

Letters to the Seven Churches 6

Intro

We come this morning to continue a series that was begun here at Grace several years ago. Rather than launch straight into the Letter to the Church at Philadelphia I thought it would be helpful to give some background.

Background

In chapter 1 of Revelation we read of the encounter that John had with the risen and glorified Lord. John's reaction is to be totally overwhelmed by the glory and majesty of his Saviour, whom he had last seen as he ascended into heaven. (v17).

The Lord's response is in character – his first words – to stoop to raise him, and his second – to say “Fear not”. And the basis of all this is who he is in v18. What a Saviour we have!

But he gives John a task – to write to the seven churches. In this section the churches are referred to as the seven golden lampstands. Lampstands were articles in the temple that were designed to give light – and we think of the Great Commission given to the apostles.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

But the significant thing is that Christ is seen walking amongst the lampstands – which again makes us think of the Great Commission.

The angels are otherwise known as messengers(1:20) – and are usually taken to mean the pastors of the churches – those charged with the care and teaching of the church. These letters were addressed to the angels, but were clearly meant to be read and understood by the members of the churches. Shows the responsibility laid upon the preaching elders for the well-being of the church, and upon the church to take note of those whom God has given them.

Some have thought that the churches are symbolic of the different ages through which the church will pass between Christ's first and second coming – but there is nothing in the text to suggest this, and it is open to anyone making anything they want of it.

It seems much better to take these as letters to individual churches that existed at the time, which nevertheless were typical in the sense that what the letters contained was relevant for all churches at all times. This is borne out by what is said at the end of each individual letter. We shall be taking this interpretation during this series. In other words, there will be something from every letter for Binfield Free Church and for Grace.

Remember, churches are made up of people – as the spiritual condition of the churches is laid out in these letters – we can apply all the lessons personally. A church is like it is because the members are like they are.

Just a few more details of how the letters are set out. In every letter the Lord Jesus refers to himself in a different way. In every letter, once the Lord Jesus has introduced himself, he says “I know.....” There is nothing hid from his sight. This truth has two edges:

It is an encouragement – no matter what our situation, no matter how we may be misunderstood, no matter what difficulties – he knows – and he is our loving Saviour.

But it is a challenge too – for he sees **all** that we do, and he sees not only what we do, but what we think and what we feel. We may hide our deeds from other people, and we can certainly hide our thoughts from others. But we can hide nothing from the Lord Jesus Christ – what a challenge to holiness and honesty.

In all but one of the churches the Lord finds something to commend. In all but two of the churches the Lord finds something to condemn. Philadelphia was one of them not condemned, Smyrna the other. All the letters end with a command to all the churches to listen to the message given to the individual church, and at the end of every letter there is a promise to those who do respond. The phrase “He who has ears to hear” is one that the Lord Jesus used frequently during his earthly ministry.

Main Bit

As with all the letters, the opening self-description of the Lord Jesus Christ emphasises truths that fit the situation of the church he is addressing.

What was the situation of the church in Philadelphia?

First of all – its difficulties.

It was small.

‘I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power [strength], and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Revelation 3:8

Some commentators have seen a rebuke in these words, but I do not think that this can be the case. In the other letters, the Lord Jesus has always issued a command to put right what he sees as wrong – but there is no such command in this letter. He does not tell them that they need strength, or that their little strength needed correcting. It would seem therefore that it is simply a statement of their apparent situation.

In a world where size meant everything (and this has been the world’s view since the fall) a church that was small was powerless. It did not have all the resources of wealth and position. It did not even have a big membership to make it look to the outsider that it was effective.

What does the Lord Jesus do to encourage them?

He reminds them of his character:

He who is holy and true.

What an encouragement it is to be reminded of what the Lord Jesus is like – holy and true. The holiness of his character guarantees the truth of what he says in general, and to this church in particular.

We can trust his word because of who he is. The church knew that what followed was going to be utterly reliable. And the written word of God throughout is true and reliable, and sufficient – for all the same reasons. We can rely on it implicitly.

He reminds them of his authority and power:

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: Revelation 3:7

This refers back to Isaiah:

“Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, When he shuts no one will open. “And I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, And he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house. Isaiah 22:22-23

Shebna – dishonest steward – deposed and authority given to Eliakim. The Lord Jesus uses these words to indicate his authority. Refer back to Great Commission.

Apply: The church does not work by man’s permission, but by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has said that he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. What an encouragement to the struggling fellowship in Philadelphia.

What an encouragement to us, in these days of small things. These days the church feels weak, and one of the mistakes it makes is to forget the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ – who has commanded that we make the gospel known by simple preaching. Today the church adopts all sorts of worldly methods to try to achieve its goal – marketing methods, using entertainment to attract people in, toning down the gospel to make it less offensive and so on. It has forgotten the Lord – and has failed to pray to him, and seek to follow his word.

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: Revelation 3:7

Authority without power is no real authority. The Lord encourages them by reminding them of who it actually is who converts sinners. It is not man, with all his clever methods, or his ways of getting people to make decisions. It is the Lord Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, who does the work of conversion. When we feel weak, and are disappointed by the fewness of conversion, let us plead with the Lord to work, and not turn to techniques.

He gives them a promise

‘I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Revelation 3:8

Despite their weakness – gospel success was assured. Those whom he would have in his kingdom would be brought in. Many people say that the doctrine of election is a discouragement to evangelism. I would say it is the greatest encouragement of all – to know that God has his own whom he will bring into the kingdom encourages me to preach the gospel – I know that success is not down to my weak efforts but his mighty power.

But this promise is related to their faithfulness – he will by no means reward churches that are slack, or careless about his word – who do not evangelise – who back down in the face of difficulties, and who pray for God to work, but who do not work themselves.

Not only were they weak, but they faced opposition.

‘Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Revelation 3:9

They obviously were being seriously opposed by the Jewish people who lived in Philadelphia – but what is said of them is true of all who oppose the gospel. It might seem harsh to refer to them as the synagogue of Satan. But Satan is a deceiver and a liar. All who oppose the gospel are like this, for they deceive people into thinking that there is another way of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, and they lie in that they so often misrepresent both the gospel and those who believe it. Whenever I hear anything about Christianity on the radio back home, all the various brands will get a decent hearing from the presenters apart from evangelicals.

But God says that he will overcome the opposition for them, because of their faithfulness – ***Behold, I will cause***

He is talking here about conversions among the opponents of the gospel. What an encouragement to know that even the most hardened opponent can be saved. Think of the Apostle Paul. And even those who are not converted will one day have to acknowledge that they were wrong. In particular they will realise that it was the Christians whom God really loved.

It was a church that was going to be kept.

‘Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. Revelation 3:10

Here was a church that had kept going, in the face of all these difficulties – they had kept the word of God, not denied the name of Christ, and had persevered in this. They had kept on keeping on..

Some think that this testing was persecution, but I cannot see that, since it was to come upon the whole world. It may well have been some natural disaster that was sent in the providence of God. Certainly it was going to happen soon, as v11 indicates:

‘I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. Revelation 3:11

I am coming quickly – refers not to the second advent but rather to the coming judgment or trial that was on its way.

Note the way God works – he will keep us, but he works through our holding fast. There is nothing in the Scriptures that teaches that God keeps all those who profess his name. He keeps those who show by their lives that they are converted.

This testing will sort out those who are truly the Lord’s:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. James 1:12

They are encouraged to hold fast, and not give up, even when things get really grim. There is a reminder here of the letter to the Hebrews about the need to persevere:

For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; Hebrews 3:14

This is not to induce doubt and fear, but to encourage to keep going. Those who are truly Christ's will keep going.

But these verses can be seen to be a picture of the final judgment and return of Christ. That is surely the hour of testing that will come on the whole world.

It is a church that was going to be rewarded

'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon 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 My new name. Revelation 3:12

This certainly looks forward to the final state in Glory – although all these things we receive in part in this life:

Part of the temple of God – living stones;

Eternal security – we will never go out;

We bear the name of God, and of his church (the new Jerusalem) and of the Saviour.

All these things are ours now, and will be ours in fullness when we are in glory.

What a reward of grace.

Conclusion

He who has an ear.....

How are we in the light of these things? Are we those who will persevere, who will keep going, who will not deny the faith? Are we wavering under discouragements, sin and failure? Are we disillusioned, or weak in faith? Whatever our case, now is the time to come to the Lord for grace and help not only to put things right, but to make sure that we do persevere and receive the reward.

The Lord Jesus told his disciples:

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33