

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 21st Feb 2010

Past Imperfect Future Tense! - The message of Revelation

A Message for the Church – Philadelphia 3: 7-13



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Philadelphia was built on the edge of an active volcanic area, a frontier city, said to be a last bastion of Greek civilisation, founded to spread the influence of all things Greek. The surrounding soil was fertile and the city had been wealthy and grown excellent vines but this may well have been in decline by the time of the writing of Revelation. The people had been badly affected when the city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17. The emperor of the time provided funds and remission of taxes to help re-build, so the grateful citizens then re-named Philadelphia *Neocaesarea* (the new city of Caesar) in his honour. The church was persecuted: the believers had been ejected from the temple and hence were no longer protected from the requirement to worship the emperor; only the regular Jews were exempt. So this was a small church under some pressure.

With Philadelphia Jesus has no complaint! So look at the Commendation: the church recognised Jesus as holy and true; (v.7) these are attributes that were used in Scripture only of God. That's probably why the synagogue had expelled them, because they ascribed the words *Holy and true* to Jesus and worshipped Him. And yet, despite the persecution that followed, the church in Philadelphia had kept their integrity and not compromised on their faith. see V 8. Jesus assures them that the synagogue worshippers would one day have to acknowledge that they were wrong. What wonderful words we find at the end of v. 9 "*I have loved you*". How reassuring and encouraging it must have been to hear that! Jesus also promises that He will keep them from the coming time of trial.

The victor's crown for those who hang on and overcome: see v.12. the reward is couched in phrases that would have resonated especially with the Philadelphians. The reference to the pillar picks up on an honour given at the time to prominent, successful men, who had a pillar with their name on it erected in a temple. One of the distinctive things about Philadelphia was that the population frequently had to leave the city because of continuing seismic tremors. Many lived their lives in constant fear. Hence the reference to never again leaving the temple. Jesus is saying that soon they would be safely home and not have to live in fear any more. The new name for the city resonates with Philadelphia having been re-named after the earthquake. But the city here, the new Jerusalem, is not subject to earthquakes or decay, it's an everlasting city. And the new name here is not just of the emperor, but of God.

In vv 7-8 there is reference to a key and a door that had been opened that no-one can shut. The phrase "*The key of David*" is a ref to **Isaiah 22: 20&22**. Eliakim is given authority to open and shut the door to the house of David, the door to the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying that He has these keys. They are the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18), the keys to the Kingdom, the keys to all of God's riches. The open door that Jesus then bids the Philadelphian church look at - and this is a command - is the door to all that God's grace promises: salvation and eternal life (v 8a) No-one can shut this door on the Philadelphians. The door of the synagogue may be closed but *this* door is ever open to them. They might have found the way hard – see Sermon on the Mount Matt 7: "*small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*" – but the Philadelphians had indeed found it.

The open door is also the door of *opportunity*. an image used by St Paul in Corinthians, talking about doors being opened for the message of Christ to be preached. Despite the open door, St Paul faced opposition and danger, as did the Philadelphians. Philadelphia was not a strong church; it had little strength (v.8). Nevertheless, this door of opportunity had been opened. The word *Strength* is translated in some versions as *power*: *I know that you lack power*, Jesus is saying – and isn't that what we have recognised about our church? But look at how positive Jesus is, how encouraging and how much He loved the Christians in Philadelphia. The open door of opportunity to witness and serve was still there and is still here for us, *despite* any lack of power.

Weakness is a very important element in our theology. It's a characteristic of Jesus Himself. He became a human being, laying aside the power of his divinity, so that he could identify with humankind. He allowed Himself to be taken by the religious authorities and put to death. He subjected Himself to God the Father's will and thereby provided the means for our salvation. God can and does work through us when we are weak; our weaknesses prove that it is God who is working in us, not our own strength. Weakness means we have to rely on Him or we might not turn to God and seek *His* way of going forward. (See 2 Cor 12:9-10)

Sir Terry Prachett gave the recent 34th Richard Dimbleby lecture, entitled *Shaking Hands with Death*. The argument for allowing those with terminal illnesses to commit suicide was fluid and compelling. There have recently been a couple of high-profile prosecutions, for example of Kay Gilderdale. Anne Atkins recently wrote an article for the Mail on Sunday (31st Jan see on line). She said, "*I know the curse of ME well but I'm sorry, it was wrong to let Lyn die*". On pro-suicide web-sites the top reason given for allowing it is that people don't want to be dependent on any one and want to be in total control of their death. Significantly, countries where assisted suicide is allowed have no hospice movement. Clearly people face terrible situations; we need to love and support the terminally ill. But as Christians we know that weakness, dependency and death are not the last word: we belong to Christ and He is always with us in our suffering.



Witness: Before discussion, read the Bible passage and ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.

1. ICE-BREAKER: What reward would you like from Jesus when you get to heaven?!
2. When and how have you heard Jesus say "*I have loved you*"? Encourage one another.
3. Look at the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 7:13-14. In what way would you say the gate is small and the way is narrow?
4. What doors of opportunity do you think God has opened for us here at St Paul's? What is your part in us going through them? Do we have weaknesses as well as strengths? How will you help address them?
5. Look at 2 Corinth 9-10. What does this mean in practice for you?
6. How can we be distinctively Christian in our understanding of weakness and dependency? What other issues do you, as a Christian, find yourself in disagreement with the general consensus in our society? Where is it particularly hard and why? Pray for anyone you know facing difficult decisions.