



NEW LIFE

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“For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:9)

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The Letter to the Church in Sardis

By Rev. Jason J. Stellman, Part 6 of 8 “The Seven Letters of Revelation”

Adapted from TABLETALK from Ligonier Ministries – May 2009

If the book of Revelation teaches us anything, it is that looks can be deceiving, that there is more that meets the eye, and that things are not always as they seem. When John is told by one of the twenty-four elders to “behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” for example, he turns around only to see “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (5:5-6). In 2:9, we read of those “who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (see also 3:9). The account of the “beast rising out of the sea” that is “allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” is later described from the vantage point of heaven, only now we hear of “those who had conquered the beast and its image” singing not the lament of vanquished martyrs but the chorus of victory and the song of triumph (13:7; 15:2-4).

The disconnect between how things appear and how they really are is no less true in the case of Jesus’ letter to the church in Sardis. Sardis has been described as “a city with a golden past and misplaced security.” It had a fortress surrounded on three sides with sheer cliffs, and it was thought to be so impenetrable that the phrase “to capture the acropolis of Sardis” became a metaphor for accomplishing the impossible. The city, however, eventually fell into Persian hands due to its citizens’ overconfidence, carelessness, and lack of vigilance in guarding against potential calamity.

The heart of Jesus’ rebuke for this church is found in Revelation 3:1, where He says, “You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” While a church’s reputation in the surrounding community is important, it pales in comparison to the estimation of the one “who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1). According to our Lord who searches the hearts and tries the minds of men, the church in Sardis was much more healthy on the outside than it was within. Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees comes to mind: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27-28).

Unlike His remarks to the other churches, Jesus does not single out some specific fault on the part of the believers in Sardis. No mention is made of Nicolaitans, Balaamites, women named Jezebel, or synagogues of Satan. Instead, the church is told that “what remains” is “about to die” and that Christ had “not found [their] works complete in the sight of my God” (Rev 3:2).

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Ironic and counterintuitive as it may seem on the surface, the church is often strongest when it is facing some specific challenge (whether doctrinal or moral), and the flip side is also true, that the church is in gravest danger when the waters are calmest and when the sailing seems the most smooth. If the Christians in Sardis were facing a specific doctrinal threat like the Ephesians were, then most likely they would have “tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false” (2:2). Or, if they were facing a concrete moral dilemma, they, like the Philadelphians, probably would have exercised what “little power” they had in order to not deny [Jesus’] name” (3:8). But when the life of the church carries on like business as usual, especially in a supposedly impenetrable city like Sardis, it is very easy to stop watching, stop guarding, and stop being vigilant to protect the church and her people. In a word, when wolves wear sheep’s clothing and Satan looks like an angel of light, it is suddenly very tempting to be content with bigger barns, more programs, and a reputation for being a “vibrant” witness in the community. In the midst of plenty and in the context of abundance, the smug cry of “soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” can be heard in many a church foyer.

Can anyone deny that this same temptation plagues the churches of this nation? We are the big man on the global campus, our “fortress” is as impregnable as the citadel of Sardis, and our mega-churches are multiplying almost as fast as our Wal-Marts. But is strength our greatest weakness? Does danger lurk behind our supposed safety? Is our reputation for “life” but a thin veneer behind which death hides its face?

Perhaps the American church’s greatest challenge is not outright wickedness or rank perversion, but a comatose state that renders us numb and lifeless. Perhaps amid our ambivalence and self-satisfaction we have forgotten the one who “will come as a thief” at an hour we think not (3:3). Perhaps we need to stop patting ourselves on the back, saying “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace, and start seeking to be like those “few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments,” who will walk with Jesus in white, “for they are worthy” (3:4).

The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia

*By Dr Cornelius P. Venema, Part 7 of 8 “The Seven Letters of Revelation”
Adapted from TABLETALK from Ligonier Ministries – May 2009*

Many evangelical churches in North America are scrambling to find strategies that will enable them to reach out effectively with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite a rich heritage of gospel teaching on this continent, there is a sense of discouragement, even despondency, among many Christians about the prospects for evangelism in our time. And so a variety of pragmatic schemes are being employed to assure success in the communication of the gospel.

However, before the evangelical church succumbs to the temptation to craft strategies that accommodate the gospel to the spirit of the age, we need to listen carefully to Christ’s letter to the church in Philadelphia. In this letter, Christ speaks to a small and beleaguered church, which was assailed by fierce opposition to its testimony to Christ, and warmly assures them that He will set before them an “open door” of opportunity to witness to His name (Rev 3:8). Because of their tenacious grip upon the true testimony concerning Jesus Christ, the witness of the church in Philadelphia will be a beacon of light, drawing them and others into fellowship with the living God and entrance into His temple-sanctuary.

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The pattern of this letter resembles closely that of the others. It begins with an important identification of the letter's author, who alone holds the "key of David and has the authority to grant entrance into the kingdom of God (vs 7). Then the letter extends a word of encouragement to the church in Philadelphia, promising an "open door" of opportunity in light of its steadfast perseverance (vs 8). And it concludes with a rich assurance of communion with the living God in His eternal temple-sanctuary.

The self-identification of the author of this letter provides an especially important background to its message. The words of this letter are "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 will open." "Holy" and "true" are divine attributes in the Scriptures and in the book of Revelation (6:10). Christ thus assures the Philadelphians that His words have divine authority. Christ Himself is the true witness whose word comes with absolute reliability. The recipients of this letter are assured from the outset that Jesus is the true Messiah, and their witness to Him is wholly true.

These opening words of self-identification are reminiscent of the language of Isaiah 22:22 where Eliakim is identified as the Lord's servant who was granted authority to administer the keys of access to David's house. What Isaiah prophesied regarding Eliakim foreshadowed Jesus Christ, who has absolute authority over the key to the household of God and the eternal kingdom. No one, whether Jew or Gentile, enters God's house or takes his place among the people of God unless Christ grants him access or entrance.

With these words of remarkable self-identification ringing in their ears, the letter turns to the promise that Christ extends to the church in Philadelphia. Christ "knows" their works. He is aware that the church in Philadelphia was, when viewed from the standpoint of numbers or social prestige, a church of "little power" (Rev 3:8). Yet, this church had "kept" Christ's word and had not "denied" His name. Their witness to the truth concerning Jesus had remained steadfast, even when those of "the synagogue of Satan" opposed their witness and belied their testimony to Christ.

To this faithful church, Christ promises an "open door" or opportunity to witness to the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the true King of the people of God. Because of its persevering faithfulness to the gospel, this church, located at a strategic crossroads in the ancient world, will enjoy the privilege of calling Jews and Gentiles alike to acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The Christ, who holds the key of entrance into the kingdom of God, reassures this beleaguered church that it will be uniquely privileged in gospel witness and mission.

Because the church in Philadelphia has kept Christ's word in patient endurance, it may be confident that, in the "hour of trial that is coming upon the whole world" prior to Christ's coming, it will be spared. This assurance, contrary to the interpretation of some, is not a promise that the Philadelphians will be "raptured" before the time of testing comes but that they will be preserved through whatever trial comes. Nothing will separate them from God's love in Christ. And so, as they hold fast to their "crown," they are encouraged to look forward to the future, when they and all who share their faith in Christ will dwell in God's presence forever.

The message of this letter to the contemporary church is startlingly clear. No message could be more relevant to an evangelical church in danger of losing faith in the ancient gospel and its power to transform sinners after the image of Jesus Christ.

WELCOME TO NEW LIFE B-P CHURCH LONDON

Our worship services begin promptly at **11.00 am** and **4.00 pm**.

Please stay back for Bible Study and fellowship lunch after the morning worship and for tea after the evening service. Do invite your friends to come to Church.

Worship Services			WELCOME
Morning	Today: 27/09/2009	Next Week: 04/10/2009	We extend a warm welcome to all worshippers this Lord's Day. We like to welcome Hean Ching to our worship services last Lord's Day.
<i>Chairman:</i>	John Poh	Jonathan Kim	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Eld George Chew	Eld George Chew	NEWS/ANNOUNCEMENTS
<i>Message:</i>	Travelogue to Philadelphia	Travelogue to Laodicea	
<i>Text:</i>	Revelations 3:7-13	Revelations 3:14-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling of Resident Minister: Thank God for His provision of Pastor Ki as our resident minister. Pray for Pastor and Mrs Ki as they prepare to return to London in December. • DHW Bible Study: Today, we will cover Lesson 19 (Gen 26). Please spend the upcoming week preparing for Lesson 20 (Gen 27). • Pray for those who are sick: - Yetta's mum (recovery from cancer), Constance (ankle), Douglas (knee pain), Barbara (Alzheimer's), Prema (thyroid and skin condition), Eld Jack Ford (old age and knees), Margaret (Asthma, Hay fever), Brian (wisdom tooth extraction in Oct), Mrs Ki's father (lung cancer), John (ankle, wisdom tooth extraction - appointment), Melissa's dad (cancer), Sharon (cold). • Pray for those who are on travel: Sophia (returning to UK/Norway), Lee-Wei (S'pore), Nicolas (Belgium), Hubert (Europe), Rev & Mrs Ki (Australia), Daniel & Maureen (M'sia/Japan), Melissa & Zacky (M'sia) • Pray for those progressing with their studies: Yetta, Joshua, Grace • Pray for the new students from S'pore as they come to UK to begin their studies. • Pray for visa applications: Joshua (Student visa). Thank God for the approval of Joy's post study visa.
<i>Organist:</i>	Anthony	Anthony	
Evening			
<i>Chairman:</i>	John Poh	Jonathan Kim	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Eld George Chew	Eld George Chew	
<i>Message:</i>	Despair and Hope	Review of the Letters	
<i>Text:</i>	Isaiah 9:2-7	Revelations 4:1-2	
<i>Pianist:</i>	Joy	Grace	
Other Duties			
	Today: 27/09/2009	Next Week: 04/10/2009	
<i>Ushers:</i>	Joey / Sharon	John / Yetta	
<i>Lunch:</i>	Constance	Grace	
<i>Washing-up:</i>	Volunteers	Volunteers	
<i>PA Crew:</i>	Jonathan	Joshua	
<i>DHW Class:</i>	Lesson 19 (Gen 26)	Lesson 20 (Gen 27)	
Appointments of the Week			
Fri 02 Oct	7:30pm	Young Adults Fellowship: No YAF	
Sat 03 Oct	4:00pm	Prayer Meeting & Bible Study: Led by John	
<u>Worship Service Collections</u>			
Offering:	£209.65	Lunch: £34.50	
<h2 style="margin: 0;"><u>Little White Lies</u></h2> <p style="margin: 0;"><i>Adapted from "In Green Pastures" by J.R. Miller, D.D.</i></p> <p>People talk about "white lies" — little deceptions, concealments, false seemings, subterfuges — as if they were not particularly wrong. But he who would be true must be true through and through, in the innermost depths of his being and in the smallest affairs as well as the largest. He must simply be true. Let your soul of truth be as pure and unstained as the snowflakes when they fall from the cloud. There really are no "white lies;" all lies are black. Falsehood is of the night, no matter whether it be merely a look or a silence that deceives, or whether it be an uttered untruth. Let us learn to be true for God's eye.</p>			