly. If Christ had meant to say that they would be preserved through a time of trouble, or would be taken out from within the Tribulation, a different verb and a different preposition would have been required.*
 - e) Warren Wiersbe, *This is surely a reference to the time of Tribulation that John described in Revelation 6–19, "the time of Jacob's trouble." This is not speaking about some local trial, because it involves "them that dwell on the earth" (see Rev. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8). The immediate reference would be to the official Roman persecutions that would come, but the ultimate reference is to the Tribulation that will encompass the earth before Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom.*

- 2) *those who dwell on the earth*
 - a) Thomas Ice, *Every global use of “earth dwellers” in the Old Testament appears in a judgment context . . . It is of special significance that both “earth dwellers” and “world dwellers” are used multiple times in Isaiah 24-27, often called Isaiah’s Apocalypse.*
 - b) Mark Hitchcock, *This description is found eleven times in nine verses (3:10; 6:10; 8:13, 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8) . . . earth dwellers, then, are unsaved people who, during the Tribulation, stubbornly and steadfastly continue in their rejection of God . . . The entire horizon of their lives is earthbound.*
 - c) Thomas Constable, *This term refers to earth-dwellers as contrasted with heaven-dwellers, the unsaved as contrasted with Christians.*

- c. Jesus will return quickly (11a), ***I am coming soon.***
 - 1) Mark Hitchcock, *The most natural meaning of this promise is that believers will not be on earth when the hour of trial takes place. This conclusion is bolstered by the next verse, where Jesus says, “I am coming quickly.” The inference is that He will deliver His people from the time of worldwide testing by His coming for them.*
 - 2) John Walvoord, *The event in view here that will deliver the true church from the tribulation is the rapture, which must occur prior to the tribulation for this promise to have its full force.*
 - 3) Robert Thomas, *A return to earth could not be characterized as ‘soon’ by any stretch of the imagination. It is rather an imminent event that will come suddenly and unexpectedly . . .*
 - 4) John Walvoord, *Christ promised, I am coming soon, a concept repeated often in the Book of Revelation. The thought is not simply that of coming soon but coming suddenly or quickly (cf. 1:1; 2:16).*

- d. Overcomers will be honored forever (12a), ***The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it,***
 - 1) Thomas Constable, . . . *God promised that He will not simply honor overcomers by erecting a pillar in their name in heaven, as was the custom in Philadelphia (v. 12). He will make them pillars in the spiritual temple of God, the New Jerusalem (21:22; cf. Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–10). Making a person a pillar in a spiritual temple must mean giving him honor in heaven.*
 - 2) George Raymond Beasley-Murray, . . . *“In contrast to . . . the buildings that perished in Philadelphia’s earthquakes, the victor is assured that his place in the city which comes down out of heaven is eternally secured.*
 - 3) John Walvoord, *Everyone who is an overcomer will become a pillar in the temple of . . . God. This is of course symbolic of the permanent place in heaven for believers, referred to here as the temple of God. The entire New Jerusalem will be the ultimate temple (21:22). In contrast to earthly temples and earthly pillars which fall, believers will continue forever in the temple.*
 - 4) Warren Wiersbe, *The symbolism in this verse would be especially meaningful to people who lived in constant danger of earthquakes: the stability of the pillar, no need to go out or to flee, a heavenly city that nothing could destroy. Ancient cities often honored great leaders by erecting pillars with their names inscribed on them. God’s pillars are not made of stone, because there is no temple in the heavenly city (Rev. 21:22). His pillars are faithful people who bear His name for His glory (Gal. 2:9).*

- e. The Father and the Son will identify themselves with believers (12b), ***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.***
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *God promises to write on the saints His name, the name of His city, and Christ’s new name. What the new name may be we do not know, but the writing of this name indicates identification with, and possession by, God.*
 - 2) John Walvoord, *Christ specified that He was referring to the city of My God, that is, the New Jerusalem (cf. 21:2). He repeated His promise: I will also write on him My new name (cf. 2:17; 14:1; 19:12). Because believers have identified with Christ by faith, He will identify Himself with them.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, . . . *Jesus Christ will identify with His faithful people: “I will write on him the name of My God . . . and My new name” (v. 12). Since they have honored Him on earth, He will acknowledge them in heaven (cf. 2:17; 14:1; 19:12). Writing one’s name on something indicated ownership in John’s day, as it does now . . . Scripture does not reveal Jesus Christ’s new name elsewhere. Perhaps this new name is a symbol of His character, which overcomers can only appreciate when they see Him (cf. 2:17; 3:5).*

E. Exhortation (3:11b, 13)

1. Stand firm (3:11b), ***Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.***

- a. Charles Ryrie, *The only exhortation is to “hold fast” (the same word used in 2:1, 13-14, 25). The reason for this exhortation is so that no one would rob them of their rewards (cf. 2 John 8).*
- b. John Walvoord, *They were exhorted in the light of His coming to continue to hold on to what they have.*
- c. Thomas Constable, *Since Jesus Christ’s return was imminent, the believers should remain faithful to Him so that their detractors would not rob them of the reward that would be theirs for steadfast perseverance (cf. 2 John 8).*
- d. William Barclay, *It is a question not of someone stealing their crown but of God taking it from them and giving it to someone else, because they were not worthy to wear it . . . It is blessedly true that even out of failure we can redeem ourselves—but only if we cast ourselves upon the grace of Jesus Christ.*

2. Listen to the Spirit (3:13), ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.***

- a. Thomas Constable, *The familiar closing charge (v. 13) reminds us once again that the message of each of these seven letters is applicable to all the churches.*
- b. John Walvoord, *The letter closed with the familiar appeal, hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The promise given to the Philadelphia church and the challenge to continue to be faithful is certainly God’s Word to His whole church today.*

CONCLUSION

- Thomas Constable, *Some students of church history have seen the era during which the modern foreign missionary movement flourished, especially the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as resembling the Philadelphian church. During that period of time there were several revivals of return to God’s Word.*
- Grant Osborne, *These two churches are important reminders to us that God prefers faithful churches over big and seemingly successful ones. Many of us may feel insignificant, and our churches may seem small and unimportant. But when we remain centered on Christ and live for him, God greatly honors both us and our churches.*