

## Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

### Study #7: “Philadelphia—The Church in Need of Strength”

Proverbs 30:26 raises a question: What is a coney? The verse reads, “Coneys are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags.” Some versions translate it “rabbits” or “badgers.” But the best research indicates that this was the Syrian hyrax, an unusual little creature about the size of a guinea pig. It looks like a rodent and is sometimes called a “rock rabbit.” But it is actually unrelated to any other animal. Its teeth and bones resemble those of a rhinoceros. But that’s as far as the similarity goes. The coney is a helpless creature—easy prey for hawks, snakes, and other small predators. So how does this little fellow stay alive? That’s the interesting part. He hides himself in the crags of the rocks, often on the side of a cliff.

Why are we to learn from this Proverb? That we too are weak, helpless, and vulnerable to spiritual attack. So how do we protect ourselves? The coney knows. The answer is by hiding ourselves in the cleft of the Rock—our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, contrary to popular belief, it’s not bad to be weak, as long as you’re protected. And we are in Jesus Christ! Believing in Jesus does not eliminate life’s dangers, but it does make us eternally secure in the midst of them. In fact, the Bible says our weaknesses are an advantage in serving Christ. 2 Corinthians 12:9 is a good example. There the Lord tells Paul why he’s suffered what he has. “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” So Paul concludes, “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” In other words, when we’re weak, we’re forced to depend on Christ instead of ourselves, and that’s where true strength is found. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary, wrote: “God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to lean on Him.”

But our primary example is the great little church of Philadelphia, described in Revelation 3:7-13. We don’t know a lot about the history of this city. We know it was 30 miles southwest of Sardis in Asia Minor and founded in 189 B.C. by Attalus, king of Peramum, who was nicknamed Philadelphia because of his special love for his brother. So that became the name of the city. We also know that it had agriculturally rich soil due to the volcanic ash deposited in the area. There was frequent volcanic activity in the region and many devastating earthquakes.

As for the church, Jesus said they only had a “little strength.” This was because they didn’t have the large membership or great resources of churches like Ephesus and Laodicea. But the truth is most of the great churches throughout history have not been large or wealthy. The churches of the great Puritans like John Robinson and Jonathan Edwards were churches of fewer than 200 people. In fact, 60 percent of churches in America today average 89 members. Because it is always just a remnant who truly love Christ and His Word. And yet, when welded to the iron bar of His strength, the copper wire of their weakness made them the most dynamic church in the Revelation. The question is: Will we learn from them? Will we admit and embrace our frailty, relying on Jesus alone for our strength? To understand what made them one of the great little churches of history, there are four facts we need to understand about them.

## 1. The Nature of Their Greatness

Jesus begins the letter like this in Revelation 3:7-8, ““And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.’”

Two things to notice here. First, notice how they were corrected. They weren’t, were they? Like the persecuted church of Smyrna, Jesus found nothing about them to criticize. On the contrary, the words He speaks to them are full of comfort, encouragement and blessing, reminding us how tender and compassionate our Savior is toward those who do their best for Him. Some of us were raised in negative households, where Mom and Dad always seemed to find fault with us. Consequently, it is difficult for us to think of God as being pleased with us. But He is—if we do our best for Him. He is not a difficult Master to please. His expectations are always in direct proportion to the strength He gives us. “To whom much is given, much will be required.” But to those who have only a little strength, only a little is expected of us. Psalm 103:13 is one of my favorite verses. It says, “As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust.”

The second thing to notice is how they were commended. They were commended for keeping God’s Word. You see, we live in an age when the uppermost thing in people’s minds is not right, but rights. A woman’s fundamental right to choose. A pornographer’s fundamental right to free speech. A homosexual’s fundamental right to promote his lifestyle. Of course, the world isn’t so quick to fight for the unborn’s fundamental right to life or our fundamental right to protest on their behalf. Because it’s rights, not right, that people care about. Making many Christians to wonder, “Should I even bother saying anything? After all, do I have the right to push my beliefs on the rest of the population?” The answer is: Not only do we have the right to do so, we have a fundamental responsibility to speak the truth in love. After all, how kind is it to quietly stand by while an unwed mother doubles her pain by taking the life of her unborn child? Or how loving is it to say nothing as the LGBT community shortens their lives through sexually dangerous behavior? So I say, even if no one listens to us, we have a responsibility to take a stand not for what is politically correct, but for what is good and right and decent and true. Or as Jesus credits them here, “You have a fundamental responsibility to keep My Word.

They also did not deny Christ’s name. Why does that matter? Because just as godly wisdom is found only in the Word of God, supernatural power is found only in the name of Jesus. Think back to the crippled man Peter healed in Acts 3. The Sanhedrin asked him, “By what power have you done this?” Peter replied, “Be it known to you all...that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...this man stands here before you whole...Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

You say, “Isn’t that rather simplistic?” Just be faithful to God’s Word and God’s Son and God will bless?” I often meet that attitude in counseling sessions or planning meetings. People want to see change in their lives or growth in the church. But when you insist that they go back to square one and start again with holiness, honestly, and love, they’re angry. Like Namaan the leper, who was told to wash seven times in the Jordan River, they think, “It can’t be that simple!

I've been hearing those things for years." Yes, but have you actually practiced them? Are you a doer as well as a hearer of God's Word? My wife and I have made many mistakes, but 41 years later, I can testify that God has blessed us with more resources, more friends, and more family joy than we ever imagined. Simple obedience is the surest route to the blessing of God.

The truth is that it doesn't take a lot of talent or charisma to be useful to God. In fact, those things can actually get in the way of serving Him. Instead, what we need do is give Him the little bit of strength we have, let Him match it with His greatness, and then explode it with divine power. That's the secret to success with God. Determining to hold fast to His name and His Word no matter what comes your way. And that's something you can do! You may have just a little strength, but a little is more than enough when God is involved. Someone has said, "The mighty oak was once just a little nut who held his ground." That homey maxim is my philosophy of spiritual growth and ministry. Digging in your heels, hanging on to God, and never letting up until He blesses. The Philadelphians did that, and not only did they become one of the great churches of the Revelation, they are also the only church which has survived until today.

## 2. The Source of Their Greatness

Each of the seven letters, you'll remember, begins with a description of Christ intended to encourage the church in question. And this church is no exception. The only difference is that this description doesn't come from the vision of Christ in chapter one. Why not? Because that vision presented Christ in judgment, and the weak don't need to hear about judgment. The unruly need to hear about judgment, but the weak need to be encouraged. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 SAYS, "Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, support the weak." So, in order to strengthen their confidence in them, in verse 7 Jesus emphasizes three encouraging truths about Himself.

He begins, "These things says He who is holy." Throughout the New Testament, Christ's Deity is proven by the fact that like the Father, He is holy. In John 6:69, when superficial disciples are falling away, Peter assures Jesus, "We have believed and come to know that You are the holy One of God." This he repeats in Acts 3:14 when preaching to the Jews. "But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you," referring to Barabbas.

What does it mean to be "holy?" The word means to be separate and distinct. This is radically different from the concept espoused by the New Age movement, which is America's new religion. The New Age movement teaches that God is the divine "force" which binds the universe together, giving it its unity and direction. There is therefore no distinction between God and His creation. There is also no distinction between sin and holiness. God is in everything and everything is a part of God. It is at this point that Jesus has given us a mandate to stand up and defy our culture, "No, God is not synonymous with His creation. He infinitely higher and holier than the things He has made." Hebrews 7:26 says, "For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, **separate from sinners.**" Because He is holy, God cannot tolerate sin and demands holiness from His people. "Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord."

Verse 7 continues, "He who is true." There are two Greek words for "true." **Alethes**, which refers to something true as opposed to false. For example, "The ocean is wet" is a true statement, whereas "The ocean is dry" is a false statement. But that is not the word Jesus uses. He uses **Alethinos**, which means the source of all truth. Jesus, in other words, isn't just a person who tells

the truth. He is truth incarnate, which means anyone who disagrees with anything He ever taught is by definition wrong. He is the standard by which every other thought or teaching is judged. You say, “That’s awfully narrow!” You’re right! It is. But this is who Jesus claimed to be—the only true revelation of God. He said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6). If that isn’t a cause for confidence, I don’t know what it.

Verse 7 adds, “He who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.” What does this mean? Jesus is likening Himself to Eliakim, the faithful treasurer of King Hezekiah, described in Isaiah 22. Eliakim held the key to the king’s treasury with the power to open or shut it at will. Now the Savior takes that Old Testament truth and applies it to Himself, saying, “I am the Greater Eliakim with the keys to Heaven’s treasures, so that whatever your need may be, I can supply it.” It is what Paul promised the Philippians when He said, “And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:19)

Then, just to make sure we don’t misunderstand how important this is, Jesus continues in verse 8, “See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it.” Do you realize how powerful and encouraging that statement is to a struggling church? Think of the problems we face today—economically, politically, morally, spiritually—and realize, we as Christians have been called to do something about it. But how is that possible? Things are so evil, how can we ever hope to make a dent in them? The answer is that victory is not only possible, it is certain because of who holds the key. Every effort we make for Christ—every missionary effort, every witnessing effort, every Bible class taught, every prayer offered—has the potential of eternal life-changing success. Why? Because Jesus Christ has opened the door. Paul talked about this in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, “For a great and effective door has opened for me.”

Sometimes we talk about looking for opportunities to serve the Lord. But that’s a cop-out, isn’t it? We don’t have to look for opportunities. Why not? Because Jesus has already opened the door. All we have to do is walk through it and take advantage of the opportunities that exist. Will you do that? Think about the unbelievers you know. Isn’t there at least one you could befriend for Christ? Or think about the pressing needs of our missionaries or other believers in this fellowship. Isn’t there at least one need you could meet? Remember, there’s no such thing as being over-qualified for the Lord’s work. If Jesus could wash feet, what could be beneath us?

Maybe you’ve heard the story of the four Christians named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was a thankless job to be done and Everybody was asked to do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn’t do it. Consequently, it wound up that Nobody told Anybody, so Everybody blamed Somebody. Sound familiar? I hope not! With so many crying needs both inside and outside the church and a wide open door of opportunity before us, nobody has an excuse for doing nothing. Instead, everybody ought to use every ounce of strength Christ gives us to do something. Where will you begin?

### **3. The Threat to Their Greatness**

You can see it in verse 11. Jesus warns, “Behold, I come quickly. Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.” This is a clear indication that the Philadelphian had already earned a wonderful reward from Christ. There was nothing new or different they had to do. All

they had to do was hold on to what they had. But that isn't easy. For it is possible to serve Christ well, earn a reward, but then, because of lack of unfaithfulness, to drop out of the race before it's ended and lose everything you've achieved. 2 John 1:8 warns, "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward."

You say, "I didn't think a Christ could lose his salvation?" You're right. We can't. Not if we have truly been born again. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 assures us that even if our works amount to hay, wood, and stubble, and are burned up at the Judgment Seat of Christ, we ourselves will be saved as from the fire—if our foundation is Christ. It isn't a matter of heaven and hell. It's a matter of rewards. We're warned that unless we're watchful, we can lose our crowns. Or to be more precise, we can have them stolen from us. Who would do that? The enemy of our souls. Satan knows very well that he cannot take away our eternal life. So he settles for second best. He seeks to tarnish our victory by stealing our rewards. How? Through pride and complacency.

I'm thinking right now of a well-known pastor who was heard to say many times over the years that the one area in which Satan would never trip him up was his sex life. And yet, it wasn't long before he was caught having an affair with a woman he was counseling. Isn't that tragic! To work hard for Christ, but then, because of a lack of watchfulness, to disgrace yourself, your family, and to lose everything you've worked so hard to achieve? But it can happen. Paul said it could happen to him. That's why he wrote 1 Corinthians 9:27. He said, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." So let's take nothing for granted. Let's hold fast to what we have, that no one may take our crowns. Or as Revelation 2:10 puts it, "Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life."

#### **4. The Rewards for Their Greatness**

Given the faithfulness of the Philadelphians and the positive tone of this letter, it shouldn't be a surprise to find this letter filled with promises. And it is!

##### **A. Vengeance**

The first promise is found in verse 9 where Jesus says, "Indeed, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you." That is a promise of vengeance.

The Christians in Philadelphia were suffering severe persecution like the other cities in the region, but in their case it was instigated by the Jews. There was a large synagogue of Jews in Philadelphia who believed that Christianity was a blasphemous lie, and like Paul before his conversion, they wanted to destroy the church. But instead of giving in to bitterness, the believers simply looked to the Lord in faith. Why? Because of what we Christians have been taught for two thousand years now. Romans 12:17-19, "Do not return evil for evil, and do not take revenge, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine. I will repay, says the Lord.'"

It isn't our job to get even with those who hurt us—our parents, our brothers, our sisters, our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our fellow church members. For God promises that His judgments are much more just and satisfying. Here He promises that anyone who hurts us, mocks us, or takes advantage of us, because we're Christians, will one day be made to bow before

us in repentance. “Indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” That should do away with the need for wrath and revenge, shouldn’t it?

## **B. Deliverance**

Next, Jesus promises deliverance. Verse 10 continues, “Because you have kept My command to persevere, 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.”

This is one of the most important verses in the book of Revelation. First, Jesus warns that there is a period of judgment coming upon the entire earth, not just Philadelphia or the region of Asia Minor. What period of judgment is that? After all, no worldwide judgment against sin has taken place since the Genesis flood. But read the rest of this book and it becomes clear. He is referring to the Tribulation pictured in chapters 6 to 19. But He doesn’t stop there. He goes on to make a promise to the Philadelphians which applies to true believers in every age and every kind of church. We know that because the letter again ends with the call, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 3:13) This is a promise that those who truly love and believe in Christ will be removed from the earth before this hour of trial begins.

Two facts make this clear. First, the preposition “from.” Some versions translate it “out of the hour of trial.” That is the most accurate rendition. For the Greek word *ek* means “out of” and comes from a root word meaning separation. This indicates that Christ isn’t merely going to protect His Church in the Tribulation; He is going to keep us “out of” it. In fact, those who teach that the church will go through the Tribulation, but be protected by Christ, have problems explaining what follows in the rest of the book. Later chapters reveal that those who are faithful to Christ during the Tribulation will not be protected from persecution, but will be martyred for their faith. And fact #2, Jesus says that this hour is designed to “test those who dwell upon the earth.” This phrase is used 10 times in Revelation and always refers to unbelievers, not believers. So, if you think the church might go through the Tribulation, the question you must answer is: Why? What purpose would be served by it? The answer is: No good purpose. This is an hour intended to test “earth-dwellers,” not those whose citizenship is already in heaven.

In fact, what is striking is how often we have read the word “church” and “churches” in the first three chapters. I counted 19 uses of the word, and in each case the church is on earth. However, once we come to chapter 4, there is never again any mention of the church on earth, because the church is now safe in heaven, represented by the twenty-four elders worshipping before God’s throne. Of course, this is not to suggest that the church will escape all tribulation. In John 16:33, Jesus clearly warned, “in the world you will have tribulation.” But what we won’t go through, if we’re genuinely saved, is the Tribulation. The definite article indicates a very specific time of trial from which we will be delivered—“the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world to test those who dwell on the earth.” (Rev. 3:10)

## **C. Permanence**

Third, Jesus promises the church permanence. Verse 12 adds, “He who overcomes, I will make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.” This alludes to the tradition of the Philadelphians who honored their heroes by carving their names on the pillars of their

temples. In our case, there will be no physical temple in the New Jerusalem, for Revelation 21:22 tells us that Christ will be the only temple we need. But He will memorialize our good deeds. How? By making us the pillars of that city. And He promises that we “will go out no more.” That phrase had special meaning for the Philadelphians. Built in an earthquake zone, the citizens spent much of their lives getting in and out of town. An earthquake would strike and the people would run for safety. Then the trembling would stop and they’d return and rebuild their homes. In fact, we’re told that in 17 AD a major earthquake struck the area, destroying 12 cities including Sardis and Philadelphia. Another earthquake destroyed Laodicea in 60 AD. So this is a promise of peace and permanence. It is what David sang about in Psalm 23: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

#### **D. Acceptance**

Finally, Jesus promises us three new names: “And 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.” What do these three things signify? Acceptance and belonging. Just as an earthly bridegroom gives his name to his precious new bride, so Jesus will give us His new name, signifying forever that we belong to Him.

So let me ask you. How strong are you? Chances are, not very. Because what God so often chooses are the weak things of this world to shame the strong. Which means that, despite our outward appearances, most of us are weak, sensitive, and vulnerable. But that’s OK as long as you’re protected. And we are! How? The coney knows. By placing our lives in the care of Jesus Christ. That gives us safety and strengthen for whatever He asks us to do today, and courage and hope for what we face tomorrow. So stay close to Christ. He is our Rock!