



Philadelphia—Opportunity Revelation 3:7-13

The other Philadelphia

A missionary city

Philadelphia (“love for brother”) was given its name by a king around 189/190 BC in honor of his older brother. It was ideally located on a major Roman highway which led to the interior of Asia Minor (Turkey). As St. Louis, MO, has been called “The Gateway to the West”, the ancient city of Philadelphia was called the “The Gateway to the East.” It was also known as a “missionary city”, whose purpose was to spread Greek culture and language in its part of the world.

An insecure city

Rome assumed control over the city, and in AD 17 a devastating earthquake destroyed the city. The uncertainty of knowing when the next earthquake would strike caused most of the city to live outside the city walls—most unusual for the time.

A re-named city

The Roman Emperor generously forgave taxation so that the city could rebuild itself. It was renamed “New Caesar” in the Emperor’s honor and under Vespasian, was re-named again “Flavia.” The townies still called it Philadelphia.

A betrayed city

Though helped by an earlier emperor, Philadelphia was economically shaken when Domitian ordered that half the grapevines be destroyed to create more of a market for the wine-makers in Italy. Also, Domitian wanted Philadelphia to grow more corn and less grapes for his army; but he failed to read the volcanic soil samples, which would have informed him that while ideal for grapes, it was foolhardy for corn.

Philadelphia—the church of the open door

- *V. 7—He who is the Holy One, the True One, says these things.* V. 7 is a direct reference to the deity of Jesus. Like Yahweh, Jesus is the “Holy One”; and unlike Caesar who betrayed the city, Jesus is the “True One” or faithful one. He is the loyal Son of God.

- *v. 7*—“*What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*” This refers to Isaiah 22:22 and Eliakim, who was king Hezekiah’s chief of staff. Eliakim alone controlled access to the throne room of the king. Like Eliakim, Jesus asserts that he alone controls access to the throne room of His heavenly Father.
- *v. 8*—*I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.* Jesus is the door-keeper! Though excommunicated from the synagogue in Philadelphia, these Hebrew-Christians are assured by Christ that they—and not the synagogue claimants—are the true people of God. “Ethnic Israel, which was claiming to be the divine agent wielding the power of salvation and judgment, no longer held this position. Christ’s followers could be assured that the doors to the true synagogue were opened to them, whereas the doors remained closed to those who rejected Christ” (Beale 1999, 284).
- *v. 8*—there is a secondary meaning to the open door that has to do with missionary outreach: “What the city had been for Greek culture, it was now to be for the Christian gospel The Philadelphian church seems to have had the chance to spread far and wide the good news of God’s grace and kingdom. The door was open. No-one could shut it. Let them pass through” (Stott 1990, 101-2)! Pray for the gift of the open door!
- In *v. 8*—Jesus commends this little church for their great faith—“*You have kept my word and you have not denied my name!*” Jesus defines success for his church—faithfulness, loyalty, and bold witness in a culture hostile to Christianity. It’s one thing to live for Christ in the Bible belt; it’s another thing to live for Christ in a pagan, godless culture that is antagonistic to Christ-followers.
- *v. 9*—“*I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan*” “Just as OT Israel was weak in comparison to its opponents, but would be made strong by God’s restoring work through Cyrus, so would God make the witness of the small church in Philadelphia effective among its opponents” (Beale 1999, 289).
- *v. 10*—Jesus’ word to this small church—and us—is: PREVAIL!
- *Vv. 11-13*—the prevailing church will be a pillar in the new heavens and new earth. The instability of earthquake prone cities will give way to eternal stability and security for those who endure in Christ. “*Never again will he leave it.*” Citizens of Philadelphia had to live outside the city for fear of their security. Citizens of heaven will live in the New Jerusalem forever. To receive the name of “*my God*”, “*the name of the city of my God*,” and “*my new name*” is to belong to God forever! This is success!

God’s Word to us: Since your ache is God’s open door, ENDURE!

Every small church in a difficult area of ministry will find this letter encouraging. Every Christian uncertain about his or her gifts and place in the church as a whole will be comforted. The basic message is simple: *God is more concerned about your loyalty to Him than your ranking in worldly success.* An inner city pastor was told by a “church growth” expert that he should leave the inner city church because there was no future in that church. The leaders in Philadelphia would have been told the same. Does God care only about suburban ministry where neighborhoods are exploding with people and “church growth” is almost inevitable? When we get to heaven will mega-ministries be given the great rewards? Or will it be the Philadelphians—those micro-ministries who held fast and stayed true and did not succumb even in the midst of an incredibly difficult circumstance? They are given an “open door” and a “crown” and no one will be able to take it away from them. (Osborne 2002, 199-200)