

“*But to Be a Pillar in the House of My God*” – Revelation Part 8
Revelation 3:7-13 (Letter to Philadelphia)

Do you know why Formula 409 is so named? Its developers experienced 408 failed attempts before their final product was created. [P]

Edmund McIlhenny operated a sugar plantation in Louisiana before the Civil War. When Yankee troops invaded his area in 1863, he fled. Two years later, he returned to find his plantation in ruins. McIlhenny fell into deep despair. Surveying his once prosperous plantation, the only part he could find undamaged was a small plot of hot peppers growing in the corner of a garden. He made a sauce with the peppers to add to his meager dinner, and thus invented ... Tabasco. 150 years later, the McIlhenny family still produces it.

What about your *past* still plagues your present and hinders your future? [P] If you could live your life over again, what about the past would you change? Would you work harder in school? Would you go back and make things right with someone? Have another chance to deal with that failure which still plagues you with guilt today?

What about your *present* hindering your future? What do you wish was different about your circumstances today? Where is life disappointing you? In what way are things not working out as you dreamed they would?

Are your children worrying you today? It's been said that we're never more happy than our unhappiest child. Is your marriage not what you dreamed it would be? How would you change your job if you could? Your finances? Your health?

Where is God in all of this? He says to his people in Jer. 29:11 – “*I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” If the sovereign, omnipotent Lord of the universe is our Father, why do we struggle so much?

When You're Living in Philadelphia

Philadelphia was the newest town in Revelation. It was founded in 140 B.C. by Attalus II, a man who so admired his brother Eumenes that his city was named “*one who loves his brother.*” But Christians in Philadelphia must have thought the name a cruel joke.

Some cities have slogans or reputations. New York is “the city that never sleeps.” Or to an entire state – “wild and wonderful, almost heaven.” The Philadelphia of Asia Minor was known as “*the city of the open door.*” She was situated on one of the great highways of their world, leading from the West to the Orient. She was placed on the eastern edge of the Greek civilization, intended to be an open door for the export of Greek culture to the larger world. [P] But things hadn’t worked out that way. The Phrygians to the east refused Greek culture and customs. The “open door” the Greeks intended was not successful.

But Jesus says that his tiny church would do what the mighty Greek empire could not: “*See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut*” (v. 8). Jesus is able to declare this because he is the one who “*holds the key of David.*” Jesus is the Son of David – the Messiah – the King who will reign forever. And as such, he is the chief steward of the royal household. The chief steward controlled entrance into the royal palace, a position of the highest authority in the kingdom. And so, Jesus, and Jesus alone, determines who may enter his household and who may not.

Jesus, the chief steward, the King of kings, declares to his little church: “I have opened this door for you, and no one can shut it.” That’s what Jesus said, but it’s certainly not what their *past* or *present* would indicate.

This church had “*little strength*” [*micro*] (v. 8). They were small in *numbers*, perhaps no more than a handful of believers. They were small in *resources*, for it was difficult for Christians to find work in Philadelphia. And they were small in *status*. Many of them were slaves, street people, or outcasts. They had no standing in their community whatsoever. Their present circumstances made future significance seem impossible.

To make things worse, they were oppressed by those in “*the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not*” (v. 9). The early Jewish Christians at one point likely met in the synagogues, but at some point the Jewish leaders of the synagogue expelled them. This would have led to their losing the religious protections Rome gave to the Jews. Some of the synagogue members would even turn Jewish Christians over to the Roman authorities, in return for 10% of their confiscated goods. So, in essence, for the Christian, every neighbor was a threat to their future.

The members of the church listening to this letter being read must have wondered at Jesus' providence and plans for them. No believers in Revelation were more hindered by their past and present circumstances from reaching a future of significance and joy.

Yet, Jesus commends them: *"You have kept my word; you have not denied my name"* (8). And then encourages them: *"Hold on to what you have"* (11), because a remarkable future is on the way. Jesus promises: I will make you *"a pillar in the temple of my God"* (12a).

Philadelphia was so filled with altars & statues that people called the town "little Athens." But earthquakes were so common in the region that people fled their temples at the first tremor, lest these marble pillars fall and crush them. By contrast, Jesus' people would be such a pillar in his eternal temple that *"never again will they leave it"* (12b).

But this promise – *"I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God and never again will you leave it"* – would've had a very personal meaning to the Jewish Christians. Jesus assures them – "You may have been expelled from the synagogue for not denying my name, but know this: you will remain in my Temple forever."

This verse recalls Isaiah 56:5, in which foreigners, excluded from the former temple, would have a place and an eternal name within God's house – *"To those who hold fast to my covenant I will give within my temple a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever."*

That brings us to the final part of v. 12 – To those who have kept his word, who have held fast to his covenant, Jesus will *"write the name of my God and the name of the city of my God ... and I will write on them my new name"* (v. 12c). When a leading citizen of Philadelphia did something noteworthy for the town, another pillar was erected with their name on it. Their pillars are just rubble today, but the name of God inscribed on our hearts and souls will endure forever.

Jesus urges his church to look past their frustrated circumstances to their glorious Father. To look up rather than down, to look out rather than in, to look to God's future rather than our past or present. [P]

But it's not easy to do that, is it? How can God redeem the loss of your job, the brokenness in your marriage, the death of a child? How can he be at work in the struggles and setbacks which have wounded your soul? How could an all-powerful, all-loving God permit you to be trapped in Philadelphia? *How are you supposed to trust his heart when you cannot see his hand?*

I have wrestled with this question a great deal over the years. While I still get perplexed, while I strive not to offer easy answers that fall short, there is something I continue to hold onto as I put my trust in our faithful Father and our steadfast Savior ... *When hardship comes, it always has a larger purpose.*

And if we follow in the footsteps of the faithful in Philadelphia – if we keep Christ's command to *endure patiently* – if we *honor his word* and *refuse to deny his name*, we will join in the blessing that comes from His redemptive work – we will receive the crown of life, we will become a pillar in the house of our God, offering our *praise*, and enjoying his *presence*, for all eternity! [P]

So when we're in Philadelphia, when we have "micro" strength and our past and present seem to stifle our future, we can know that it's not so. We can dismiss the voices of those who boast and lie, and relish in the Voice who is "*holy and true*" – the One who says: "*I have loved you*" (v. 9) [Pause] We can know that so long as we are yielded to the Spirit of God, the *open door* Christ has set before us can never be closed. [P]

Jesus tells us to hold on – to not despair – *for the One who loves us knows our future.* [P] Beethoven lost his hearing and the music world thought his genius was at its end; but he later composed his greatest works. Louis Pasteur made his greatest discoveries after suffering a stroke which threatened his life. John Milton's best poetry came after he lost his eyesight. The lowest valleys can lead to the greatest victories. [P]

When you're in Philadelphia, never give in. Give *yesterday* to his forgiving grace. Bow your heart before him – you can do it right now. Then give *today* to his redeeming power. Ask him to use your present for his purpose. Stay faithful to the last word from God, while open to the next. And rejoice that the door Jesus opens for you, no one can shut. Not today – not ever. [P]

Giant pillars framed the door to the ancient church of Philadelphia. They are all that stands today of *any* of the churches of Revelation – the only visible remains of any of these congregations. *In the smallest church, the greatest doors.* And God is still using the enduring faithful church they welcomed.

A certain pastor visited the site of the Philadelphia church. He writes: “I was greeted by a Muslim government worker employed as the caretaker of this archaeological site. He gave me the only Christian literature I found in all my tour of Turkey: an extensive booklet on the 7 Churches of Revelation. Written as an evangelistic witness, the brochure is available in three different languages, but *only* at the site of the Philadelphia church. The caretaker distributes hundreds a year, without fully understanding its content. These booklets contain the gospel, perhaps the only witness in that part of the country.” (Dr. Jim Denison)

Even today, God is using his “*church of the open door.*” And every Christian like her.

If you’re in Philadelphia, today is a day to rejoice. Thanks to Jesus, chief steward of the household of God, he opens the door for us. And as those he has loved even unto death, we can know ... the best is yet to come. Thanks be to our wonderful Savior. Amen.