

## **A Great Commission Church**

### **Revelation 3:7-13**

**Introduction:** 1) For many years I have taught at a school that aspires to be a Great Commission seminary and college. Throughout our campus you will hear people say, “Every classroom a Great Commission classroom.” “Every teacher a Great Commission teacher.” “Every student a Great Commission student.” “Every graduate a Great Commission graduate sent out to build Great Commission churches.” The fact is Christ is only pleased with Great Commission churches that take seriously his final marching orders given just before He ascended into heaven (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). Oswald Smith says, “Any church that is not seriously involved in helping fulfill the Great Commission has forfeited its biblical right to exist.” (In *Expect Great Things*, Marvin Newell).

2) This church in Philadelphia, Asia was passionate about being a Great Commission church and the risen and glorified Christ was passionate about enabling it to continue to be a Great Commission church. They were faithful to Jesus and our Lord promises them, “I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close” (3:8). What a wonderful promise for any church to receive from the Savior!

3) Churches may be mighty in their witness even when they look weak in appearance. Who they really are on the inside matters more to God than what they look like on the outside. And, when He sees what He likes, there are no limits on what God may do for them and through them. Chuck Swindoll says it well, “The size of a congregation, the limitations of its location, or the restrictions of its budget should never determine its vision. Instead, churches should set their vision based on the power of their God. God is infinite, magnificent, awesome, and mighty—beyond description or comprehension! When He chooses to open opportunities, the possibilities are endless. All we need to do is trust and follow Him wherever He leads.” (70).

4) Certain traits characterize a Great Commission Church for which Christ opens doors that no one, not even Satan, can shut. It entails how they see Christ, how they value the power of the gospel, and how they trust in and live by the promises of God. Count Nicolaus Ludwig Von Zinzendorf put it beautifully, “I have but one passion: it is Christ. It is Christ alone. The world is the field and the field is the world; and henceforth that country shall be my home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ.” This passion pleases our Savior! Three truths capture well the thrust of that passion in this verse.

## I. A Great Commission Church Sees Jesus As Awesome 3:7

The city of Philadelphia (which means “brotherly love”) was 25 miles Southeast of Sardis. It was an “important high-plateau city” on a main highway that connected with Smyrna which was about 100 miles due West. In AD17 the city was devastated by an earthquake. It was rebuilt by Tiberius. As a result it was quite loyal to Rome. Called “the gateway to the East,” it was something of a “missionary city” for the spreading of Greek culture. Jesus promises the church that it will be a missionary church for the gospel. We do not know how the church was founded. What we do know is it was a church that pleased Jesus. Like the church at Smyrna (2:8-11), our Lord has no word of criticism or correction (Johnson, *EBC*, 630; Mounce, 98-99). I suspect this was due, in large part, to the exalted view and love they had for Jesus and the gospel. The description of the Savior in verse 7 would support this thesis. Three truths are set forth concerning the Lord who walks among his church (1:12-13).

### 1) He is the Holy One

Jesus is the *ho hagios*, “the Holy One.” This title was ascribed to God in the Old Testament (Isa. 40:25; Hab. 3:3). Here, and elsewhere in the New Testament, it is equally and appropriately ascribed to Jesus (Mark 1:24; Acts 3:14). The idea is one of purity as well as separateness. God is separate from creation as the Creator. He is separate from sin as the

Savior. Who God is, Jesus is; because Jesus is God. He is pure, undefiled, spotless, without stain or blemish. Hosea 11:9 says, “For I am God and not man, the Holy One among you.” Jesus is this Holy One who walked among us in the flesh (John 1:14) and now walks among us by His Spirit.

2) He is the True One

Jesus is the *ho alethinos*, “the True One.” Revelation 6:10 combines these two titles as well calling Christ, “the One who is holy and true.” Jesus is “the true God,” distinct from all others. What he says is “the truth” (John 14:6) [David Levy, “The Church in Crisis and Commitment,” *Israel My Glory*, Feb/Mar 1995, 22-23]. What He says is the truth because it flows from the True One. Ideas of trustworthiness, reliability, dependability leap from this title. He is genuine and He is faithful. This would certainly encourage this church with “limited strength.” He will sustain them and see them through the commission He had given them. They have His word on it! As 1 John 5:20 declares, they could count on the One who “is the true God and eternal life.”

3) He is the Sovereign One

Jesus “has the Key of David.” That implicitly looks to 1:18 and the fact that Christ “holds the keys of death and Hades.” It also looks back to

Isaiah 22:22 where the Bible says, “And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” Here in Revelation 3:7, the same words appear and are again ascribed to Christ. Jesus is “the Davidic Messiah with absolute power to control entrance to the heavenly kingdom.” (Mounce, 100). He has the authority to admit or exclude who will come into the presence of the King. He alone has the key that lets people into the kingdom of God. No wonder Jesus said in John 10:9, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” No wonder Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Only One is the sovereign Lord who holds the Key to the entrance into heaven and eternal life. Only One! His Name is Jesus.

## **II. A Great Commission Church Is Faithful To The Gospel 3:8-9**

It is their vision of Christ as exalted and awesome that energizes this church for its Great Commission task. Henry Martyn said it well, “The spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to Him [Jesus] the more intensely missionary we become.” Unlike the church at Ephesus that “abandoned the love they had at first” (2:4) and were now going through the motions and doing good things as a matter of routine, the Philadelphians were doing good things through proper

motivation: love for Christ and the gospel. Jesus commends this church in several important areas that we would be wise to emulate and set as priorities for faithful ministry.

1) Be persistent in the work of the gospel. 3:8

Jesus says, “I know your works” (cf. 2:2, 19; 3:1, 15). The one “who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens” (v.7) says I know your faithful service on my behalf and the gospel. Notice, unlike the church at Ephesus, He does not reference there their heart; He does not correct them for leaving their “first love” (2:4). Apparently the Philadelphians were doing the right things and for the right reasons. Love for Jesus and not ritualism or legalism moved them into action. Osborne notes, “The church was right with the Lord and needed encouragement rather than denunciation” (188). To say it another way, they were to keep on doing what they were doing. Their hearts were in the right place. This labor for Christ was exactly what He wanted to see. The gospel was their message and the grace of God their motive.

2) Be True to the Name of Jesus 3:8

This church, like many churches, “had limited strength.” The *ESV* says, “little power.” They were not large or wealthy. They carried little, if any, influence in the city of Philadelphia. Osborne again says, “The

church lacked size and stature in the community and was looked down upon and persecuted. They had “little authority” or “influence” (189). But, they were hard working and they were faithful. They had kept Christ’s word and not denied His name. Faced with constant trials they stayed true to the word of the gospel. Faced with consistent opposition and ridicule, they remained faithful to the only name that saves (Acts 4:12; 1Tim. 2:5). Philadelphia had “only a “little strength,” but...proved successful in standing in that strength” (Keener, NIVAC, 149). Opposition did not deter them from obedience to the Great Commission and proclamation of the gospel.

3) Be encouraged by the prospects for evangelism and missions 3:8

Jesus makes a promise, a pledge, to this faithful, fledgling community of believers. It is the promise of “an open door that no one is able to close.” Some believe, this is an open door into the kingdom, into heaven. (Keener, Mounce, Osborne). Others believe it is an open door for success in evangelism and missions (Hamilton, Swindoll). Though an either/or option is not necessary, I believe the primary thrust is indeed a promise for the success of the gospel to go forth and spread. Swindoll puts it really well, “A similar Greek phrase occurs in 2 Corinthians 2:12 in reference to an opportunity for ministry (see also Acts 14:27; 1 Cor.

16:9; Col. 4:3). If this is the meaning, Christ encouraged the church in Philadelphia with opportunities for ministry in the midst of their trials. That church didn't realize the "open door" they had. As the geographic gateway to the East, Philadelphia sat at the crossroads of several languages, cultures, and people groups. From an evangelistic and missionary perspective, this dynamic, diminutive church had great opportunities for ministry." (73).

This church had an evangelist and missionary passion and Christ promised them even greater opportunities to be on mission with God! Mike Stachura gets it, "The mark of a great church is not its seating capacity, but is sending capacity" (*Expect Great Things*). Philadelphia was a great church and Christ honors them for their passion for Him, the gospel and the nations.

4) Be encouraged by the hope of vindication 3:9

Jesus is faithful to His people. As the God of all the earth, He promised to make things right. Our exalted Lord's words are bold but appropriate. Here He tells his church, "Take note!" (*ESV*, "Behold"). I will make those from the synagogue of Satan (unbelieving and hostile Jews, cf. 2:9), who claim to be Jews (spiritually) and are not, but are lying – note



this—I will 1) make them come and bow at your feet, and 2) they will know that I have loved you.” Our Lord has a general love for all but a particular love for His children. Jesus promised His church that He will humble their enemies. Note it is the Lord who brings about their humiliation. It is the Lord who declares His unique and special love for His church. The opposition God’s people face is often fierce and hostile but it will not last forever. There is coming a day of judgment, a day of justice, a day of vindication. Graciously, some will come and bow, as they bow to King Jesus as their Messiah (Zech. 12:10; Rom. 11:25-32). John MacArthur notes that, “This imagery derives from the Old Testament, which describes the yet future day when unbelieving Gentiles will bow down to the believing remnant of Israel” (cf. 45:14; 19:23; 60:14). [MacArthur 123]. Here we see unbelieving Jews bowing to Messiah Jesus and His people. And the apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 2:9-11, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Bowing to King Jesus in either glad salvation or bitter submission, they will bow with or to the people who follow Him as their

Lord, Master and Sovereign King. I wonder if, as he wrote, John thought of the conversion of a brother named Paul and his experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9)?

### **III. A Great Commission Church Lives By the Promise of God 3:10-13**

A Great Commission Church is a church that pleases her Lord. She has, as it is often said, the smile of God upon her. How, then, does Christ specifically smile upon a people who do good things for the right reason, keep his word, do not deny His name, and obediently walk through the open doors of evangelism and missions He has placed before them?

#### 1) Jesus will protect us according to His plans 3:10

- This is a much disputed verse as to its proper interpretation.

Regardless of the position we take, we should hold our view with grace and humility. Good, godly Bible scholars disagree on the exact meaning and this should give us pause in terms of a dogmatic position. Alan Johnson summarizes well the two hermeneutical challenges before us: “Related to the promise “I will also keep you from the hour of trial [*HCSB*, “testing”] that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth: are two problems: (1) the identification of the “hour of trial” and (2) the precise sense of His

phrase “keep you from the hour of trial.” Both involve the ongoing debate among evangelical eschatologists over the tribulation/rapture question” (EBC, 632).

- Though I have many dear friends who take different views from mine, here is how I understand what Jesus is saying to his churches in this verse:

You have “kept my word of endurance” [HCSB, marg. reading], a reference to the “teachings about Christ’s endurance (e.g. 2 Thess. 3:5; Heb. 12:2-3; as well as the Gospel stories of the life of Christ) that became a model for the steadfastness of the Philadelphian church in the midst of their own trials” (Osborne, 192). In response I promise you a remarkable protection from an “hour of testing” which will test “the whole world” and “those who live on the earth.” This last phrase is very significant and is repeated several times in Revelation. In every instance it refers to unbelievers exclusively as the objects of God’s judgment and wrath (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14). Therefore several truths should be noted:

- 1) “The hours of testing” is focused on unbelievers. I think this is primarily a reference to the “Tribulation” of chapters 6-19.
- 2) Christ promises deliverance or protection to his children not from trial or persecution in general, but from a specific and definite testing that is aimed at rebellious humanity. Now, how do we best understand their deliverance, their being kept from the hour of testing?

Dr. John MacArthur summarizes well the pretribulational view with which I am sympathetic. He writes,

“Because the believers in Philadelphia had successfully passed so many tests, Jesus promised to spare them from the ultimate test. The sweeping nature of the promise extends far beyond the Philadelphia congregation to encompass all faithful churches throughout history. This verse promises that the church will be delivered from the Tribulation, thus supporting a pretribulation Rapture. The Rapture is the subject of three passages in the New Testament (John 14:1-4; I Cor. 15:51-54; 1 Thess. 4:13-17), none of which speak of judgment, but rather of the church being taken up to heaven. There are three views of

the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Tribulation: that it comes at the end of the Tribulation (posttribulationism), in the middle of the Tribulation (midtribulationism), and the view that seems to be supported by this text, that the Rapture takes place before the tribulation (pretribulationism). Several aspects of this wonderful promise may be noted. First, the test is yet future. Second, the test is for a definite, limited time; Jesus described it as the **hour of testing**. Third, it is a test or trial that will expose people for what they really are. Fourth, the test is worldwide in scope, since it will **come upon the whole world**. Finally, and most significantly, its purpose is to test **those who dwell on the earth**— a phrase used as a technical term in the book of Revelation for unbelievers (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8). The **hour of testing** is Daniel's Seventieth Week (Dan. 9:25-27), the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7), the seven-year tribulation period. The Lord promised to keep His church out of the future time of testing that will come on unbelievers." (124).

However, I do think hermeneutical restraint is wise at this point.

Further, Mounce adds a perspective, from a posttribulational

perspective, we can all affirm. Ultimately, the most important issue is not physical protection from temporal wrath but spiritual protection from eternal wrath. Our Lord protects us to the end and forever. We are safe from the wicked assaults of Satan and his demons both now, in the future, and forever. Might this be the main focus of verse 10? (Mounce, 103). When all is said and done on this issue, I appreciate the tempered and reasoned perspective of Alan Johnson. He writes,

“v. 10 does not settle the question of the time of the rapture in relation to the tribulation. Rather, it remains ambiguous. One might be on the earth and yet be exempt from the “hour of trial” if (1) the “hour of trial” is an equivalent derived from the briefer term “trial,” and (2) this “trial” is directed only at the unbelievers in the world, while the believers are divinely immune not from trial or persecution in general but from a specific type of trial (God’s wrath) aimed at the rebellious on the earth. To this writer, the most natural way to understand the expression to be “kept from the hour” of something that is universal in the world is not to be preserved through it but to be kept from being present when it happens. In any event, we have here a marvelous promise of Christ’s protection (*tēreō*,

keep”) for those who have protected (*tēreō*), his word by their loving obedience.” (*EBC*, 633).

2) Jesus will come soon so stay strong 3:11

One of the glorious aspects of biblical eschatology is that we should live in the hope of the any time, imminent return of Jesus. Titus 2:13 calls it the “the blessed hope.” The phrase or idea that “I am coming quickly” (cf. 2:5, 17; 3:3; 22:7, 12, 20) is not a threat of judgment but a promise of deliverance fast on the heels of v. 10. Because His coming is imminent, any day, any time, they should hold on (pre. imp.; cf. 2:25; 3:3) to what they have, His Word, His name, His promise of deliverance; that no one may take (*ESV*, “seize”) their crown. Loss of salvation is nowhere in view for that could never be taken. But, Satan or evil men could rob them of future reward if they get their eyes off Jesus, or yield to temptation to deny His name or disobey His word. Stay with it Jesus says; there is a crown waiting at the finish line.

3) Jesus will honor us by giving us a home and His name 3:12-13

Our King concludes this letter with a two-fold promise to “the victor”, “the one who conquers” (*ESV*), the one “who overcomes” (*NIV*). First, our Lord “will make him a pillar in the sanctuary (*ESV*, “temple”) of My

God, and he will never go out again.” To a people continually threatened by earthquakes and the need to flee the city when they come, this word would speak powerfully to their hearts. Alan Johnson notes, “Often the only parts of a city left standing after a severe quake were the huge stone temple columns [pillars]” (*BSC*, 61).

Revelation 21:22 tells us in the New Jerusalem “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” To be a pillar of Christ puts the believer in a position of absolute and complete security. No disruption, disturbance or disaster will ever separate us from our Savior. As Romans 8:38-39 beautifully testify, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Second promise, “I will write on him the name of the city of my God – the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God – and a new name.” The church at Philadelphia had a good name, a wonderful reputation in heaven. Jesus promises them, “It will only get better.” Because they had not been ashamed to identify themselves with Jesus, our Lord is not ashamed to identify Himself with them. Three times Jesus promises them a new name of blessing and honor.



- 1) They receive the name of God, the God of Jesus, the one true God.
- 2) They receive the name of God's city, the New Jerusalem (cf. 21:2; Heb. 12:22). We discover at the end of this book that the New Jerusalem is both a place and a people. They will have a citizenship not on earth but in heaven, not earthly Philadelphia but Heavenly Jerusalem.
- 3) They receive the new name of Jesus (cf. 19:12; 22:4; 2:17). The names signify identification, character, ownership, and recognition. The names signify who my God is, where my home is and who my Lord is! I belong to the Father, heaven is my home and Jesus is my Lord. I bear the signature of my God!

To these marvelous promises the Lord Jesus again gives the challenge, “Anyone (that’s you and me!) who has an ear (are you listening, paying attention?) should listen (an imperative of command) to what the Spirit (the word from God the Son applied by the Spirit of God) says to the churches (this was a word for Philadelphia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and a word for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century).

## **Conclusion**

David Platt rightly says, “This, we remember, is the great reward of the gospel: God himself. When we risk our lives to run after Christ, we discover the safety that is found only in his sovereignty, the security that is found only in his love, and the satisfaction that is found only in his presence. This is the eternally great reward, and we would be foolish to settle for anything less.” (*Expect Great Things*, 241).