



REVELATION 3 AND THE RAPTURE

BY DR. RON J. BIGALKE

The message to the church of Philadelphia can be tremendously inspiring when regarded as God's instruction to a faithful church that did not compromise their worship. The recurring theme of this letter is that God is sovereign. Scripture does not advocate trust in anyone else but in God alone (Prov 3:5-6). He alone can be trusted, and man's faith must reside in Him. The world is unstable, but God declares, I am He "who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens" (Rev 3:7). It is because God is sovereign that He declares there is a door of opportunity, "which no one can shut" (3:8).

LOCATION OF THE CHURCH

Philadelphia was a city in the Roman province of Asia; that is, in the west of what is known today as Asiatic Turkey. It is alleged that Eumenes, king of Pergamum, founded the city in the 2nd century BC. Apparently, Eumenes named Philadelphia after his brother Attalus Philadelphus. Therefore, the name Philadelphia came to mean "brotherly love." It was located near the upper end of a broad valley that passed through Sardis to the sea that was near Smyrna. Philadelphia was

on the verge of a quite fertile territory of plateau country, and this geographical area contributed to the commercial prosperity of the city. Philadelphia was noted for its elaborate religious festivals and remarkable temples. Today, the town of Alaşehir occupies the site. The residents of Philadelphia experienced frequent earthquakes, such as one in AD 17 that destroyed the city. As earthquakes increased, more of the residents moved their homes to outside the city. An imperial bounty helped the city to recover from the

Philadelphia was a gateway to the East; it was the farthest city of the Greek civilization in that area. Physically, the city was at the threshold of a fertile geographical area from which it could derive its wealth. From a spiritual standpoint, there were numerous barbarous tribes beyond the city of Philadelphia that granted the church “an open door” of opportunity for missionary activity (Rev 3:8).

devastation, and in gratitude the city changed its name to Neocaesarea. The name of the city was changed again, and the new name, Flavia, indicated another imperial bounty from Vespasian.¹

HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

“The angel of the church in Philadelphia” (Rev 3:7-13) was selected among others to receive a message from the Lord. It seems that the Philadelphian church was selected due to the particular issues that it experienced, which would be relevant to churches throughout the church age. Seven churches were selected, since the number indicates completeness. First Corinthians 10:11 indicates that God has chosen certain events and the character of individuals to admonish others. The church in Philadelphia was such an example. Summers commented,

One of the marvelous things about the book is the impression that conditions in churches of every age, including the twentieth century, are illustrated by the conditions of these churches. The message is one of universal application. Wherever the conditions exist, the corrective procedure indicated will find application.²

As already stated, the name Philadelphia came to mean “brotherly love” due to the loyalty of Philadelphus to his brother Attalus. The church of Philadelphia was identified with this “brotherly love,” which was also manifested in the church’s loyalty to Jesus Christ. The church was commended because they were faithful to God’s Word and were loyal to His name (Rev 3:8). They also exercised patience toward the Word of God (Rev 3:10).

Philadelphia was a gateway to the East; it was the farthest city of the Greek civilization in that area.³ Physically, the city was at the threshold of a fertile geographical area from which it could derive its wealth. From a spiritual standpoint, there were numerous barbarous tribes beyond the city of Philadelphia that granted the church “an open door” of opportunity for missionary activity (Rev

3:8). The church was loyal to Christ in the past, but two doors lay before them. One door offered physical blessing, whereas the other offered spiritual blessing. Perhaps the letter to this church serves to remind God’s people of their responsibility to the Lord and to examine which “open door” is more important. The mention of a “crown” and the “pillar” in the following verses indicate a point of contrast of the eternal with the recurring instability of a city plagued with never ending earthquakes (Rev 3:11-12). Those who overcome are promised eternal blessings.

The church in Smyrna and Philadelphia experienced intense opposition from religious leaders (Rev 2:9; 3:9). The Philadelphian church was exhorted to “hold fast what you have” amidst the ongoing rejection, because they would receive acceptance from their Lord (Rev 3:8, 11). Again, a contrast is made between the temporal and the eternal. The historical background of this church provides unique insights as to why the church received this message. The church encountered earthquakes, heathenism, and religious rejection in a continual manner. Nevertheless, the church remained loyal to Christ. They were encouraged to continue in their separation from “the synagogue of Satan” and heathenism (Rev 3:9-11). Although the church often journeyed outside the city (due to the earthquakes), a day would come when they would be pillars in the temple of God (Rev 3:12). The exhortation to this church was continual faithfulness to Christ with their hope in the eternal.

CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Many competent Bible teachers believe that the seven historical churches in Revelation of the first century provide a sample of the types of churches that will be present throughout the history of the church. Revelation 1:19 does provide a chronological outline for understanding the Book of Revelation. For instance, there are “the things

Although none of the seven churches remain today, there are applications for the churches throughout the centuries. It is apparent that the churches selected were chosen due to their representative character. Every church can find some circumstance, trial, or temptation within these letters that will provide admonishment to live holy in a godless world in light of the Lord's imminent return.

which you have seen" (Rev 1), "the things which are" (Rev 2—3), and "the things which will take place after these things" (Rev 4—22).

"The things which are" does relate to the current church age, which is evident in the Lord's recurring command: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). However, this does not mean that the seven historical churches provide a pattern of the various types of churches throughout history. The historical-prophetic interpretation of the seven churches not only finds application from each of the letters, but also believes that one type of church will be dominant in a particular period of church history. Fruchtenbaum provided an outline representative of this interpretation.

1. Ephesus [30-100] Apostolic Church
2. Smyrna [100-313] Roman Persecution
3. Pergamum [313-600] Age of Constantine
4. Thyatira [600-1517] Dark Ages
5. Sardis [1517-1648] Reformation
6. Philadelphia [1648-1900] Missionary Movement
7. Laodicea [1900-Present] Apostasy⁴

The historical-prophetic interpretation seems to read more into Scripture than what is actually the original intent. For instance, the seven churches would not have understood the letters in such a manner as proposed by the historical-prophetic interpretation. Rejecting such an interpretation, Summers wrote,



These were actually seven churches in Asia Minor. It stays by the principle announced that the book must be interpreted in a way that would have been meaningful and helpful to those Christians who first received the message. Hence, it rejects the frequently confronted approach that the seven churches represent seven stages in the development of apostasy of the church.⁵

Although none of the seven churches remain today, there are applications for the churches throughout the centuries. It is apparent that the churches selected were chosen due to

their representative character. Every church can find some circumstance, trial, or temptation within these letters that will provide admonishment to live holy in a godless world in light of the Lord's imminent return.

GOD'S MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH

The message begins with Christ's presentation of Himself as "holy" and "true." He is the one who holds "the key of David" (Rev 3:7), which is a reference to Isaiah 22:22, and thus indicates the authority of Christ. He alone is the sovereign. God opens and closes according to His divine will. There is none that can thwart His eternal decrees. The church in Philadelphia was commended for four things (Rev 3:8): (1) taking advantage of the opportunities granted them by God ("I know your deeds"); (2) displaying some spiritual maturity ("you have a little power"); (3) keeping the Word of the Lord; and, (4) faithfulness to God's calling ("have not de-

The third promise is that the Lord will come quickly (Rev 3:11). Walvoord aptly noted that the “expression ‘quickly’ is to be understood as something which is sudden and unexpected, not necessarily immediate.”

nied My name”). The devotion of the church to Christ resulted in five promises given to them.

The *first promise* given to the church was that their Jewish enemies (“synagogue of Satan”) would be humbled before them (Rev 3:9). Secondly, they would be kept “from the hour of testing” (or “tribulation”; cf. Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17; Luke 8:13). The *second promise* is noteworthy since many Bible students commonly cite it to teach the pretribulational rapture. It is common to hear Revelation 3:10 cited as proof of a pretribula-

tional rapture, but there are problems with such references. Thomas concluded, “The statement does not refer directly to the rapture. What it guarantees is protection from the scene of the ‘hour of trial’ while that hour is in progress. This effect of placing the faithful in Philadelphia (and hence, the faithful in all the churches; cf. 3:13) in a position of safety presupposes that they will have been removed to another location (i.e., heaven) at the period’s beginning.”⁶

Therefore, it would be best to understand Revelation 3:10 as promising the church in Philadelphia a first century deliverance from the tribulation period, but also extending that promise in a general manner to the church throughout the centuries (cf. Rev 3:13). Thomas was correct that the passage does not *directly* teach the pretribulational rapture. However, this is not to say that the passage does not relate to the rapture of the church. It is as Walvoord stated, “If the rapture had occurred in the first century preceding the tribulation which the book of Revelation described, they were assured of deliverance.”⁷

The phrase kept “from the hour of testing” is significant for several reasons. For instance, the word “hour” (Gk. *horas*) designates deliverance



not only from the “trial,” but also deliverance from the period of time in which the trial exists. Ryrie noted, “In the Septuagint translation the *ek* indicates an external, not internal preservation. *Ek* also is used in the same way of external protection in Joshua 2:13 and in Psalm 33:19; 56:13.”⁸ If the writer had intended to teach preservation through (rather than from) the tribulation, the correct grammar to use would be *en te hora* (“in the hour”). Significantly, John stated, *ek tes haras* (“from the hour”). The same Greek preposition is used in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, wherein Paul communicated the same teaching: “*that is*, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

The *third promise* is that the Lord will come quickly (Rev 3:11). Walvoord aptly noted that the “expression ‘quickly’ is to be understood as something which is sudden and unexpected, not necessarily immediate.” *Fourthly*, the church in Philadelphia would be honored in the temple of God (Rev 3:12a). It is significant that they “will not go out from it anymore.” In other words, that which is eternal and unmovable would replace the unstable earthly dwelling in which they were accustomed. *Lastly*, the church would receive a new name (Rev 3:12b), which will in-

The church in Philadelphia was given precious promises from the Lord. However, the exhortation to “hold fast what you have” is also applicable to the church today. The world today can be deeply depressing without any appearance of hope. However, this is when Christians can be marvelous testimonies of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ by living with the blessed hope of the Lord’s imminent return (Rev 3:11; cf. Tit 2:13).

dedicate their eternal identification with God.

CONCLUSION

If the majority of pastors were asked which of the seven churches describes their congregation, it would be honest of most to respond that at times all of them correspond to their local church. The most prominent churches to be mentioned would probably include Ephesus (“you have left your first love”), Philadelphia (“kept My word, and have not denied My name”), and Laodicea (“you are neither cold nor hot”). There are several applications that should be adopted in response to the Lord’s evaluation of these historical and representative churches.

First, the church needs a greater awareness of God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness. If the people of God truly understood the wrath from which they have been delivered, they would not become accustomed to living independent of the living and written Word. The church needs to understand the sovereign choice of God in election, and also accountability to God. The late Dr. Walvoord stated a great point when he wrote, “It remains true, however, that many casual worshipers in Christian churches today who are quite familiar with the Sermon on the Mount are not aware of the existence of these seven messages of Christ.” Even many teachers of prophetic passages in Scripture will emphasize chapter 1 and then chapters 4-22 of Revelation, and only provide a survey analysis of the letters to the seven churches. The exhortations of these



letters need to be an emphasis in the church.

The church in Philadelphia was given precious promises from the Lord. However, the exhortation to “hold fast what you have” is also applicable to the church today. The world today can be deeply depressing without any appearance of hope. However, this is when Christians can be marvelous testimonies of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ by living with the blessed hope of the Lord’s imminent return (Rev 3:11; cf. Tit 2:13). The suddenness (“I am coming quickly”) in which Christ will return is also an incentive for holiness

and evangelism, that Christians should not be caught unaware when the Lord returns for His church. (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 286-302.
- 2 Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951) 107.
- 3 Ramsay, *Seven Churches*, 296-97.
- 4 Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, 1983) 36.
- 5 Summers, *Worthy*, 107.
- 6 Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 288.
- 7 John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966) 87.
- 8 Charles Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996) 133.
- 9 Walvoord, *Revelation*, 87.
- 10 *Ibid.* 51.