

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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PHILADELPHIA: THE PERSEVERING LITTLE CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR (Part 2)

It seems likely that the trial which had confronted the church at Philadelphia was in one way or another administered by the Jews of the city (v. 9). The opposition implied in *etērēsas kai ouk ērnēso* (have kept and not denied) came at Philadelphia, as at Smyrna, from the Jews; cf. 2:9 where the language is very similar. Added here is the expression “they are liars” (*pseudōnumoi*), and their claim to be of the truth is a sin against the One who is true. These will be brought before that small despised church and made to acknowledge the truth. “In form the words echo those of the prophets telling of the coming of the Gentiles to do homage to the people of Israel and acknowledge Israel’s God, when the final Kingdom of glory shall be set up in the land. *The sons of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet*, Isa. 60:14; *They shall fall down unto thee . . . saying God is in thee*, Isa. 45:14; cf. also Isa. 2:3; 49:23; Zech. 8:20ff; Ps. 72:9.”¹ E. R. Craven points out that these texts cited do in fact have special reference here; “and there can be little doubt that a conversion is implied in these prophecies. The conversion, however, is not that of the present missionary era of the Church – that which follows the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted through the *open door* alluded to in 1 Cor. 16:9, etc.; during which time the converts are at once admitted into the church. It is a conversion which is consequent upon the subjection of the nations to the established *basileia* [kingdom]. On Isaiah 49:23, J. A. Alexander thus comments: ‘The addition of these words, *face the earth*, determines the meaning of the preceding verb (LXX *proskunsousi*) as denoting actual prostration, which is also clear from the next clause, where the expression for the kissing of the feet or of the earth, in token of homage, but is rather like biting of the dust in Homer, a poetical description of complete and compulsory prostration, not merely that of subjects to their sovereign, but of vanquished enemies before their conquerors (comp. Micah 7:17; Ps. 72:9.)’ A conversion is implied in this passage under consideration, it is true; but that which was directly contemplated in this threat of the Lord is subjugation.”² The question as to when this will happen is one of vital importance in the study of eschatology and the Church’s role in the preaching of the Gospel.

- I. **THE CHURCH’S OPEN DOOR.** In verse 9 Christ declares, “See I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” This has been understood in the following ways:
 - A. **Opportunity for Effective Service.** Cf. 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3. The city was geographically located in such a way that practically all travel and trade in the area passed through Philadelphia. Thus the church was strategically situated so as to present the gospel in this environment.

- B. **Admission Into the Kingdom.** Cf. Revelation 3:20; 4:1; John 10:7, 9. Christ promises the church the right and privileges to His Kingdom. “The Jews in Philadelphia were aggressive in their hostility to the church and claimed that only they – Israel – had access to the door of God’s Kingdom. Christ assures His church that the Jews cannot prevail in their purpose to close that door of the Kingdom to the church.”³ I would favor this as being the correct interpretation.

II. **CHRIST’S ENCOURAGEMENT.** The church is encouraged in four ways:

- A. **Protection.** “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” (v. 10)

NOTE: There have been gallons of ink spilled over this verse. Exactly what is the debate? Chiefly it concerns the time of the rapture of the church. Does this verse teach a rapture of the church before the tribulation (as advocated by pre-tribulationists)? Or are we to understand the verse to teach a preservation of the church during the tribulation (post-tribulationism)? If the latter, then the rapture is not implied – if the former, the rapture is implied. Space does not allow for an extended discussion of this debate. I will present the positions of both in brief and draw my own conclusions.⁴ As in all questions of doctrine, we should search the Scriptures personally and prayerfully, realizing that our personal beliefs should be formed on a firsthand study of the Bible, and not received secondhand from other men simply because they are respected Bible teachers and theologians. We study the writings of good men always in light of Scripture – not vice versa!

- (1) **Pretribulationism** teaches that this verse clearly implies a pre-trib rapture of the church. Here are the arguments:
- (a) **The words “keep from,”** *tēreō ek* should have the force of “keep out of” or “preserve out of.” The preposition *ek* is the key word. Jeffrey L. Townsend paraphrases the verse with this emphasis, “*Because you have held fast the word which tells of My perseverance, I also will preserve you in a position outside the hour of testing.*” This paraphrase points up an important nuance of meaning that must be recognized. *Tēreō ek* in Revelation 3:10 does not describe the rapture as such. Instead it describes the position and status of the church during the hour of testing. It describes the results of the rapture, not the rapture itself. Revelation 3:10 does not state directly how the church will be preserved outside the hour of testing. However, the remainder of the verse indicates that the proper logical deduction is preservation by means of a pretribulationist rapture of the church.”⁵
 - (b) **The hours of testing** – A clear reference to the Great Tribulation (comp. Matthew 24:9-31; Revelation 7:14; 14:7). The stress, they say, is on the word “hour” – a definite time period – and the church is promised deliverance from this “hour,” or physical preservation outside the time period of the tribulation. Therefore, the church cannot be located on the earth during this time.
 - (c) **The Wrath of God** – since the Tribulation is going to be a time of the outpouring of God’s wrath, and since Christ bore the wrath of God for believers, the Church must be removed from the sphere of God’s wrath, i.e., the earth.⁶
 - (d) **The use of the word “church”** in the Book of Revelation. Pretribulationism points out that the word “church” is not mentioned after chapter 3, and not until 22:16, the period of the tribulation. The conclusion drawn from this is that the Church is not on the earth during the time of the Tribulation.

- (2) **Post-tribulationalism** contends that Revelation 3:10 does not teach a pre-trib rapture of the Church.
- (a) **The use of *tēreō ek*.** The only other occurrence of this phrase is in John 17:15, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from (*tēresēs autous ek*) the evil one.” The expression is set off directly from “take them out of the world” – it is a sharp contrast.⁷
 - (b) **The hour of testing.** The stress, they say, does not emphasize a period of time, but the trials during that time period. Robert H. Gundry writes, “The word *hour* appears many times in the gospels with reference to the passion of Jesus (Matt. 26:45); Mark 14:35, 41; John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 31:1; 17:1). The emphasis falls on the experience within the time, not the period as such.”⁸
 - (c) **The Wrath of God.** The text declares that “the hour of trial . . . is going to come upon the whole world to test⁹ those who live on the earth,” literally the earth-dwellers, *oikomenēs*. This expression **always** in the Book of Revelation refers to unbelievers (cf. 13:8; 17:8). That believers will **never suffer the wrath of God** is abundantly clear, but post-trib points out that, while believers will never suffer the wrath of God (by the way, there will be believers redeemed by the blood of Christ in the Tribulation; pre-tribs admit this, while they maintain the absence of the church from the earth), believers have always had to suffer the wrath of Satan and unbelievers, and will in the Tribulation be exposed to the persecutions of Satan and Anti-Christ, comp. texts like Luke 21:16-18; esp. Matthew 10:28; Acts 5:40-41; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 3:14. Believers (whether members of the church or tribulation saints, as dispensationalism maintains) will never suffer the wrath of God, cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9).
 - (d) **The use of the word “church.”** Post-trib points out that the word “church” is also not found in the texts of Revelation that deal with heaven, and a great deal is going on in heaven after chapter 3. The argument from silence cuts both ways.

NOTE: Pretribulationalism contends that a physical removal via the rapture is a necessary and logical conclusion from the promise stated in Revelation 3:10. Post-tribulationalism argues that it is **not** that God **can** (no Christian doubts this) preserve His own during the tribulation – that is evidenced over and over again in the OT (Noah, Israel in Egypt during the plagues). *How* He will is not the issue – *that* He promises to do so is what matters.

- B. **Exhortation.** “Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” This follows the statement that Christ is coming soon. What is given to some as a warning is here given as an encouragement. Like the church at Smyrna (note both churches received no complaint from Christ), the church at Philadelphia is exhorted to stand fast in the midst of opposition. Both churches have the promise of the “crowns,” comp. Colossians 2:18; 2 Timothy 4:8.
- C. **Promise.** To the overcomer, “I will make you a pillar in the temple of God,” a picture of strength and security (comp. 1 Kings 7:15-22). “This is a fitting reward for the Philadelphia overcomer. He has had little strength, so he is made a pillar of strength. His very reward will testify that he has been sustained from the beginning by the Word and the Name of the Lord.”¹⁰ The expression “Never again will he leave it,” points to the believer’s rest from struggle with suffering and sin, comp. 22:15.¹¹
- D. **Blessing.** The “name of my God,” a declaration that shows that they are God’s own possession, cf. 7:3. “My new name,” one that will be revealed at Christ’s Second Coming.

Note the possessive pronoun in each case. This repetition emphasizes the absolute certainty of the Lord's promises; He is the True One, comp. Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2. The "name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem," points to the rights of citizenship in the Kingdom of God (comp. Galatians 4:16; Hebrews 12:22; Philippians 3:20).

CONCLUSION: Size is not the determining factor in God's eyes. This little band of believers had little to commend themselves to the eyes of those around them, but they kept to the Word and maintained their sanctified stubbornness over the name of Christ. In other words, they had perseverance. God grant that we may run with endurance the race set before us, discarding anything and everything that would hinder us – with our eyes fixed upon "Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

ENDNOTES

¹I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker, 1979), pp. 481-82.

²E. R. Craven, in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 12 (rpt. Zondervan, 1956), p. 130.

³G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 59-60.

⁴There are also two other positions besides Pre-trib and Post-trib. *Mid-tribulation Rapture*: This is similar to the pre-tribulation view except that it locates the rapture after the first three and-a-half years at the point when the Anti-Christ assumes power. *Pre-wrath Rapture*: This position argues that the rapture will occur toward the end of the tribulation before the outpouring of God's wrath with the bowl judgments (Rev. 16) prior to the return of Christ. Neither of these has gained much of a following.

⁵Jeffrey L Townsend, "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 137 (July-Sept, 1980), p. 259.

⁶I will point out here the glaring inconsistency of Dispensationalists who hold to a "Universal Atonement" (as over against a "Definite Atonement"). To say that Christ died for the sins of every person without exception is to say that He bore the wrath of God for those sins. To turn around and argue that it is only on unbelievers that the wrath of God falls and that the church is delivered from wrath because Christ received that wrath in the place of believers is illogical theology.

⁷J. B. Smith in his commentary on Revelation objects and tries to argue that in John 17 the "immunity is from a person – the evil one; in Revelation, from a time period – the hour of trial which is yet to come. . . . Here the passages are dissimilar," p. 89. Smith has chosen to ignore the fact that John is the writer of both texts; Christ is the speaker in both texts; and the direct contrast in John 17 with "keep from" and "take out" cannot be dismissed as being "too slender to warrant such sweeping and far-reaching deductions." (p. 88)

⁸R. H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation: A Biblical Examination of Posttribulationism* (Zondervan, 1973), pp. 59-60.

⁹The word "test" is *peirazō*, to expose to a test in order to reveal the real character. Most often the word implies that the test will demonstrate failure. That is its usage here.

¹⁰Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Zondervan, 1971), p. 78.

¹¹Wm. Ramsay has pointed out that, because of the earthquakes and tremors, the inhabitants lived in continual fear; many would sleep outside of the city for years! "The habit of going out to the open country had probably not disappeared when the Seven Letters were written," p. 397. The parallel is obvious. Just as the people of Philadelphia had to live in a constant state of alert, so the church had to maintain a diligent vigilance, and they are promised that one day that will be over.

¹²Wm. Ramsay's note on the emphasis on "names" in this particular letter. "Philadelphia was the only one of the Seven Cities that had voluntarily substituted a new name for its original name," p. 398. The names never stuck, but in the case of the Christian, the name will stick for all eternity.