

Philadelphia

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] We did Sardis last week and we're going to look at Philadelphia this evening. And this is a great passage and it's a great message that we have.

And I do wonder if there are periods in your life when you feel that it's very dull to be a Christian. Very dull and very boring really.

And you can't understand why that's the case. And yeah, that's a good idea. Take it down. If anyone wants a Bible, Puzzle is coming with a bread carton of Bibles.

Which is good, yes. No ice cream, just Bibles. No, I just wonder if sometimes we do think that in our lives that it seems dull to be a Christian.

And even within your Christian life you're longing for some excitement. You even maybe hear of other churches which seem to be terribly exciting and growing so much.

[1 : 09] And you know, our churches and growing terribly much and there aren't many dramatic conversions happening. And it's all a bit flat and we just come week after week and it's the same thing.

And there's a plainness and an ordinariness and possibly a bit of dullness about your Christian walk. And so much so that you actually feel quite weak and you don't necessarily feel terribly strong.

Nor do you even maybe, I was speaking to someone this week about this, that you know the truth of the Gospel, you know the facts of the Bible, you know the Christian truth as well.

But you don't feel it and you don't feel excited by the truth. And you don't feel that you're worshipping a great and powerful God because there does seem to be a flatness.

You maybe look around at another level, at other churches that aren't maybe, it's not so much that exciting, but they've denied basic biblical truths.

[2 : 16] They've denied the resurrection, they've denied the deity of Christ. And so at that level you're battling at both ends. You're seeing churches struggling and failing and denying truths that you hold dear.

And see other churches blossoming and growing and other Christians flying, but you feel dull and lifeless yourself. And I think sometimes we do feel like that.

And we sometimes, in arguing for the Christian faith, ourselves struggle when people ask, well if it's so great, if it's so true, if it's such good news, why is it that so few people believe?

Why can we shove the whole of our community into the small Presbytery Hall? Why don't more and more people fall at the feet of Jesus if it's so good and exciting and win-win situation.

And you may or may not, maybe it's just me, maybe it's the perversity of my own heart and mind that sometimes thinks these things. But I think Jesus addresses these kinds, some of these issues in the church that he writes to here in Philadelphia.

- [3 : 27] This is at one of the interesting of the seven, because he has nothing bad to say about this church. He calls, he knows they're weak, but he doesn't say anything bad.
- He commends them, but he doesn't rebuke them as he does with most of the other churches for areas of weakness and sin. But Philadelphia was one of the seven churches in that whole area that Jesus speaks to here.
- And of course, almost in each of the churches there's enough to link it to the church throughout the ages.
- So it's always a relevant message, obviously, because it's the living word of God also. It was the city of, as it's named there, Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. And it was often called the Gateway to the East. It was a commercial city.
- It was in a great place. It was generally a thriving city. I think it was on an earthquake fault line and it had known earthquakes and had been rebuilt.
- [4 : 31] So there was a certain degree of freshness about it. But it was also quite an idolatrous city. There was much worship to idols going on in that city. And within that city there was Jews and a synagogue, but there was also a small Christian community.
- Not strong, not blossoming, small, seemingly insignificant church. I know you, you have little power and nothing flash, nothing special in many ways about this church.
- And it would have been tough for the Christians in that community. Tough culturally, they were hugely counter-cultural being Christians in that city.
- Tough because the God-believers in that city, the Judaistic believers, the Jews who had rejected the Messiah, they believed they had a monopoly on knowledge and truth of God.
- And they despised the Christian movement and they despised the people who believed themselves to be followers of the Old Testament God, who had come to know that God through Jesus Christ, who himself was God.
- [5 : 53] And so they persecuted this small church. So there was religious persecution from religious people. And there was secular persecution from the society in which they lived.
- Tough. It was difficult for this early church. The promises of God maybe didn't feel particularly real or vibrant or relevant. Would they have been tempted to give up? Yes, I think so.
- Would they have been tempted to say, well, if it's, why is it such a small church? And why is it so difficult for me to be a Christian? There wasn't, in other words, much glamour.
- I do think we live in days when even the Christian church and sometimes the way we think in a business-like way, or the way as individuals we think that there must be glamour about the Christian life, and sometimes that this message is a significant and important one for us that, generally speaking, for all of you, tomorrow, there will not be a lot of glamour in your Christian life.
- It's not generally a glamorous life. So I think as we go through this, you'll find the message will be an important one to take with you to work tomorrow, and into your own Christian psyche and thinking.
- [7 : 27] So we see Jesus here, again speaking, the angel of the church and Sardis, right? These are the words of him who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. Again, just that designation of Jesus speaking.
- And he says, I know your works. The words of the Holy One. I'm getting confused now. The true one who has the keys of David.
- So again, this is Jesus speaking very directly to the church. And that must have been, even at this level to the church in Philadelphia, a hugely encouraging thing that here is Jesus Christ, the one who died, who rose again, who ascended, in whom they had put their trust.

It changed their whole lives. He is the one who is speaking to them, though they are small and insignificant. And he describes himself as the Holy One, the true one.

Again, we take that message and recognize that Jesus speaks to us through his Word. And when he speaks, he's the one who is worth listening to.

[8 : 40] And I was speaking with that this morning at Brunshaw, the evangelical, which I passed on your greetings to, and as a church this morning, that if we lose sight of the goodness of God's holiness, we find ourselves in a very difficult place spiritually, because we have someone who is holy and separate, but not good.

And we need to work through that and think very seriously about accusing God of not being good in our lives. So he's good and he's true. So when he speaks, he's not going to deceive you.

And when you read his Word, it is not going to deceive you. It is the truth that we receive from him. The truest words you will ever hear in this universe in which we live.

Absolute truth. It might not be convenient truth. It might not be the truth we want to hear or that we feel excites us. There's many more humanly speaking from a flat level.

There's more exciting truth, maybe we think. But this is the truth of Jesus Christ. And he says, I know your Word. Now we've seen that before in Revelation in these letters, that he's speaking to them and he says that he knows who they are.

[10 : 01] And therefore the voice that we are listening to has much greater significance when it comes from someone who knows us. You know what happens at six o'clock every night in our home is the phone goes.

The landline. Nobody uses the landline these days. But the phone goes and invariably we let it go. Now that goes right against my grain, not answering the phone. I've grown up never letting it ring more than twice.

So not to answer the phone goes against the grain. But Katrina has taught me not when we're having our dinner, not to get the phone at six o'clock. And that's because invariably it's a marketing phone call at six o'clock.

And apart from being there's a little delay before the voice comes on, and usually enough of a delay to put the phone down. When you hear that voice, you know immediately it's not a personal friend.

It's not somebody you know. You're not interested in hearing about that I've been in a crash in the last six months and have you got claims in or that you have PPI that you need to check out.

[11 : 11] And you know that that voice is not someone that is significant and that you need to listen to. Just as a spam email from someone that has sent it to half the Derrick's in the world doesn't need to be read.

Hi Derrick ML. You know nobody speaks, who knows me uses that form of introduction. And you know it's meaningless and it's just general message for anybody.

But if you get an email that is from a friend, you read it usually. Someone that's important. And there's that same sense in which we will listen this evening or we will listen when God speaks through his word because he knows us and as believers we've come to that place where we know him as well.

And he is holy and he is good and he is true. We recognize his, we're his sheep. We recognize his voice and often we recognize that his voice is speaking directly into our life in a way that somebody who doesn't know us can't do.

And of course it is the voice of the living God. How often have you been in that place where you have needed to hear a voice from God of comfort or of guidance or of strength and on the day you've needed it you've received it from him.

[12 : 35] Because you know him. That changes us when we know God is, there's a personal relationship we have and he speaks to us from his word. And he says, I know your words behold.

The words of the Holy One, the true one who is the key of David who opens and no one will shut and shuts no one who opens. So this is the Christ who declares himself to be the one who opens, who holds the keys.

So he holds the keys and you know Revelation, Revelation is a book of images, of pictures, of symbols, of descriptions for us. And here we have a description of Jesus who holds the keys.

Now, who's the most important person in this building? A lot of you think Scott because he's the chief executive. He's the most important person in this whole building. But I'll tell you who's the most important person it's Colin because he holds the keys.

Who's the most important person in the school? It's the caretaker. It's the janitor. We all know that in the hospital or in the school or in the home. If you hold the keys, you're the boss.

[13 : 43] Holding the keys speaks of authority and it speaks of access. And that's important. And he says here he is the key holder.

He has the key of David. And what he is saying is that he holds a hugely significant and important place in the universe.

A place of authority and a place of spiritual access. Now, I'm going to use that illustration just briefly four times here through this letter.

He holds the keys to the door and I'm going to speak about doors, the door of salvation. He says I'm the one who holds the key of David, the one that opens and no one shuts and shuts and no one opens.

The key of David, particularly this picture and Donna read from it from Isaiah, where we had in that reading a description of the keys being put on the shoulder of a lycam.

[14 : 46] And that was a picture of a lycam receiving authority in the kingdom to be the one who decided who was able to go into the king's presence and who was banished from the king's presence.

The keys of David had hugely symbolic and real meaning for the Jewish people. And they recognize the importance of the key holder as having authority to allow people access into the king's presence.

And Jesus is saying here, that's who I am. I'm the key holder who is the one who decides and the one who has authority to give access to people into the presence of the Most High God through what I have done and through who I am.

And it kind of feeds into the picture of John 14. I am the way, verse 6, the truth in the life. No one comes to the Father except through me because I'm the key holder.

I'm the one with the authority and the access. And the curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom because of the finished work of Christ on the cross, because he allows, gives us access into the holy of holies.

[16 : 03] Now that was very significant for this people. They were small. They were unimportant. And the Jewish synagogue were the proud ones. They were the ones who were the holders of the truth and the covenant of God in the Old Testament.

And Jesus is saying to this small despised Gentile Christian group, he says, Look, I'm the key holder, not this synagogue of Satan who think they are.

The Jews who have rejected Jesus Christ. They are not the ones who hold the truth and the covenant. And that was a great comfort to them. That Jesus Christ is the one who gives life, the one who chooses.

It is in his gift. It is in his time. It is in his will that we have freedom to enter into the Kingdom of God. He has elected the people before the foundation of the world.

He holds the key for the door of salvation. Now that's important for us as it was for the church in Philadelphia. Because sometimes I think we think that our lives are because we alone, simply in our own strength have made a choice to follow Jesus Christ.

[17 : 17] It's just been my decision. And that's why I'm struggling so much because I want to give up the choice that I made. Don't forget the keys to enter into the access, into the presence of the Most High God through salvation are held by, not us, but by the Lord Jesus Christ.

He enables us to enter. And he is the one that will keep us in the Kingdom of God. That is a recipe of fatalism.

I recognise we have a responsibility as we will go on to see. But nonetheless, it's a great comfort to know that we don't just give up.

Don't just give up this evening because you're bought with a price by the great key holder. And remember that you're precious to him because of that.

And however dull and disinteresting and unfulfilling, sometimes the Christian life might feel because it doesn't attract us in the way that the world attracts us.

[18 : 20] Then remember who we are and whom we serve. And remember that his way is a narrow way that he has promised to keep us in. So it's the door of salvation. There's a great confidence that that must have given the church in Philadelphia.

And I hope it gives us a sense of confidence too that Jesus is the key. He's the core. He's the centre. He's the King. He's the Lord. He's the majestic one.

That is the one in whom we trust. The door of salvation which Jesus Christ has the key of. It's the door, secondly, of opportunity, I believe, for it's the door which he opens and no one will shut and who shuts and that no one opens.

Now, Philadelphia, possibly as a small and as we're told, a church with little power, might have thought, well, this is rubbish, you know, why aren't more people becoming Christians here?

Why aren't there more conversions? And what are we doing wrong? Is it our fault? Have we not got a good enough strategy? Have we not learned one-to-one discipleship properly? Are we not good at sharing our faith?

[19 : 32] What's it about us that makes us small and not that significant as a church? What are we doing wrong? Why isn't our evangelistic strategy working? And here, Jesus reminds himself that he is the one who opens and closes the doors.

That the opportunities come from him and the gateway is from him and that he is sovereign in evangelism, which is also a great cut.

It's not an excuse for us ever, but it's a great recognition. In Acts 14, we're told that the disciples reported all that God had done through him and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles or in 1 Corinthians 16.

But I will stay on it, Ephesus, Paul says until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me or in Colossians 4. And pray for us too that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.

So all of these pictures speak of the same thing, that it is they were going to God recognising he had the doors, was the one who opened the doors of opportunity for mission.

[20 : 41] And he is the one who gave them the opportunity. And he's the one sometimes who closes the doors. And it is God who has the key over these things. Now that's also, I hope for you, a great encouragement.

The evangelism, and we'll go and say a little bit more about that in a second, but we needn't burden ourselves with the sense of failure and guilt about evangelism and the lack of amazing work of God in our lives or among our friends or in the church.

I'm not saying we shouldn't pray about it. I'm not saying it shouldn't burden us, but the buck does not stop with us. It is not just, we can't have a five year strategy that will say by the year 2021, Saint Columbus will have 500 members.

That's what we're going to do. That's what's going to happen. People are going to come to Christ because we're a being and we're sharing our faith and we're going out and having a cup of coffee and telling people about Jesus. And that's what's going to change it.

Which is driven and which sometimes breaks us because we don't feel like that. And we just want to lie on our own. And we don't want to do everything just in this mechanistic way in the hope that God will simply just honour that because it's God who holds the keys he's saying here.

[22 : 06] He's the one who opens and closes the doors. But I'm not saying don't evangelise. And I'm not saying that God's sovereignty is an excuse for us doing nothing because there is a degree of conditionality within what Jesus says about opening doors.

And in verse 7 he says to them, you're the people say, I know you have little power. And yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

You've kept my word and you've not denied my name. That's what they are commended for. They were a small church. They didn't have much power.

But Christ was the key holder and he commends them for doing this, for keeping his word and not denying his name. That's what I believe the doors of opportunity of evangelism will come for us.

We might have the greatest strategy and might be the greatest communicators in the world. I have the friendliest church and have the most wonderful presentation of the gospel. But the key to evangelism and to blessing in our Christian lives is that we keep his word and we don't deny his name.

[23 : 24] What does it mean not to deny his name? It means when the opportunity comes up, we don't deny that we know him. That's witnessing to Jesus Christ because I guarantee you over the latter you will have an opportunity.

Not to ram the gospel down someone's throat, not to do the ABC step of evangelism and give them the prayer of submission to Christ that will make them Christians.

But simply with little power being a Christian who doesn't deny that Jesus is our Lord and Savior when the opportunity arises, will be the kind of model, if we talk about a model, that dovetails with God who opens the doors of messianic opportunities for us.

He goes on to speak about them enduring patiently. I'll say a little bit more about that in the end. But isn't it that the blessings come for us? Not in dramatic ways, not in a constant buzz of excitement and of newness and of freshness, maybe a human level for us, but in the consistent, courageous testimony of the gospel which seems to have little power, which doesn't seem to be terribly effective.

We don't have here the triumphalistic language of relentless victory, of slaying Satan's enemies, and of marching forward in a constant stream of melodious victory for Jesus Christ.

[25 : 08] That will come. There is a day for that, but often for us our lives are like the church in Philadelphia, and our witness is like that, and it is a struggle.

And it's important to know that. I think for you and for me this evening, it's important to know and recognise that. The door of opportunity, also the door of protection.

Jesus goes on to speak to them here, and reminds us about the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews but are not, but lie, behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet.

They will learn that I have loved you, even in the opposition. Those who are opposed to him will recognise who he is and whose people are. But because you've kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the out of trial that is coming in the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth. This is door of protection.

Now, I have to admit, and I confess before you, I'm not exactly sure to what Jesus is referring here.

[26 : 21] When he says that I will keep you from the out of trial that is coming in the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth. There are some who speak about that in eschatological terms, at the end of time, when there will be a rapture for Christians, and then there will be a great out of trial from which you'll be kept.

But that to me doesn't seem to have much relevance to the church in Philadelphia. And it could have been true, therefore, of all the churches, of course, who all died away and faded before the rapture, which hasn't happened because it probably isn't going to.

It's more likely to either refer to fierce persecution that came upon the church later in the century, or just to general testings and general opposition.

And it could even refer to the reality of death, the out of trial that comes to the whole world to try all those who dwell on the earth. Well, that does refer to death, that's something that happens to all of us.

And the protection of this key holder is that he keeps us in death and through death and into life on the other side. And we can generalise that to a recognition that Jesus Christ protects us from many trials, I think.

[27 : 47] I think, and until we get to heaven, we'll not recognise how many things he kept us from, that we won't even know. But also that he will protect us through trials and difficulties and tribulations, as he did with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3, through them, in the fire, with us, but he'll take us and our clothes will not be singed, will come out on the other side.

But also, of course, for death itself, he protects us. The door of protection is around us. However, if it might not feel like that, you might feel very vulnerable as a Christian, but he says, listen, I'm holy and true, and I'm saying to you, I am protecting me.

And what we must do as believers, because there's always a responsibility in Christ and under Christ and through Christ, to be the ones who patiently endure. Because you've kept my word about patient endurance.

It's to be those who hide under his feathers. That's what he wants us to do, to be protect. And to come to him for protection. He's the great God and the great Father.

What does the great parent do? The great parent wants to just embrace their children to protect them when trouble comes, don't they? That's what parents do. That's what is the instinct of the Father, the protective Father.

[29 : 17] And God is the great Father. And as we endure patiently under the shadow of his wing, as we keep going and keep on keeping on, as we keep reading his word, as we keep praying, as we keep faithfully coming to church, when we would rather sit and watch Andy Murray beating Djokovic in the final or whatever it happens to be, any one time that we keep coming and faithfully doing the things that help us to live our Christian lives and be strengthened and not give up. A responsibility to be under his wings, to worship him and to trust him.

It's very much what this is speaking about here. And I know there's other emphasis that we can have. It's very much speaking of the marathon man mentality. To run the marathon well, you can't have the mentality of a sprinter.

It's no use. It's no use to run a 26 mile race thinking that it'll be over in 11 seconds. You're going to be let down. You're going to burn out. And you're looking for something that is not possible.

And in the Christian life, we mustn't look for everything blessed and good and holy and wonderful and exciting and marvelous to happen in the first five minutes of our Christian lives.

We need to recognize and see the drama of salvation and the timescale of salvation and the future promises that will bring all of the longings we have for community, for belonging, for excitement, for passion, for exploration, for joy, for worship, all coming together eternally without sin and difficulty and struggle and battle in the new heavens and the new earth. And that's what he's saying.

[31 : 15] Patiently endure. Keep to my word. Keep faithful to that word and keep going. And what he finishes with and I finish as well, of course, is that we recognize the door of security by which we're protected. There's a door of salvation. There's a door of opportunity, of protection and of security.

And he finishes by talking about the one who conquers. I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it. I will write on him the name of my God, the name of the city of my God.

The New Jerusalem is hugely personal here, isn't it? Son of God. And he's saying, look, this is what I'm going to do. The New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven and my own new name.

And he is a near let him hear what the Spirit says to churches. So here's the sovereign Jesus, sovereign God. And he's bubbling over with excitement as to what he's going to do for his people.

And it's very personal and it's planned and it's true and it's holy because of who he is. And he reminds us that there is, he wants this small church, remember it's a small church? It's not very strong.

[32 : 38] It's not a mega church. There's not hundreds of converts. They're not all being healed. It's not all wonderful. They're struggling, they're persecutors, difficult. And he says to them, look, in the light of 20, I'm asking you to do the counterintuitive thing. You want to give up? He says, listen to my promises.

I'm close. I will keep you standing. I will. I love you. I have a purpose for you. I have a future for you and it will be made clear soon. I'm coming soon.

Might not seem like it for you young guys. You then, at the cusp of your lives, even 40 or 50 years seems like eternity. When you get to my age, it doesn't seem like eternity and you start thinking about death. That's what we do.

You're very morose once you hit 50. And it seems much closer. But whatever it is for us in the light of eternity, Jesus is coming soon. And he promises with all these pictures that he uses of making us a pillar, something permanent.

He's saying something of significance. You know, you're a pillar in the temple of my God. That's what we are. That's what we're going to be. And we're going to have this tremendous identity.

[34 : 02] Because God will be there. We'll have the name of God on us. We'll have the name of the city of God on us, the community of God. And we'll have a new name that Jesus will give us.

That's great. And so there's a tripled identity message there that we are new and we are committed and we belong and we're in community with him.

And that's the secure promises on which you need and I need to persevere tomorrow.

There might not be a miracle tomorrow, okay? There might not be a tremendous buzz of excitement. Your heart might not flutter. You may be opposed and you may feel like doing a hundred different things apart from reading your Bible when you get up.

Or spending some time in prayer before you hit the day. Please learn as I need to learn from this church that had little power.

[35 : 12] It wasn't a great example where the pastor went round the world telling everybody at conferences how to grow the church. We don't even know the pastor was. But Jesus speaks very powerfully to them and he says the things that matter to him.

And he says you've kept my word. You've not denied my name and you have persevered with patient endurance. That's a great word and we can all do that by his grace. And I hope that we have the marathon person mentality rather than the sprint mentality which sometimes burns us out and makes us struggle.

I mean let's pray. Dear Jesus, we pray that we wouldn't struggle yet. We know that we do and we know that many of us struggle at greater or lesser degree at different times in our lives.

And we ask and pray that we would hear your voice tonight. And again if we're in that place where we just feel like giving up because it's so much easier not to be a Christian.

That's how things are set up in this world and that's how the devil who's the king, who's the prince of this age and of this world has set things in place that he deceives us by making us think it is easier.

[36 : 43] And of course he does not challenge and embattle us and plant seeds of doubt in our minds if we are listening to him.

But may the opposition sometimes we face and the battle and the struggle may it be a comfort to us because it draws us back to Jesus Christ in whom our strength and our grace and our hope and our future lies.

And that you are so willing to pour out your strength in us every day and every day we survive is by your grace. And may we hear your promises, may they comfort us and excite us, may we dwell in them, may we pray through them, may we think about them, may we not live as if this were all that there is.

Easy though it is to do that. And may Christ have all the praise and the glory we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.