

8. The faithful church

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While seemingly at the top of his game, Lance Armstrong was literally forced off his bike in excruciating pain. In early October 1996, his doctor gave him the stunning news that he had cancer. And his life changed forever. Tests revealed advanced cancer that had spread to his lungs and his brain.

He went through vigorous treatments. Against all odds, Armstrong beat the cancer and returned to his cycling in 1998. 1999 came with a specific goal—the Tour de France. When Lance went to the line at the prologue of the Tour, it was already a victory—both for him and cancer survivors everywhere. But showing up wasn't enough for Lance. He won the prologue stage and rode on to win his first Tour victory with a stunning mixture of power, aggressiveness, and team strategy. Last Sunday, Lance Armstrong won his sixth Grand Prize of the Tour de France.

He was faithful to stay in the course. Cancer couldn't put him down. His own depression couldn't subdue him. He had a goal. And he got it.

More than the courage of Lance Armstrong, more than his determination to win the Tour de France, the church of Philadelphia not only stayed in the course and determined to follow the Word of God in spite of all the persecutions and mockeries from the people around this little church, but also they evangelized the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the unbelieving people in the city of Philadelphia. Oh, how we need to learn from this church to stay at it!

A. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA FROM JESUS

Rev. 3:7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens"":

About twenty-five miles southeast of Sardis, along the Hermus River valley, lay the important high plateau city of Philadelphia. Philadelphia became a strong fortress city. To the northeast was a great vine-growing district, which, along with textile and leather industries, contributed greatly to the city's prosperity.

Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on the main route of the Imperial Post from Rome to the East, and thus was called "the gateway to the East." It was also called "Little Athens" because of the many pagan temples in the city. The church was certainly located in a place of tremendous missionary opportunity to spread the Gospel.

Jesus Christ presented Himself to the church at Philadelphia as "He is holy and true." He is declaring that He is God. There were hundreds of false gods and goddesses in that city, but only Jesus Christ could rightfully claim to be the true God.

In chapter 1:18, we read that Jesus holds the keys of hell and death. To this missionary church, He says He holds an additional key: the key of David—In this quotation from Isaiah 22:20-23, Jesus expresses His power and authority, especially to admit and exclude.

In speaking of missions, as I told the majority of you, Calvary Chapel of Sahuarita is putting 25% of its income to the Missions fund. With that, we are reaching out in the communities of Sahuarita, Green Valley and Tucson as the Home Missions, New Creations, a drug rehabilitation center in Nogales, Mexico as the Across-the-Border Missions and a church support in Bulgaria, a former communist country in Eastern Europe. I am going to go to Bulgaria in Sept. 29th and returning Oct. 13th to find out what the Lord wants us to do in that country. Jesus is the One who opened the doors for William Carey in India, Hudson Taylor in China, for us in the United States, in Mexico, and in Bulgaria. Please pray with me that the Lord make His direction to us clearly.

But God also shuts doors that no one can't open. If a man continually says, "No," to the Lord, there will come a time when he will be unable to say, "Yes" of his hardened heart – at which point he's locked in to his eternal decision and destruction.

B. COMMENDATION

Rev. 3:8 "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

There are two things we find in all seven letters to the churches in Rev 2 & 3: The first is "I know your works" and the second is "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." In other words, Jesus who is being God, knows all things including the motives, even obscure works done by the saints and awful things done by backslidden people, with His omniscient capability.

At the same time, He is pleading to us that we need to hear what the Spirit of God is speaking to us instead of ignoring Him. If you've been coming to this church for sometime, you've been convicted by the Holy Spirit what you need to do for one thing or another. Please don't ignore Him. If you choose to ignore Him, you'll regret it.

Jesus tells them that He has opened the door of evangelistic opportunity to them, and they must go through that door in faith of Him according to 1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, and Colossians 4:3.

God often sets an open door of evangelistic opportunity in front of us, but we don't see it.

A man who had been touched by the Holy Spirit, came to Spurgeon and asked how he could win others to Jesus. Spurgeon asked him, "What are you? What do you do?"

The man said, "I'm an engine driver on a train."

"Then," said Spurgeon, "Is the man who shovels coal on your train a Christian?"

"I don't know," said the man.

"Go back," said Spurgeon, and find out and start on him."

You may say, "I don't know how to tell them about Jesus Christ." If you are a born-again Christian, you already have an answer for that. Tell them how Jesus changed your life that was miserable and lonely with the life of joy and peace because of His presence in your heart. People will listen if you are real and love them enough to tell them about Jesus. You don't have to know all the doctrines of Christianity. Just simply give them Jesus. Do you remember our church motto? "Knowing Jesus and making Him known."

The term a “*little strength*” does not imply weakness, but real strength. They were weak enough to be strong in the Lord. We can be “too strong” or “too big” or “too sure” of ourselves for God to really use us. The church in Philadelphia were poor in spirit to know they really needed God’s strength.

It is not a matter of great strength, nor great ability but great dependability in God. Samson had great ability but poor dependability. A little strength faithfully used means more than much strength flashily. The Apostle Paul was a great example of this dynamic of weakness and strength. God’s strength was made evident in his weaknesses.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Success in Christian work cannot be measured by what a big church building we would have or how our church ministries flourish. Nor it can be wooed by how many congregation we might have, but the dependency in the Lord Jesus Christ, faithfulness in our servant hood, the love for the Lord, His Word and His people.

C. NO REBUKE AND CORRECTION FOR THEM

Like the church of Smyrna, there is no rebuke or correction from the Lord to the congregation of the Philadelphia church.

D. PROMISE

Rev. 3:9-10 Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie— (1) indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, (2) I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

Apparently, the Christians in Philadelphia were persecuted by Jewish people. However, these persecuting Jews were Jews in name only. Jesus spoke of this specific group of Jewish people in Philadelphia and Smyrna who persecuted the Christians during that period.

Our Lord Jesus gave three wonderful and encouraging promises to this church:
1) Jesus promises that He will vindicate His people and make sure that their persecutors recognize they are wrong, and that Jesus and His followers are right.

Persecuted people often long for justice against their persecutors. But the best way to destroy the enemies of the Gospel is to pray that God would change them to be His followers.

I used to pray to God to burn down all the strip clubs, adult bookstores and abortion clinics with His lightning bolts. I no longer do that. Instead, I ask the Lord to bring those people into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Once they truly receive Jesus into their hearts, they wouldn’t go back to their old lives again and the places will get shut down. I say that is a better way to solve problems, don’t you think?

2) Jesus promises to keep these Christians and us from that hour of trial.

I asked you to underline the sentence about “*the hour of trial.*” I agree with the majority of Bible scholars who consider this as the Great Tribulation that we are going to study from chapter 4.

In many Bible scholars’ understanding, Revelation 3:10 is a promise that the church will not go through the Tribulation, but will be taken to heaven before it begins we know this process as the Rapture. We’ve study about the Rapture when we were in Matthew 24. For those who were not at that study or not sure about which one to believe – Pre-trib, Mid-trib, Post-trib or Pan-Trib, we will look into the Rapture more carefully soon.

“*The hour of trial*” is directed against those who dwell on the earth and have no intention to follow Jesus.

Although in the first two centuries, the topics of Jesus’ Second Coming and the Rapture of the church were central themes of preaching and writing, Bible prophecy became a lost interest in the church until the 1800s. Because people said, “It’s impossible for a nation to come back from the dead. It’s unthinkable that the Jewish people could have a national identity again. It’s gotta be an allegory. Why would the Middle East be the focal point of a battle? Who cares about the Middle East?”

Do you have any day go by without hearing news from the Middle East? I heard that Israel just have found that they are sitting on the top of a massive oil pile which will be able to supply all of their oil needs. And they don’t care about some environmental tree huggers’ demonstrations. We now understand why that region of the world is so strategic: oil. Economically, militarily, politically, the attention of the whole world is constantly focused on the Middle East.

Rev. 3:11-13 Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. (3) He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

3) God would honor the Philadelphians.

The symbolism in this verse would be especially meaningful to people who lived in constant danger of earthquakes in Philadelphia areas. The stability of the pillar and safety in Christ Jesus give them comfort.

Ancient cities often honored great leaders by erecting pillars with their names inscribed on them. God’s pillars are faithful people who bear His name for His glory.

However, this promise again is on conditional. We can lose our crowns to none other than our fleshly selfish desires.

But let’s remember that God is the Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Heb 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) We can be "too strong" or "too big" or "too sure" of ourselves for God to really use us.

God is not asking us to have all the ducks in a row. But He is telling us to trust Him, depend on Him in everything. We often are too independent from Him for our own good.

2) The best way to destroy the enemies of the Gospel is to pray that God would change them to be His followers.

We need to remember to extend mercy and grace to those who stands against the Gospel. I am not saying that we need to compromise our Christian principles to mingle with them. But we need to show them God's grace, God's mercy and God's love through us.

3) When the Holy Spirit opens the door of opportunity to evangelize, don't worry about not knowing the right Bible verses to quote.

It would be better if you know the verses, but simply give the testimony of your life changing experience by Jesus. Depend on the Spirit of God, He will lead you and bring the right verses to your remembrance.

4) If we fail to hold fast, our crowns might be given to another. The idea is not that it might be stolen by another, but given.

This is not a crown of royalty. This is a crown of victory. Jesus encourages His saints to finish their course with victory, to "play the second half" just as strongly as they "played the first half."

Let's never forget that the one most likely to steal our crowns are ourselves.

Jesus who made Himself real to the church of Philadelphia can be real to you, too, if you let Him.

The love He had to them can be yours to take. His arms are aching to embrace you and to comfort you from your lonely and hopeless life. He will be your strength and only hope in this dying world. Are you ready to invite Him in your heart now?