

THE PHILADELPHIANS (PART 2)

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Revelation chapters two and three contain Jesus Christ's letters to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. In Revelation 3:7-13, the letter to the church at Philadelphia is very instructive for every church of Christ in how to be faithful to the Lord, and to overcome temptation even through much tribulation. The letter to the church at Philadelphia, along with the other six letters, was written at the close of the First Century A.D. This was a time in which the Roman Emperor Domitian had instituted the first systematic empire-wide persecution against the Christian religion. Tens of thousands of Christians perished during this time. Yet the Philadelphians had kept Christ's word and not denied his name (Rev 3:8). They serve as a wonderful example of spiritual growth.

Philadelphia and Smyrna

The Roman persecution, along with further tribulation at the hand of local Jews, is addressed in the letters to the churches at Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11) and Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13). These two churches also happen to be the only two who received no rebukes or warnings of "repent or else" by the Lord. We have the opportunity to learn some important lessons about spiritual growth in comparing and contrasting what Christ said to these two excellent churches. First, there are several similarities to be noted between the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. In addition to their troubles at the hands of the Romans, both congregations were also persecuted by the Jews (Rev 2:9; 3:9). Both were promised the crown of eternal life (Rev 2:10; 3:11). And these were the only ones of the seven churches in Asia not to be rebuked for anything. But there is a slight difference between the level of spiritual growth achieved in those two congregations at the time they received their letters. The purpose of suffering is to cause a person to grow to be spiritually "perfect," meaning *complete* (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9; Heb 2:10; 5:8-9; Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 1:3-7). God's purpose for Christians is for them to become

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complete *like Christ* (Matt 5:48; 10:25; Luke 6:40; Rom 8:28-29; 2 Cor 13:11; Eph 4:11-13; Php 2:5-8; Col 1:27-28; 3:10; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2; 5:10; 1 John 2:5-6; 4:17). The prize of eternal life is reserved for those who finish the race to attain this spiritual completeness (Php 3:10-12). Before Paul's death, he had finished this race (he was now complete like Christ) and the crown of righteousness was laid up for him (2 Tim 4:7-8). The difference between Smyrna and Philadelphia is that those in Smyrna were going to be facing further severe tribulation (Rev 2:10), but those in Philadelphia were going to be spared from it (Rev 3:10). This would indicate that the Smyrnan Christians were not yet complete and needed some more suffering before finishing their race. The Philadelphians were like Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7-8. They had already finished the race and the crown was laid up for them. The Smyrnans were told to be faithful so they could get the crown (Rev 2:10). The Philadelphians were told to hold fast so they would not lose the crown (Rev 3:11). This is a subtle but important point.

To him that overcomes

In Revelation 3:12, the Lord gives another great and precious promise. As with all the other promises to the churches of Asia, this one is only to "*him that overcomes.*" The promise is to be made a pillar in the temple of God. It is almost beyond comprehension that we can become pillars in heaven, yet this is the Lord's promise. And Jesus also tells us that we will go no more out. Once we enter heaven, that will be our dwelling place forever and ever. We will never leave. The Lord will also write upon us the name of God, and the name of the city of God, which is new Jerusalem, and he will write upon us a new name. What wonderful promises! But we *must* overcome to inherit these eternal blessings. "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches" (Rev 3:13).