

Philadelphia

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, as I said, we're turning towards the... We're turning to the chapter 3 in Revelation tonight, to the church in Philadelphia, page 1, 2, 3, 5.

The penultimate study in this section of the Bible. Philadelphia is now known by a different name. You can still go and visit it in Turkey.

At the time of writing, it was one of the newer of the towns, newest probably, of the towns that was written about. It had not long been destroyed by an earthquake.

So the people lived in a fragile environment. It was rebuilt by a generous emperor. And it was a strategically important place. It was situated on a just above a very fertile plain, on a main route from the east, the west to the east, and the road that it was on culminated in a seaport.

So trade was very important. So it was quite a strategic place. And it was a place where there were a variety of people, groups and religions. We read about the Jews. Obviously the letter was written to Christians.

[1 : 24] And there were various pagan deities worshipped in the city. There was a temple to Dionysus. And the letter is one of encouragement and of comfort.

And we'll come to see this in just a little bit. So what do you know about the church from this letter? Well, it gets, as it were, a positive report. If you look at the first little bit in this letter, it doesn't receive, like many of the churches, a kind of commendation for all the good that they had done, and then a rebuke.

It's just commended for its good works. In verse 8, I know your deeds. It goes on to say, I know you have little strength, yet you've kept my word. So it was a faithful church, but it wasn't a big or an influential or a, humanly speaking, strong church.

And at the same time, it wasn't one who had any major heresy, despite being in a center where there were various people type, various religions.

And the opportunity and the challenge to maybe merge their Christianity a wee bit, they didn't, they remained faithful, and they were commended for that in this. So we know that, but what don't we know?

[2 : 44] When I read through this, first of all, it struck me that this is the kind of passage that we can be more confused about than otherwise. In some senses, we can read it with Christian eyes, or with eyes that are used to passages of the Bible like this, and pick up on something of the meaning.

But if somebody who wasn't used to the Bible, certainly the Book of Revelation, and maybe if we hadn't read this kind of, this kind of style of writing for a while, it could come across as very confusing.

There are many questions that you would ask. You would look into the text, and you may have done so while I was reading through it earlier, and you may think, the key of David, what is this door that he's talking about opening and shutting?

A synagogue of Satan. That's pretty strong language. What earth is he talking about there? And there are other things as you read through. In the latter section, to talk about becoming a pillar in the house of God.

So there are some things that are obviously not clear when you first read it. But I want us to tonight get away from a sense that this is just totally mysterious and disconnected from us.

[3 : 56] When I was young, I used to read parts of Revelation, particularly maybe these letters. And it always seemed like from a far-off galaxy. I didn't know the names of the places. I didn't know where they were. I didn't know a lot of the language.

And the way it's written was unfamiliar to me. And I want us to realize tonight that that's... I want us to move away from a sense of mystery. This was written to a real place, to real people, with a real situation of need for their encouragement and their comfort.

And that's what this letter is all about. It's a letter written to Christians who have a difficulty to strengthen and to encourage and to point them forwards in their Christian lives.

When I was young, I had a picture above my bed. It wasn't... Well, it was a bit of a kind of painting with a text, kind of old-fashioned.

I can't remember. I didn't buy this thing. It arrived on my wall. It was always there as far as I can remember. It was one of these old-fashioned framed pictures with kind of roses strewn across a table and an old-fashioned scroll of text.

[5 : 10] And the text said, The eternal God is your comfort and underneath are the everlasting arms, which is a text from Deuteronomy. I remember some of my friends used to come round, just hang out, and this is at the age when you're starting to have pictures of footballers or whatever.

And they would look at it like, what is that? But one said to me, it was quite interesting, one said to me one time, he looked at it for a while and he said, You should memorise that.

And I thought that was quite interesting because I was slightly embarrassed by this quaint old-fashioned thing that I presumed my parents had found in some second-hand shop somewhere. But that is designed to be a constant comfort, not like a crutch, but a reminder of the truth of God's word.

People have these kind of things around the house as text, symbols of faith. The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms. In many ways that's what this letter is doing, it's being written to these people to hold them fast, to comfort them, and to show them the security they have in their faith.

So I want to look at two main areas as we move into the text tonight. First of all, the problems that they faced, because they did face a problem. And then the promises that they were given by God.

[6 : 39] The problem they faced was a bit of a dispute. If you see from further on in the passage in verse 9, we'll take that reference to the synagogue of Satan, first of all.

There was a dispute, obviously coming from the Jews, maybe very aggressively towards them, that they as Christians were wrong.

They had it all wrong, this whole salvation through Jesus thing, that was nonsense. And what the Jews were saying was that, no, this Jesus, you don't believe in Jesus.

And so that their faith was in a sense being undermined. It could well have been undermined. And this isn't a new dispute, and it's not, this isn't the only place we find this in the Bible, is it?

If you think about, let me just turn to a passage in Galatians. This is a core issue in the Bible. Galatians chapter 2, and we find here Paul defending the truth that faith through Christ is the way to salvation.

[7 : 47] So much so that we know this is a passage where he even sticks up to somebody like Peter, who's begun to kind of, begun to merge his thinking a wee bit. Let me just read a little bit from Galatians chapter 2 from verse 11.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong, but they've got a dispute. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles, but when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray. The issue here is that the clarity that faith in Jesus Christ is what saves us was being kind of eaten away a little bit.

Now look at what he goes on to say in verse 15. We who are Jews by birth and not Gentiles sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So this issue isn't new, and this is the kind of thing that was surrounding them here.

And the letter is written into this situation, and this language is so strong it might offend you. It might offend people that you know, a synagogue of Satan, that's so judgmental.

[8 : 58] How can he say things like that? Well think of what these people were doing. The Jews were saying effectively that by our regulations and by the pattern of our lives, which we're establishing and which we think is good, we will earn our salvation, not by Jesus.

They are taking Jesus Christ, the Savior, out of the picture, dethroning him. And that's what has led to this strong language, the synagogue of Satan.

Those who meet together in the synagogue, in this place, Philadelphia, think they have it all right and are openly and aggressively attacking the Christians, and yet what is said to them here is that they are a synagogue of Satan.

So the response to the problem that they have, the letter is written in part really to reassure them in a sense to get behind them and to say to them, your belief in Christ is right, it is good, it is the faith and you must hold firm to it.

And so those who are tempted to loosen their grip on Jesus as their Savior, and those who are tempted not to be so strong in the marketplace when they meet with their friends in saying, I'm a follower of Jesus, they're to be encouraged and they're to be reassured that they are right.

[10 : 22] If we look back to verse 7, look at what it says about Jesus reinforcing their faith in him. Again, these are the words of him, Jesus, who is holy and true, who holds the key of David, a reference to the fact, a key obviously being the imagery of somebody who is able to open the doors to the kingdom, to those who go in to be part of God's family.

What he opens, no one can shut. And what he shuts, nobody can open. This is, again, some of the difficult imagery used in this passage. But what it speaks about is the fact that through Jesus we are saved.

So the dispute is there, but the response is to encourage them to be put in their faith in Jesus, who is stable and trustworthy.

And it was mentioned by one commentator that in a place where there is the very real threat of earthquake and where they have maybe open attack from other religions, this opening of the reality of the strength of Christ and the fact that the people could really base their faith on Christ was so important for them. And so it is for us today, surely.

So what is the issue you have when you go to work that would keep you from saying, I'm a Christian? What is it that somebody would find ridiculous about that? I'm sure you know somebody when you go to work or in your friend group or in your family, or maybe you have that issue tonight, something that would take away from faith in Jesus as the saviour for those of us who trust in him.

[12 : 03] It's never an issue that's going to go away. It was an issue for these people and it's an issue for us here tonight that Christ as the saviour of the world is not palatable to many people. It's not something they want to hear.

And there are many kinds of issues that people can bring up, historical issues, faith issues, issues of science, all kinds of things. Well, we hold fast to the message of Jesus.

But we go on because as well as there being a problem which is addressed by Jesus in the letter, there are also promises which follow on from this as well.

There are promises in two ways. The first of which is that those around the Christians, you could say they're enemies in the sense of those who are causing them trouble and who are attacking them, those who are around them will be changed.

That's a remarkable truth that we find in this passage. But also, the Christians themselves will be affirmed or they will be strengthened one day. And in this sense, the passage becomes kind of prophetic and it's looking forward.

[13 : 09] So let's look at these two things. The enemies will be changed. Verse 9. We've read that there's a dispute because the Jews are causing a problem and there's this issue of the synagogue of Satan.

But look at what he goes on to say. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan who claim to be Jews, although they are not, but are liars. I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

Now right away we should be struck by that. The incredibly personal language that's used by Jesus to these people. I have loved you. And that's really important for us to grasp is that our faith is never based on our first loving God and us getting to a kind of level of love that we can be accepted at.

Our faith is based on the fact that he first of all loved us. Isn't that amazing that God reaches out to us in love? So that language is very startling for us. And it's very comforting.

I have loved you. But look what he says. I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Now there's two different interpretations of what this means. I will make them come and fall down at your feet.

[14 : 21] One that is this pointing towards a kind of conversion of the Jewish people that many, many Jews will one day be saved. There's lots of people who hold to that idea.

Or is it talking about simply the fact that they will at the coming of Jesus bow in submission recognizing that he is Lord. It may well be that they hadn't during their lives and become a follower of Jesus.

And it may well be that there will not be mass conversion of the Jews. But this is either pointing towards many Jews becoming Christians or just simply the fact that they are recognizing at the end of time he should have received all my love and all my praise.

I don't know. There's different arguments on both sides. Some make the case very strongly that this is to do with many Jews coming to be Christians.

But I think that what is important here is that this sentence shines with how we should be thinking about those around about us.

[15 : 28] If we think about the Lord's Prayer, Matthew chapter 6, if we pray that prayer as Christians, part of what it says is, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And if we're praying to God, your kingdom come, then what we're really praying is that what we want is for us and for everyone that we know to give God the right place that he desires in their hearts, in our hearts, so that all the world honors God.

That's part of what that prayer means. And it's a good way to think about this passage in Philippians 2, we read, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes lose sight of that. That is what is right in this world, is that everybody that you know should hold up God's name and praise him.

And a lot of people that you know, and maybe you yourself, tend to kind of be a bit standoffish from that, and we think, well, I'll decide whether I can hold up God's name. I'm going to examine this God, maybe, and I'm going to decide whether or not I like him, I like the sound of him, and then I might give him some recognition in my life.

[16 : 54] But what this is saying is that we are to give him all of our praise, and one day everybody will, as we read in Philippians, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And again, we come back to this verse, I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. And there will be a time of mass recognition that Jesus is Lord of the earth.

And so that's the challenge to us in our prayers, that we don't want to become like everybody else. When we go to our marketplace, our schools, our colleges, our workplace, it's so easy for us to kind of dilute what we say in our personality.

I'm not suggesting that we go and become all abrasive and try and shout Jesus' name down every one of these thoughts. But is our concern that everybody we know lift up Jesus' name and love him and praise him, and recognize him for who he really is?

So one of the promises is that these people will be changed. They will recognize one day that Jesus is Lord. But there's another promise as well, isn't there?

[18 : 14] The last section, as it were, of this passage, points towards the Christians themselves and how they will be affirmed.

There will come a time when they will be drawn into God's family. And we as Christians all look forward to that. That is our great hope that one day we will be taken to be with Jesus.

Some of the things that I'm thinking of, you'll see from verse 11 onwards. And this is a very symbolic language here. The first time you read this, again, you could think, what is this talking about? I'm coming soon.

Hold on to what you have so no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes, I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Another thing he'll do is I'll write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem.

And he also says, I will also write on him my new name. This is quite possessive language, isn't it? And again, this is the kind of thing that can frighten off many people that we know today.

[19 : 20] We have a spirit of autonomy in our culture, of independence that will make our own way in life to God, find our own path through faith, taking bits of faiths along the way.

What Jesus is saying to the Christians here is, He has already said, I love you, and here he's saying, I'm holding on to you.

And expresses it in these quite unusual ways. I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Now, elsewhere in Revelation, it says there will be no temple.

But this isn't necessarily a contradiction. This is symbolic language, and what it's saying is, there will be permanence. You will be taken into my place, and I will not let you go.

You will become a part of my people when they will be taken to be with the Lord. And in many ways, this is their hope as they go through the difficulties of their lives.

[20 : 19] I will write on Him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem. Symbolic language again of ownership and safety, that they will be taken to a place of safety.

I'll make him a pillar, I'll write on Him the name of my God, of the city of my God, I'll write on Him my new name. This is a reference to, after Jesus is coming again, when everybody will see Him as He really is, He will have a new name, and this name is to be written on us.

Those who are His people will have this name written on them. And it reminds us again, going back to verse 7, to the start of the letter, look at what it says about Jesus again.

These are the words of Him who is holy and true. Jesus is holy and perfect, and He is true. Again, important for them in a culture where there were many challenges, and important for us in our culture where there are many truths, apparently.

Many things can be true at the same time, many faiths, many ways to God. And that's very important for us to recognize if we're challenged by that, if we struggle with that issue.

[21 : 35] And it's not saying that we shouldn't get to know about any other face or be able to give a reason at all for the hope that we have, but it is saying that we must hold very firmly to Christ and to the fact that He knows us and He loves us, and His plan for us as Christians, and His plan for these people was to take them, to hold them, and for them to be His people.

And as I said at the start, this is a letter of comfort and of safety. You may well tonight have troubles and difficulties, I think we all do from time to time.

We may know of people who have great troubles. How do we deal with that? How do we comfort each other? How do we comfort our own hearts? Is that the way to do it? Is it just that we bring comfort to our own hearts?

You go to your happy place, or you deal with things in a way that is your way of coping and managing with the world. You follow a routine. If life doesn't follow the usual routine, and you get out of step, does that make you uneasy?

Things are out of control. Do we create a private empire of wealth and security and sit on it so that we are safe and things are manageable?

[23 : 01] I remembered an example yesterday from a film. In the film Fight Club, the main character is advised by his therapist or something to go to his happy place.

And in the film, his happy place happens to be an ice cave in his mind. And in his ice cave, he meets a talking penguin. And the talking penguin comes along.

I looked it up on YouTube. There's a sort of 20-second clip. The talking penguin comes up and gives him a message. Now, this guy is stressed out. He's got a lot of problems in his life.

And the talking penguin simply says, slide, and then jumps onto a slide and slides away. And the symbolism of that is just give it all over.

Just chill out, forget about it, and just slide away. Let all those problems slide away in your happy place. And that's it.

[24 : 04] That's the end. That's the level of therapy that has been offered to this guy. But we're not to be like that because we have a sure and a certain hope that we are being prepared for glory.

That was the hope that was offered to these people in Philadelphia and the church in Philadelphia, whether they feared earthquakes, whether they feared persecution in the marketplace, or whether they were just tired of trying to explain this message of Jesus to those who are hostile about it.

Hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown. It's a message of encouragement, and it's a message of hope and of security for them. We have much more than just self-help, feel-good therapy.

We have a sure and certain hope that Christ is preparing us for eternity. And if that isn't part of how we deal with the things that come into our lives that trouble us, then as Christians we're missing what Christ wants for us, which is to tell us repeatedly that we are His and that He has loved us and that He is taking us to be with Him.

And so, in conclusion, what is required of us? What is suggested to us from this passage? Well, in some ways it's to remember our place in space and time.

[25 : 34] Sometimes when trouble comes to us, we feel like it's come to us like as if to nobody else before us, because it's personal and it hurts, and it comes on us and we don't know how to deal with it.

And yet others have been through trouble. The church in Philadelphia had to a degree, and they would have dealt with it, according to their own personalities in different ways as well.

And all down through the ages, Christians have faced trouble. And we do too, and we are to remember that we are being prepared for glory and that Jesus knows us and that He has loved us. And we are to, I think, as well, remain faithful to the name of Jesus.

I think that's really important in today's culture, where Jesus' name is a swear word, and it's often mocked. That He is our Savior, He is the one who went to the cross and died in our place, and therefore we love Him.

As we were looking at this morning, we see the incredible tenderness He had for the children. Even the children of the local peasant families around Him, let them come to me because I love them.

[26 : 48] And so we finish by thinking of what an incredible Savior we have who loves us so much, that He gives up His life for us and tells us that we are to hold on to the hope that we have in the face of the trials.

And that is why it is so important for us to encourage each other daily so that we do not give up and to speak the gospel to each other and to care for each other when we know that we struggle with these issues, as we do sometimes.

So let's pray. Lord God, we pray that You would help us. We thank You for this letter to the church in Philadelphia. We recognize the struggles these people had, the problem they had and the way that You gave them encouragement.

And we recognize the promises that are here for those people and we pray that we would take hold of the promises and we would look forward to being a people who bear Your name and who are held closely by You.

Help us with the troubles that we have at the moment, not to give up, but to remain faithful and to own and love and proclaim the name of Jesus. Jesus, we pray that You would help us tonight and we pray that You would open our hearts to You, to know You as Savior, even as we sing the last hymn and all that it teaches us about Your love for us and Your salvation.

[28 : 04] In Jesus' name, amen.