

Philadelphia - A Church Strong Through Weakness

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] But we're going to read now in our Bibles. If you need a Bible to look at, there's some at the front here, some at the sides, and some at the back of the church. So if you don't have one, you can easily get hold of one.

We're going to be reading in the Revelation of John. That's the very last book of the Bible. Paul has been helping us look at these early chapters of Revelation and the letters of the risen Lord Jesus to his church, to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Real churches, but also representing all the churches of the Lord Jesus in the known world at that time. And still of great relevance preserved for us in the scriptures because there's still a word for the church today.

And we're going to read together now in chapter 3 and verse 7, which is the letter to the church in Philadelphia. So Revelation chapter 3 at verse 7.

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, write the words of the Holy One, the True One, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens.

[1 : 16] I know your works. Behold, I've 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.

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.

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.

I'm coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one will seize your crown. He will make them come and bow down before your feet.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good evening, folks.

[2 : 52] And please have Revelation 3 open in front of you. These verses, the letter of the church in Philadelphia. Revelation 3, verses 7 to 13.

Now, the task of Christ's church in every age, including ours, seems rather daunting, doesn't it?

The task of making and growing disciples of Jesus Christ, declaring his lordship over all, calling people to repent because they are sinners in the face of the judgment of God.

That task is daunting. When we consider the scale of it, the numbers of people, the difficulties that we face, the opposition we encounter, it overwhelms us.

And it is easy, isn't it, to be discouraged as we think about our task as a church, not just here, but across the UK, across the West.

[4 : 03] It's easy to be discouraged. We feel very small and weak, seemingly not making much progress. We live in a city of maybe half a million, 600,000 people.

We're a church of 400 or so. We represent about 0.008% or something like that of the population of Glasgow. We are tiny. We're puny, aren't we?

Yet, our desire is to win Glasgow for Christ. To see men and women, boys and girls, coming to know the laws. And I think the church in Philadelphia probably felt a bit like that.

Huge opportunities for the gospel, given where that church was located. It was a real base for reaching what we now call Turkey. It was a great base to reach. And it was certainly that for the Greek world as they were expanding their empire.

Philadelphia was a key staging point for the evangelization, in terms of Greek culture at least. So, where it was located, it was an ideal place to go proclaim.

[5 : 13] But, despite the huge opportunities, they were small. Look how Jesus describes them, middle of verse 8. I know that you have but little power.

They felt and were puny. At least in their own eyes and probably to many others around. They were not impressive. They were small.

They were a church who had endured hard times. Look at verse 10. Jesus says to them, I've seen your sufferings because you have kept my word about patient endurance.

This was a church that's had to endure. So, what does the Lord Jesus say to a church like that? A small church?

They face difficulties. A church aware of the scale of the task, but also aware of their own limitations. A church perhaps burdened by its responsibilities.

[6 : 13] Well, this letter in Revelation 3 is here to encourage such a church. The church then and today will have its eyes lifted from present circumstances to perceived weaknesses and have its eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who reigns, who is sovereign, and who opens doors for the gospel.

That is what this letter is here for. So, I've got one main point this evening and then four implications flowing from it. So, here's the main point.

Jesus is sovereign over his eternal gospel kingdom. That's the big point. Jesus is sovereign over his eternal gospel kingdom.

Look again with me at the start of this letter. Look at verse 7. Well, we have these words about the Lord Jesus Christ. It says, And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, write, 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.

Jesus is presented as the Holy One. Holy and true. He is set apart above all others.

[7 : 41] He's holy, pure, and spotless in righteousness. He is the true one, the faithful one, the genuine one, the only Messiah. But it's the next description of Jesus that's particularly significant.

And at first glance, it seems a bit obscure as you read these words about keys of David. And what does that all mean? Shutting doors, opening doors. Well, to possess this key, to possess the key of David, was to have complete control over the gospel kingdom.

To possess such a key was, in Old Testament terms, to have administrative responsibility for the whole kingdom of Judah. Now, this mention of the key of David there, it's a reference to a rather obscure incident you read about in Isaiah chapter 22.

At that point, in Isaiah 22, King Hezekiah reigns. And he had a chief steward.

He's like the prime minister. He had the... Hezekiah was the king, but he had a prime minister who was responsible for looking after the nation. And his chief steward was called Shebna.

[9 : 03] Now, Shebna was just not up to the task. He was not good at his job. And he was to be removed from office and replaced by a man called Eliakim.

Well, listen to these words from Isaiah 22. And you'll see at the very end, the exact words picked up here in Revelation 3. So this is where this reference comes from.

So let me read some words from Isaiah 22, verse 20. It says this, So he's the replacement prime minister.

And I will clothe him with your robe and will bind your sash on him and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open and none shall shut. None.

[10 : 04] He shall shut and none shall open. So that's where this reference comes from. This key of David was given to Eliakim and he alone had the power to open the doors to the kingdom and to shut the doors.

The fact that Eliakim was given this key of David, it means he had absolute control of the kingdom. He determined who would come in and go out. He would open and shut the door.

And Jesus, likewise, has been given the key of David. But it's a key with far greater and more significant responsibility than Eliakim.

Here in Revelation 3, this Isaiah reference presents Jesus as the Davidic Messiah with absolute power to control entrance into the gospel kingdom.

Jesus has the key to the household of God. He is the one who opens and shuts the door to God's gospel kingdom. Jesus is the sovereign key holder.

[11 : 08] And that means that he alone determines who comes in and who doesn't. Jesus alone is in charge, not us.

Jesus alone is in charge, not Satan. See, Jesus alone determines who will and who will not enter his eternal kingdom.

And Jesus says to the Philadelphian church, I have opened this door into my heavenly kingdom and whatever anyone else tries to do, they cannot close that door.

Jesus is sovereign over his eternal gospel kingdom. That's the implication of this key of David. It's the key to the whole kingdom, God's eternal kingdom.

And so, four implications which flow out from this fact. The fact that Jesus is the one who is sovereign. He is the one who determines who comes in to his eternal kingdom.

[12 : 13] Four implications we see in this short letter. Firstly, Jesus is sovereign, therefore, he determines gospel opportunities.

Look at verse 8. Jesus says, I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut.

The sovereign Lord Jesus who has the key of David who opens and no one shuts has set before the Philadelphian church an open door which no one can shut.

This open door language is used in several places in the New Testament and at times it means there is an opportunity for gospel advance. The fact there's an open door. You see it in Acts 14, you see it in 1 and 2 Corinthians and again in Colossians.

And in that final reference there in the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul writes to the church there and he urges them to pray also for us that God may open a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ.

[13 : 26] You see an open door represents an opportunity to preach the gospel, to witness to Christ. Christ. It is an opportunity determined by the sovereign laws and that means that nothing can take away that opportunity.

He's opened the door and no one can shut it. Yes, the Philadelphian church may be small, they may have little power, they may be a weak looking church, but the opportunity for gospel progress has nothing to do with their power or their influence.

See the sovereign Lord has opened a door. No one, no thing can shut that door. Greatly encouraging for the Philadelphian Christians to hear these words of the Lord Jesus.

The fact he has set an open door before them and given who Jesus is, no one can shut it because he's the one who is sovereign. How wonderfully reassuring for the church in every age to know that Jesus is the one who opens doors for gospel advance.

Opponents to the gospel can't shut the door. They may oppose. They may seek to destroy churches, burn them down.

[14 : 50] They may seek to hurt Christians, throw them in prison. But the thing is they cannot touch our eternal destiny. They cannot close the door that matters for salvation because Jesus alone holds that door open.

How wonderfully reassuring for the church in every age that it's Jesus who opens the door for gospel progress. And Jesus has done that, hasn't he? Just consider the global church today. doors that you and I would never thought would open. He has opened. The very fact that the church is global now. Think about when this letter was written.

The church was beginning to spread but it was pretty localized. But here we are 2,000 years later. The gospel's gone to every corner of the world. Jesus opens doors.

Think of the millions of Christians in China today. Go back many years, didn't look like a promising door. But Jesus is the one who opens doors.

[15 : 59] Now this of course doesn't mean that the church just sits back and waits for doors just to swing open. No, we try things, we work hard.

The doors in China didn't look open at the time. It wasn't easy. Bibles were smuggled in. People found ways. They toiled hard. So the fact that Jesus is sovereign over these doors does not mean that we do not work hard and do all that we can.

And the fact that Jesus is sovereign, the fact he is the one who opens doors does not mean that things will look good or feel easy at any point. We're to be thoughtful about how we best reach our contacts with the good news of Jesus.

We do all that we can as a church to help people find Jesus in his word to hear and respond to the gospel. In one sense, we are a reasonable sized church.

There's lots going on but as soon as you step out the doors and you see our city, hundreds of thousands of people walking in utter darkness, the colleagues and friends and family that we have, we quickly feel small and powerless, don't we?

[17:17] We quickly feel discouraged. But in light of who Jesus is, in light of the fact that he is sovereign in salvation, we press on, don't we?

we keep inviting people along, we keep telling others about Jesus. The Lord may be opening unpromising looking doors and if he opens them, there is nothing in this world that can shut them. We don't know whose hearts the Lord is at work in. We can't see into people's souls. We don't see that. But Jesus is sovereign.

So we work hard, we make the most of opportunities but not in a frenzied, panicked sort of way as if the results depended all on us.

It's his work. He is sovereign. He is at work as his word is proclaimed as we call people to repent. And he is at work.

[18:27] In this city. He was at work in Philadelphia and he is at work here. The harvest is plentiful. People are starving spiritually.

People are hungry for truth. I was speaking this morning with a couple of folk here this morning. Starving for truth.

Wanting to find out what has Christianity got to say. And so in light of the fact that he's sovereign, in light of the fact that he's in control, we cry out to him, the Lord who is sovereign.

We pray to him and ask him to open doors. He's the one with the keys. He is the one who can open the door to people. And so we ask him. That's the first implication.

Jesus is sovereign over his gospel kingdom so he determines gospel opportunities. Second, he overcomes gospel opponents.

[19:30] We see that in verse 9. Jesus overcomes gospel opponents. Now the church in Philadelphia is reassured there is an open door in front of them but that does not exclude the possibility of opposition.

The weakness of the church won't hinder the progress of the gospel for it is Christ who opens doors but neither will opposition the believers faced hinder that progress either.

Look there at verse 9. He says, 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.

Well, clearly the church there in Philadelphia was facing hostility from some within the Jewish community he describes in there as the synagogue of Satan.

And these are people who say they are Jews but in reality they're not. They're not anything of the sort. They lie. Jesus isn't denying their ethnicities.

[20:46] Rather stating their true status. They claim to be God's people but they are not. If they really were God's people they wouldn't be denying and opposing Christ's people, would they?

And Jesus sees right through their opposition, he exposes them. Not only does Jesus reject the false faith of unbelieving Jews, he promised that their opposition wouldn't hinder the gospel.

Jesus says, Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet. They will learn that I have loved you. It's pretty remarkable, isn't it? These people who are opposing you at this moment, one day they will come, they will realize who you are, they will know that I have loved you.

And it's an allusion to a couple of texts in Isaiah which predict that unbelieving Gentiles would come, come and bow down at Israel's feet.

Listen to one of these verses from Isaiah 60. It says there that the sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despise you shall bow at your feet.

[22:02] They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. So Isaiah is anticipating this time when those who once have afflicted you will come and bow down before you.

But the irony here in Revelation 3 is that the roles have been reversed. Here in Revelation 3 it's ethnic Israelites who will come and bow down to believing Gentiles.

for the Philadelphians the very people who are persecuting them will one day come down and bow down before them.

They will come to realize just how much the Lord loves this small group of Christians these believing Gentiles. Jesus says to them and he says to us people you never thought you'd win over.

You will win over. They will come to realize that you are loved by the Lord God. That you small Christian church you've been ushered through the door that only Jews can open.

[23 : 20] You've been ushered to the kingdom of heaven and one day they will know it. All those who oppose you now one day they will know who you are. Jesus promises that he will cause unbelievers even unbelieving Jews to acknowledge that God's love is upon the followers of Christ.

One day that will be true whether now or on the great day of Christ's return. heaven. And even those who at the moment are most vocal most fierce in their opposition to the gospel they can be brought low.

They will bow before the people they once persecuted and they will confess God's love. That is possible isn't it?

That was the apostle Paul's own experience. One who persecuted the church well he was brought to his knees wasn't he? So having opened a door for gospel ministry Jesus assures his church then and today that through the witness of his weak looking church even some of those most fierce in opposition will be among those who are saved.

That's the second key implication. Thirdly Jesus is sovereign over his gospel kingdom therefore remember that he sees our gospel faithfulness.

[24 : 52] Verses 8 in 10. As we've seen again and again in these letters here in Revelation these churches in Asia the Lord Jesus Christ sees his church.

He knows his church. He sees their faults their flaws he sees their sins their short falls but he also sees their faithfulness.

Remember the church in Sardis last week. although the church as a whole was complacent there was a remnant within wasn't there? There were some who remained faithful who conquered there was a faithful few and the Lord saw them as well as seeing the slumber of the many he saw the steadfastness of the few and likewise here in Philadelphia Jesus saw their faithfulness yes they were small and weak but Jesus sees their loyalty to him.

Listen again to his words there in verse 8 I know that you have but little power and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.

Again in verse 10 because you have kept my word about patient endurance I will keep you. Jesus sees their faithfulness and he honors them for it doesn't he?

[26 : 23] Because you have kept I will keep you. No matter our status or stature in this world no matter how small how weak how feeble we may feel we can take great comfort in knowing that Jesus sees even the smallest act of obedience the refusals to deny Christ that nobody else sees the patient endurance that nobody else seems to notice but Christ notices he sees he noticed the small Philadelphian church and he sees this church he sees you and his eyes are the eyes that matter ultimately so often we crave don't we the recognition of those around us whether in the church or the wider world but none of that really matters in the end does it what matters is Christ and what he sees and what a reassurance for the church of Philadelphia here

Jesus knows that they don't have power but he saw them keeping his words he saw them not denying his name and he sees you too and that can be a great encouragement at times can't it when you're facing tough times when nobody else knows but Jesus does well that's our third implication finally fourth implication Jesus is sovereign over his gospel kingdom therefore he safeguards his gospel servants now and forever this is verses 10 to the end look at what he says there verse 10 because you have kept my word about patient endurance I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming in the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth he goes on verse 11

I'm coming soon hold fast what you have so that no one may seize your crown the one who conquers I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God never shall he go out of it and I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which come down from my God out of heaven and my own new name see Jesus is sovereign and he promises to safeguard his servants both now and forever firstly the now that first section I read from verse 10 is speaking primarily of a spiritual safeguarding a spiritual protection in this world see nowhere in the book of Revelation are believers promised immunity from physical suffering now but rather we are promised spiritual protection in the midst of current tribulation no promise of physical preservation now but there is spiritual preservation promised and this hour of trial he refers to I think is referring to the end times troubles and tribulations which have already begun they began in the first century with Christ's ascension and they will continue until he returns and so Jesus

promises that as we keep his words as we patiently endure as we go about making the very most of the doors that Jesus has opened for ministry he will keep us now in this world in this life he will keep us safe and secure spiritually as we wait for his coming we are to hold fast we are to hold steady through the tribulations of this world we are to hold the line we don't move from the gospel and that's the now that's the here and now but there's also promises for the future there's promises of future safeguarding for all eternity to the one who conquers

Jesus will make them a pillar in the temple they will be given a new name the name of God of the new Jerusalem Jesus himself those who endure now will live permanently in the eternal temple the new creation the city of God the dwelling place of God himself that is our future as his people and there's nothing that can shake us from that future reality Jesus Christ has the key of David he opens the door to the eternal gospel kingdom and he promises his faithful church that eternity awaits eternal security permanently in the presence of God that is our hope that is our destiny no matter how small and feeble we may look now no matter how

[32 : 04] Philadelphian we may be those with little power a puny church in a big city we can take great comfort that our patient endurance now is worth it the Lord will honor it our steadfastness in the midst of trial will be worth it our witnessing and the faith of opposition will be worth it because Jesus is sovereign over his gospel kingdom so take great courage ultimately it's not down to you or me is it the progress of the gospel the task we face as a church it's not down to you or me Jesus holds the key he is the one who will build his church and so hear his words Jesus says fear not little flock for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom he can give it and none can take it away well let's pray shall we as we close father god we thank you that we do not belong to a weak or an impotent god but rather we belong to the sovereign creator the sustainer the lord over all things thank you that we belong to you and thank you that you alone possess the keys to the kingdom so please help us help us to trust you and help us to be a people that walk not by what we see but rather trusting in your words that we be a people who live by faith help us we ask it in Jesus name amen