

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 9 - Chapter 3 Continued

As we continue in Revelation chapter 3 today, we'll discuss the Believer's assembly at Philadelphia; but first let's review.

The congregation we examined in our last lesson was the one at Sardis. For me, as a pastor and Bible teacher, this is the one that might trouble me the most of the ones we have studied so far because the Believers there were so self-deceived that they thought they were in excellent stead with God; the responsibility for this dire situation has to start with the leadership. As it turns out their self-satisfaction was the case only from their perspective; the Lord saw them otherwise. Indeed they seemed to have no obvious outward flaws. Unlike some of the other churches they weren't accused of eating meat sacrificed to idols (which, we ought to see by now, is more or less saying Sardis was eating biblically kosher), and they were not sexually immoral. So what's not to like? It reminds me of when Moses was talking with God and God told him to put his hand into his cloak and pull it out; it came out full of skin disease. This was the Lord showing Moses that an outward display of piety, uprightness and righteousness is not the same as what the inward spiritual condition might be; a condition that only the Almighty can see. It was the same with the Believers in Sardis and what the Lord saw reflected the opposite of their outward appearance.

What was the cause of Sardis' inwardly decaying spiritual condition? It was because they had abandoned God's Word that they had at first, making them incomplete. At first they apparently cherished and studied the Holy Scriptures to guide their works and deeds. But as time went on somehow their enthusiasm for activities and manmade doctrines increased at the same time their zeal for God's biblical laws and commands diminished. They lost sight of the fact that the Word of God was a vital anchor for them and it remains so for us in our time so that we have something solid to measure ourselves against. Not knowing Holy Scripture means we cannot know God's will for us. And if we do not know God's will, then we can not do God's will.

James 1:22-24 CJB ²² Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it! ²³ For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴ who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

James makes two critical points. The first is that only **knowing** God's Word isn't enough; we must also do it. The second is that we can't know what we should be doing without first knowing God's Word. Sardis is an example of what happens when you don't know God's Word and instead do much religious activity that you assume must be pleasing to God because it makes you feel so good. Without the Scriptures as the mirror to look into to test if what we're doing comports with God's will, we have no tangible measuring stick. It is true that the Holy Spirit resides in us as a guide; however He is but one piece of the puzzle. The all too prevalent Christian viewpoint is that with the Holy Spirit in us, we no longer need Bible

knowledge or to obey God's commandments because He replaces it. The thought is that the Holy Spirit will tell us supernaturally whatever God wants us to know or do, and what is right and wrong for us. This is a distortion of what Scripture tells us. Rather the Holy Spirit can be a teacher who will help us to know how to understand what the Bible tells us and how to apply it in every situation. But make no mistake; the Holy Spirit is not each Believer's personally customized Word of God nor does He redefine evil and sin person by person.

This sin of ignoring God's Word, and therefore each doing what was right in his own eyes, was far more serious than one might have thought. The divine threat was that the Sardis Believers' names, which were currently written in the Book of Life, would be blotted out...removed... if they didn't repent and get back to taking the Bible seriously. This is a good time to highlight that the Old Testament was their only Bible at this time, and it would remain that way for a century more.

Let's read what John wrote down about the assembly in Philadelphia.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 3:7 – 13

Philadelphia was located on a major highway about 25 miles south of Sardis. It was founded by Attalus Philadelphus, king of Pergamum, about 200 years earlier. Nothing outstanding about this city during this time is reported except that it experienced a number of severe earthquakes that may have kept the populace in recovery mode so much of the time that the city couldn't prosper or develop a signature industry. That is probably why in verse 8 God refers to the Philadelphian congregation as having only "a little power"; it was a minor place that had little influence in the region. Scratching out a living was the order of every day.

The standard opening protocol of the 7 letters is used whereby the divine vision-being (God) introduces Himself by His characteristics but gives no name. He describes Himself as "**HaKadosh (The Holy One), the True One, the one who has the key of David, who, if he opens something, no one else can shut it, and if he closes something, no one else can open it.**" Overall, this is a new description that has not been used in the Old Testament for any of the persons of the Godhead. In fact, although it is an allusion, this is as close to an actual quote from the **Tanakh** (the Old Testament) that we are likely to find in Revelation. Beginning with the part of the quote that starts "the one who has the key of David", these words are originally found in Isaiah 22. In order for us to get a better handle on what this statement meant to the original writer, let's go to Isaiah 22 and see where this appears in context.

Isaiah 22:15-23 CJB ¹⁵ Thus says Adonai ELOHIM-Tzva'ot: "Go and find that steward, Shevna, administrator of the palace, and ask him: ¹⁶ 'What do you own here, and who gave you the right to cut yourself a tomb here? Why do you get such an eminent tomb? Why are you carving a resting-place for yourself in the rock?'" ¹⁷ Look, strong man! ADONAI is about to throw you out! He will grab you, ¹⁸ roll you up, and toss you around like a ball in the open country. There you will die, with your fancy chariots, you disgrace to your master's palace! ¹⁹ "I will remove you from your office, I will snatch you from your post. ²⁰ When that day comes, I will summon my servant Elyakim the son of Hilkiyahu. ²¹ I will dress him in your robe, gird him with your sash of office, and invest

him with your authority. He will be a father to the people living in Yerushalayim and to the house of Y'hudah. ²² I will place the key of David's house on his shoulder; no one will shut what he opens; no one will open what he shuts. ²³ I will fasten him firmly in place like a peg, so that he will become a seat of honor for his clan.

The overall context for this passage is the time when Assyria was terrorizing Judah. For reasons of his arrogance the chief governor of King Hezekiah's palace in Jerusalem was threatened by God with being replaced. The arrogant governor was **Shevna**, and the Lord said He would replace him with **Elyakim** the son of **Hilkiyahu**. The palace governor was a very powerful man and also acted like the King's Chief of Staff; just who received an all-important audience with the king was usually decided by the governor. So God says that once He's made **Elyakim** the new palace governor that He would "place the key of David's house on his shoulder and no one will shut what he opens and no one will open what he shuts". The key of David's house is referring to the fact that the kings of Judah were still descendants of King David, including the current King Hezekiah. So this simply means that this governor is in full charge of the palace and handles many of the king's affairs, and no one can countermand his order; although in the doing he is at all times subordinate to the king and does the king's will. This Isaiah passage is not generally regarded as a Messianic prophecy; it is about a specific office within Hezekiah's government.

Thus what we have is this same description about **Elyakim** from Isaiah 22 placed upon the divine vision-being of Revelation 3:7, but it is a description that was used of a mere human and not that of God; in fact not even of a king.....strange. The first part of the description, The Holy One, is a typical one for God the Father found in the Holy Scriptures and within Jewish literature and liturgy. Nonetheless, as always, most commentators instantly insist that this must be Christ. Yet this insistence itself creates a real conflict with rather standard Christian theology as concerns the Trinity. Interestingly, the comparison is that **Elyakim** is to be seen as a type of Christ. Therefore **Elyakim** is the undisputed governor over the King's palace in the same way that Christ is the undisputed governor over the Kingdom of God and whatever either of them orders to be done no one can override. However if this is the comparison and analogy that John intends then we must note that just as **Elyakim** has been given full authority, he is not autonomous; it is still not his palace and further he is subordinate to the one whose palace it is: the King. Therefore it follows that it would be that Yeshua has been given charge over God's palace (God's Kingdom) even though God the Father remains the owner of the Kingdom and Yeshua is but the governor under the Father's authority and not His own. While this doesn't agree with most Christian doctrine on the structure of the Godhead (making all the persons co-equal with no one in authority over the other), we once again see John's theology of the Godhead pop-up that the Father (The Holy One) is the preeminent King and The Son is His subordinate that rules what the Father owns and has delegated to The Son to rule, but at the Father's pleasure. Since the divine being is not named in this letter (nor in any other of the 7 letters), neither will we force the issue and name Him simply to comply with assumptions and manmade doctrines.

Verse 8 says that what God has put before the brethren of Philadelphia no one can shut. Clearly this is a play on the words of the description used in verse 7 and it means that the Lord has set out a mission and a pathway for the Philadelphian Believers and no one (human or

spirit being) has the authority to change it or stop it. The usual take on this is that the Philadelphians' mission is to spread the Good News and no one can defeat them from accomplishing their task even in the face of great persecution; that is certainly a possibility. However there is also the possibility that this statement is connected to the next verse that speaks of God sending this congregation some people from the synagogue of Satan.....defined as those who say they are Jews but aren't.....and they will come and prostrate themselves before the Philadelphian Believers because they will learn that God loves the Jewish Believers. In other words these members of the synagogue of Satan are not being sent to harass or test the Believers of Philadelphia, but rather to learn an important lesson; what God's love truly is and that the Jewish people remain the apple of His eye.

The synagogue of Satan is, as I see it, a play on words (and by the way, the New Testament contains a number of word plays). Since Philadelphia was itself a synagogue of God (and the Lord had nothing negative to say about them), then those who oppose God's work through the Body of Christ are called a synagogue of Satan (or synagogue of the Adversary). And interestingly the Lord is somehow not only going to cause these adversaries to want to come to the Philadelphia synagogue but also they will in time accept God's love NOT JUST FOR THEM but will also come to understand God's love for the Believers of Philadelphia. For their part the Philadelphia Believers are to accept these folks as part of their divine mission. Here's the thing that helps us understand this rather odd intention of God: first we must question the nearly universal Christian theology that demands that these pretend-Jews who are said not to be Jews are nonetheless really Jews. Only as Christian doctrine would have it, they are Jews who Judaize and therefore God disqualifies them as Jews and takes away their status as Jews. We've discussed this in an earlier lesson and I won't repeat it except to say that we need to take this verse in its plain sense just as it appears in God's Word; these are people who claim they are Jews but they are lying and are not Jews. What is a person who is not a Jew? A gentile. Remember: this scene is taking place in Asia, a gentile region, far from the Holy Land. These are gentiles insisting they are Jews just as the passage says they are because Judaism was actually an admired religion and adopted by many gentiles. Further it is biblically prophetic that gentiles and gentile nations would eventually want to attach themselves to Israel and to Israel's God and they would come humbly, asking to.

Isaiah 45:14 CJB ¹⁴ Here is what ADONAI says: "The earnings of Egypt, the commerce of Ethiopia, and men of stature from S'va will come over to you and become yours; they will come in chains and follow you. They will prostrate themselves before you; they will pray to you: 'Surely God is with you; there is no other, other gods are nothing.'"

Zechariah 8:23 CJB ²³ ADONAI-Tzva'ot says, 'When that time comes, ten men will take hold- speaking all the languages of the nations- will grab hold of the cloak of a Jew and say, "We want to go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"

There are several other passages that say essentially the same thing. The part of verse 9 that is so heartwarming to me is when it says of the Jewish Believers of Philadelphia "and they will know that I loved you". Even the Old Testament Prophets commented that because of God's discipline of His people, gentile nations will become haughty and think that God has abandoned His people. Of course a significant portion of Christianity believes that God has

indeed switched His loyalty from the Jewish people to gentile Christians. So here God affirms just how much He continues to love His people.

Verse 10 implies that there may have been an earlier communication with Philadelphia about preserving in the face of persecutions and troubles they were facing. Perhaps it only means that Believers in general are taught to persevere; it's not really clear. But what is clear is that to persevere means to hang on to the faith and not falter. It means to stay the course, tell the truth and not water down the Gospel. It means to keep learning and keep maturing and to keep doing everything in the spirit of love despite the pressures that will be applied from the local society. And this Philadelphia has accomplished to God's satisfaction and He commends them for it.

The 2nd half of verse 10 is controversial. It's not controversial concerning whether it's correct but rather about how we are to understand it. It says that because the Believers of Philadelphia persevered, then ***"I will keep you from the time of trial coming upon the whole world to put the people living on earth to the test."***

A standard interpretation of this passage is that it is speaking directly of the Tribulation period and obliquely of the Rapture that is meant to save Believers from the Tribulation. This may well be so. However I see it a bit differently. First of all, the words translated as trial and test in this verse come from the same Greek word ***peirazo***. They both have to do with the idea of going through an ordeal for the purpose of being proved innocent or guilty; or being proved worthy or unworthy. The Greek word for tribulation is ***thlipsis*** and one would think that if indeed the Christian concept of The Tribulation was what was intended here in Revelation 3:10 then the word used would be ***thlipsis*** and not ***peirazo***. Part of what complicates the matter is the phrase "people living on the earth". Who are these? David Stern in his commentary on Revelation points out that there are two equivalent Hebrew phrases that may be what is being expressed by the Greek and then translated to English. The plain sense of the passage seems, then, to be referring to all human beings. If that is not what is being expressed here then it is most difficult to interpret the sense of it and so a few points of view have come about based on one's End Times doctrine. For instance: for Pre-tribulation Rapture adherents this means every person still alive who is not a Believer because all Believers will have been raptured away to safety in Heaven. Others think that it means that Believers will be sealed by God so as not to be subjected to His worldwide wrath. Yet we must also consider that this had direct meaning to the Believers of Philadelphia in their era. Persecutions under Nero had already happened and while localized, nonetheless they were devastating on Believers. The persecutions under Domitian (the current Roman Emperor) were more widespread, and in time the persecutions under other Roman Emperors grew more intense. So from John's perspective, and from the Philadelphians' perspective, this likely was a warning of what was coming accompanied with an assurance that God would protect them in some unnamed way from the worst of those persecutions. I concede that in addition to referring to the time of John and soon thereafter, it could also be referring to the End Times that is ahead of us and we need to keep that in mind in our time and beyond. Yet there is not enough evidence for us to come to a firm conclusion from what is written here.

Verse 11 makes the idea that this is meant to refer to something immediately ahead for the

Philadelphian congregation more likely (but that is not to preclude something later as well because the Bible proves that it is usual for a prophecy to happen more than once but in different ages). That is, the divine being says: "I am coming soon". Soon did not mean 2000 years or more to the people who heard and read this letter; soon meant imminent to John, Paul, and no doubt to the good folks of Philadelphia. Were the Believers of Philadelphia eventually protected from some of the savagery of the Romans? There's no evidence either way that seems convincing enough to speak about. Therefore it is far more likely that this divine protection that is being offered was not physical but spiritual. It is that even if the Philadelphians lost their physical lives, their far more important spiritual lives would be held safe by God.....and it is guaranteed. Here is what Yeshua said about this when teaching His disciples perhaps as much as 60 years prior to John writing the Book of Revelation:

Luke 12:22-32 CJB ²² *To his talmidim Yeshua said, "Because of this I tell you, don't worry about your life- what you will eat or drink; or about your body- what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. ²⁴ Think about the ravens! They neither plant nor harvest, they have neither storerooms nor barns, yet God feeds them. You are worth much more than the birds! ²⁵ Can any of you by worrying add an hour to his life? ²⁶ If you can't do a little thing like that, why worry about the rest? ²⁷ Think about the wild irises, and how they grow. They neither work nor spin thread; yet, I tell you, not even Shlomo in all his glory was clothed as beautifully as one of these. ²⁸ If this is how God clothes grass, which is alive in the field today and thrown in the oven tomorrow, how much more will he clothe you! What little trust you have! ²⁹ "In other words, don't strive after what you will eat and what you will drink- don't be anxious. ³⁰ For all the pagan nations in the world set their hearts on these things. Your Father knows that you need them too. ³¹ Rather, seek his Kingdom; and these things will be given to you as well. ³² Have no fear, little flock, for your Father has resolved to give you the Kingdom!*

And in the Book of John, Christ prayed this to the Father:

John 17:11-15 CJB ¹¹ *Now I am no longer in the world. They are in the world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, guard them by the power of your name, which you have given to me, so that they may be one, just as we are. ¹² When I was with them, I guarded them by the power of your name, which you have given to me; yes, I kept watch over them; and not one of them was destroyed (except the one meant for destruction, so that the Tanakh might be fulfilled). ¹³ But now, I am coming to you; and I say these things while I am still in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ "I have given them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world- just as I myself do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I don't ask you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the Evil One.*

While there have been instances that God bodily rescued His people, more often than not He gave His people the endurance and faith to suffer through the most terrible of times. And this is why I have serious doubts that the statements in the letter to the Philadelphians meant to imply that God would bodily rescue them from persecution, and why I have those same serious doubts that we will be raptured to Heaven prior to tremendous persecution being inflicted upon

the world by the Anti-Christ. We'll get into much more depth on this matter later on in Revelation; but suffice it to say it would break God's biblical pattern to whisk His worshippers away to avoid the persecution of other humans. Rather the goal has always been to strengthen His worshippers to endure as an example to those of weaker faith and even to those who don't yet believe.

The end of verse 11 says that the importance of hanging on to the faith they have is so that they will receive their crown. The crown for Believers is symbolic of being admitted into the Kingdom of God. But then verse 12 speaks of those who win the victory being made a pillar in the Temple of God. Winning the victory means to keep the faith they have now even as things get much tougher. And while no doubt the mention of pillars in the Temple is a metaphor or perhaps figurative, the image this would conjure up in the minds of Jews at that time is quite different than how gentile Christians of today would think of it. Indeed there were two well known pillars of the Temple (destroyed probably 2 decades earlier by the Romans) and they were given names: **Boaz** and **Yakhin**. **Boaz** means "strength", and **Yakhin** means "to establish." Rabbis differ on exactly what this is meaning to communicate, however the two pillars at the entrance to the Temple were ornate and monumental in size. They were the prominent features that visitors would first notice. No matter; since Revelation is primarily a Jew writing mainly to other Jews, these two pillars are what is being referred to and whatever they symbolized to Jews in that era is the crux of the statement about Believers being made pillars (spiritual pillars) of God's Temple.

Next in verse 12 an amazing amount of information is given in only a few words. There we read: "**Also I will write on him the name of my God and the name of my God's city, the new Yerushalayim coming down out of heaven from my God, and my own new name**".

This no doubt is far future to the era of the Believers at Philadelphia (although they thought it was not very far off). For them a new Jerusalem was their great hope; the former Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed by Rome some 20 years earlier. Jerusalem and the Temple were the national and spiritual symbols of the Jewish people and they were greatly missed. So when the words of this letter tell them a new Jerusalem is coming down out of Heaven I'm certain that most, if not all of the Jewish Believers, took this as meaning that Jerusalem and the Temple would soon be rebuilt at the direction of Yehoveh. History shows us this was not the case and in fact this event is still future to us. In fact the final few chapters of Ezekiel speak of this prophecy coming about.

When the passage speaks of the divine being writing the name of God and also the name of God's city (the new Jerusalem) on the Believer, we should think less in terms of names like Bob, Chris, or Dorothy and more in terms of name in the sense of reputation, character, and identity. This was the primary sense of the word "name" in this and earlier eras, even though today that is a purely secondary sense. So what we have is God identifying with the Believer and the Believer with God, as well as the new Jerusalem identifying with the Believer and the Believer with the new Jerusalem. We even have the divine being saying that He will receive a new name; this is also meant primarily in the sense of reputation however a new reputation can also reflect a new given name as given names in ancient times were meant to reflect or inspire a certain reputation.

Later on in Revelation we read of a new heaven and earth being created as well as a new city of Jerusalem descending from Heaven.

Revelation 21:1-2 ^{CJB} *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there. ² Also I saw the holy city, New Yerushalayim, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*

What is also exciting is when we read about this new Jerusalem getting a new name in Ezekiel 48. After this chapter in Ezekiel explaining about the territory that the tribes of Israel will receive after the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, the final words of the Book of Ezekiel say this: **Ezekiel 48:35** ^{CJB} ³⁵ *"The perimeter of [the city] will be just under six [miles] long. And from that day on the name of the city will be ADONAI Shamah [ADONAI is there]."*

So indeed we see Ezekiel, writing almost 700 years earlier, back-up what we read here in Revelation 3:12. Or perhaps, John is alluding to Ezekiel in this dramatic statement. And by the way; when we look at the original Hebrew in Ezekiel the name of the city is NOT **Adonai Shamah** as the CJB has it; it is **Yehoveh Shamah**. That is, God's name is used and so it means "Yehoveh is there". And Yehoveh is either the name for the totality of the Godhead, or it is the exclusive name of the Father. I think the weight of evidence is that YHWH is the Father's name and the name for the totality of the Godhead is **elohim** or sometimes **yah**. But reasonable people can differ over this.

I will close today with this thought. The issue of identification is everything for human beings, and especially so for Believers. Over and over, Old and New Testaments, we are told to identify with the God of Israel if we want deliverance and redemption. Even a mixed multitude from Egypt joined Israel because they opted for that identification with Yehoveh. Just as we see some of the churches in John's era battling to keep their identification with God and Christ, and some failing, so it is today. Manmade religions and religious systems will always attack authentic Believers who hold fast to God and Christ, because those systems are false and cannot hold up to testing. This is why God always finds Himself working with remnants and not the mainstream. Later in Revelation we will read about God judging the false religious systems of this world that billions of people follow in full confidence believing them to be safe and correct. I'm sorry to say that much of the Christian Church today falls within that category as too many have given up the Word and authority of God in exchange for an easier, cheaper, more congenial religion consisting of a few bumper sticker slogans, humorous sermons, and a pious looking exterior.

We have been reading in these letters what identification with God looks like, and what it doesn't, which is why every letter ends with the strong admonition: "Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Messianic communities".

Next week we'll talk about the 7th and final letter to Laodicea.