

Reigniting the Flame: Faithfulness Revelation 3:7-13

I. Introduction

I grew up in west Philadelphia, and I'm still an Eagles, Flyers, Sixers, and Phillies fan. The name "Philadelphia" is Greek and means "City of Brotherly Love."

This is ironic, because we actually had to move out of west Philly to the suburbs when I was in fifth grade because the neighborhood we were in became too dangerous! Philadelphia sports fans once famously booed Santa Claus at halftime of an Eagle's game!

Nonetheless, it was given its name by William Penn, of *Pennsylvania* fame. William Penn was a Quaker, and a fascinating figure in American History. He had a vision for America of being a place of true religious, political, and intellectual tolerance.

So he founded a city where this could be demonstrated, and so appropriately named the city Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Throughout the rest of the colonies, there was bitter conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and even among different Protestant denominations. But during the colonial period, Philadelphia did indeed embody this vision of religious pluralism and tolerance.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Philadelphia was home to more religious denominations than any other American city, featuring vibrant Quaker, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Moravian congregations. <http://www.answers.com/topic/philadelphia-pennsylvania>

Compare this to the ancient city of Philadelphia in the province of Asia we are going to explore today, which was more like our modern day America. It allowed religious tolerance for every pagan religion, but persecuted Christians!

In the face of such rampant and immoral paganism, and against such persecution, the Christians in ancient Philadelphia remained faithful! Indeed, they are one of only two congregations among the seven ancient congregations we are exploring in our current sermon series that received no rebuke, but only praise, from Christ Jesus.

Let us pray...

II. Scripture

Revelation 3:7-13

7 *"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

10 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.

11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 To those who overcome I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

13 To those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

III. The Faithfulness of Philadelphia

Christ used the language and culture of each city to communicate and illustrate the gospel. So we also should not hesitate to use the language, communication tools, and art forms of whatever culture we are in to communicate God's truth and gospel effectively.

Let's see how Christ used the particular situation in Philadelphia to speak God's timeless truth and promises...

The city was located on a major geological fault line, and so was subject to both volcanoes and earthquakes. *"Of this aspect of the city's life Strabo wrote, 'The walls never cease being cracked, and different parts of the city are constantly suffering damage. That is why the actual town has few inhabitants, but the majority live as farmers in the countryside, as they have fertile land'.*¹

¹Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Re 3:7). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

The volcanic activity made the surrounding area very fertile farm land. So the majority of the people actually lived outside the city to both escape the constant danger of earthquakes, and to make a living from farming and vineyards.

It is to this situation that Christ declares to the Christians in Philadelphia, *“12 To those who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it.”* In contrast to the insecurity of life in Philadelphia, the faithful Christians were promised a home in God’s eternal city that could never be shaken, and where they would never have to live outside its walls.

In AD 17, an earthquake destroyed the city. It was rebuilt by the Roman Caesar Tiberius, who renamed the city *Neocaesarea* (the city of the new Caesar). The new name remained in vogue for some twenty-five to thirty years. Later, to honor the next Emperor Vespasian, the city called itself “Flavia,” the Emperor’s middle name.

And so to a city that kept getting renamed according to its Emperor, Christ promised the faithful Believers there that someday Christ would... *“write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”*

The reward of faithfulness is that someday they would bear the name of the true Emperor, our Triune God, and of God’s eternal city, the New Jerusalem.

To a church and city that lived with the perpetual threat of destruction, Christ gave this promise... *“10 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.”*

The Christians who received this letter must have been protected through some immediate trial that we don’t know about. Then this promise applies to all Christians through the ages who face trials. Then its ultimate fulfillment will be when Christ protects His Church through the end time tribulation.

It’s very important to notice Christ’s promise is to “keep us from” the tribulation. The word “keep” here in the original Greek is to “watch over,” “to guard,” or to “keep one protected in the state that they are.” It does not mean “to escape,” or to “deliver from,” but rather to “protect through.”

We’re proclaiming God’s faithfulness in this sermon. God far more often than not demonstrates His faithfulness to and through His people by strengthening them in the face of trial, not keeping them from trial, and then using that trial for redemptive purposes to make us more like Christ. God’s track record throughout the Bible and throughout history is not to deliver His people from trial, but to allow trials for higher purposes.

There is no reason to believe it will be any different come the end time “Great Tribulation.” Rather than “rapture” us out of the Great Tribulation, it is far more likely that God will protect us as we persevere through the tribulation, and use us as witnesses of His faithfulness and gospel throughout these dark days.

Back to the Church in Philadelphia... To Christians who were being commended for their faithfulness in evangelism, Christ declared that He alone was the one “*who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*”

The reference here is to Isaiah 22:22 where Christ is declared to have undisputed authority over entrance into, or exclusion from, the kingdom of God. Christ alone has the authority to decide who becomes saved and when. Salvation is not the result of human decision, but divine choice. And Christ was reassuring the faithful in Philadelphia that God had indeed chosen them both to be saved, and to declare the gospel of salvation.

Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on the main route of from Rome to the East, and thus was called “the gateway to the East.” It was also called “little Athens” because of the many pagan and Imperial Cult temples in the city.

This strategic location created tremendous opportunity for evangelism. And the church in this city was taking full advantage of those opportunities. Indeed, Christ commended the Church in Philadelphia for its evangelistic endeavors, and for not compromising in proclaiming the full message of God’s Word.

Only two Churches in these seven letters we are exploring from Revelation received no harsh rebuke from Christ, Smyrna because it was faithful in the face of persecution, and Philadelphia because it was faithful in proclaiming God’s Word and evangelism.

The lesson to us? What delights our God the most is faithfulness in the face of trial, and faithfulness in declaring God’s truth and gospel!

IV. The Faithfulness of Third Presbyterian Church/GracePoint

And that is why our Lord and our God is so delighted with all of you! This congregation has been faithful in declaring God’s truth and gospel since 1890, 120 years, officially, and another 15 years prior to 1890 as a Bible study group. This congregation in some form has faithfully declared Gods’ truth and gospel for 135 years! This congregation has faithfully labored under the leadership of 24 different pastors, and often without a pastor!

Like the Church in Philadelphia, who remained faithful to God, God’s Word, and God’s mission even in the face of sever trial, Third Presbyterian Church, now GracePoint, had remained faithful to God through two World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the Great Depression.

This congregation has remained faithful through many internal trials as well...

...such as in the early years when they could barely afford to pay a pastor, and it was a group of faithful women who raised enough monies

...in 1963 when they stepped out in faith to purchase the land we are now on and build a new facility

...in 1968 when they raised enough funds to build this sanctuary

...in the 70's they launched a bus ministry by raising 15 thousand dollars in one week to buy a bus, and for the next couple of decades bussed in hundreds of kids to hear God's Word and gospel, and experience God's love

...in 1981, they again stepped out in faith to raise enough funds to add on the church office and classrooms

...then again in 1990 another capital campaign to add on the conference room and downstairs classrooms

...throughout all these building funds, members sacrificed much personal pleasures and even basic needs to support God's work at Third Presbyterian/ GracePoint!

...as this congregation found itself often as the lone voice of orthodox, evangelical Christianity in the midst of an increasingly liberal denomination and presbytery, they remained bold and faithful to God's truth and gospel!

...in a decadent American culture that each years embraces a lower standard of acceptable behavior and ungodly beliefs, this congregation has been a voice crying out in the wilderness God's uncompromising truth and righteous commands!

...those of us here today, who were not part of these years, now are benefiting from all the sacrifice and faithfulness of these faithful saints,

...we are standing on their shoulders, we are reaping the fruits in joy of their decades of faithful labor, and we now say, "THANKS!"

How many of you have been members or regular attendees to this congregation for 15 years or more? ...20 years or more? ...30 years or more? ...more then 30 years?

Let us give thanks to our Lord for His faithfulness through these faithful saints!

It is because of these many decades of faithfulness, and because this faithfulness continues to this day, that I can declare this...

When I began this sermon series, I was not sure which of these seven congregational profiles would best fit GracePoint. Remember, each of these seven churches in Revelation represent the state of being that every local congregation can find itself in at different seasons of its existence.

As I was engaged in the extensive prayer and preparation work for this sermon this week, I felt strongly in my spirit man our Lord declare, “GracePoint is and has been to God, a ‘Philadelphia’ church!”

Let’s us give thanks to our faithful God for His grace that enabled this congregation to remain so faithful for 135 years!

And if that news isn’t awesome enough...God still has amazing plans for this local lampstand for decades to come!

V. GracePoint’s Call to Faithfulness not Success

...In 2006, this congregation transferred into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church which allowed it to reclaim and refocus on its gospel mission of rescuing the captive, restoring the wounded, and redeploying the equipped!

...in the same year, by God’s grace alone, I became your pastor!

...In 2008, Third Presbyterian Church became GracePoint as it fully claimed its new identity while remaining true to its 135 year old heritage

...also in that year, we called Pastor Dana through an act of bold faith driven by God’s vision for a fruitful and faithful future!

...in December 2009, we launched our five new venues

And were do we go from here...

...on August 22, 2010, we will host our “Grand Reopening” and reintroduce ourselves to the entire Tri-State area!

...God has given us a vision to reach the wounded, wandering, and unwanted, the lost, least, and last, the un- and de- churchd

...we have quarterly “Connections” events for doing so,

...our five venues give us many more bridges into the life of GracePoint to which you all can aggressively invite people to,

...and we will soon host another Alpha series starting right after Resurrection Sunday.

Please hear and abide by this key truth: In all our ministry, we must remember, our call is to be faithful in God's eyes, not success in the world's eyes! God calls us to be faithful to the vision and mission He has given us, and leave the fruit up to Him!

We don't know what the future holds for GracePoint as to numerical growth, but here's what we do know as to remaining faithful to God's vision...

VI. God's Open Door for GracePoint

Christ promised the faithful Christ-followers in Philadelphia... *"8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."*

Christ as the one who "holds the keys of David," who alone has the power and authority to decide who is let into the eternal kingdom of God, who alone can open the doors for evangelism wherever He decides to do so, who alone can move upon the hearts of depraved human beings and grant them the gift of faith and grace to believe the gospel.

This Sovereign Lord promises to the faithful believers in Philadelphia, "because you have been faithfully proclaiming my Word and declaring my gospel, I am going to open up even greater doors of opportunity to do so!"

Faithful Saints of GracePoint, I don't know all the details of who and how, but I know in my spirit man that our faithful Christ is extending to us this same invitation and promise! The harvest of the tri-state area is white for the reaping! There are thousands of people in this area who are either unsaved, or who are disconnected from active worship and fellowship, and we remain faithful to God's vision and mission, Christ will open up doors that only He can open!

Christ makes another amazing promise to the faithful Christians in Philadelphia, that I am also convinced God is making us as well... *"9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you."*

Christ here is referring to the Jews in the city of Philadelphia who were rejecting Christ as the Messiah. The Jewish people were considered God's people until Christ the Messiah came. Since the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ, the Jewish nation are no longer God's chosen race.

The Church, capital "C," all those who are saved by grace through faith alone in Christ are now God's chosen people. Any Jew who continues to reject Christ is cut off from part of being God's people. Christ goes as far as to call the Jews who reject Christ, the "synagogue of Satan!"

But Christ is making the promise here to the congregation in Philadelphia, that many of these Jews were going to come to faith in Christ through their evangelistic efforts!

Please hear this well: The application to us here, is that Christ promises that as we remain faithful in our evangelistic efforts, Christ will draw to Himself many who we now think are most opposed to Christ and the gospel! Praise our Faithful Lord!

VII. God's Call to be Faithful

Now I know, many of you who have been laboring faithfully in the ministries of GracePoint for decades are thinking...”yes, this is all very exciting, but I’m tired, we need a new generation of faithful laborers!” To which Christ affirms in verse 8, *“I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”* Christ honors and commends you for your years of faithfulness.

And to those of us who are new or relatively new to GracePoint, here’s our challenge...will we take the baton of leadership being offered to us by these faithful brothers and sisters in Christ and carry on their legacy of faithfulness for the decades to come? Will you work as hard, be as faithful, commit with the same depth of loyalty!

Many harshly critique the younger generations of having no depth of commitment, and no strong work ethic. The generations under 40 are often characterized as embracing a victim mentality, feeling entitled, blaming everything and everyone instead taking personal responsibility.

Will those of you under 40 accept this label? Or will you rise up and declare we are the generation who will fight! Will you declare...We are the generation who will also be faithful, and who will also leave a legacy of faithfulness, just as we are reaping the fruits of the faithfulness of previous generations! Such faithfulness is needed not just to carry on the work of GracePoint, but it is needed if we are to carry on as a free, democratic, prosperous, and godly country!

So again, here is my challenge to all of us who have been a part of GracePoint for less than 10 years.....will we pray and pay the price it takes to fulfill God’s vision and mission for GracePoint? .Will you join a ministry team, if you’re not already on one? ...Will you commit to being faithful in worship attendance, instead of considering it optional? ...Will you commit to weekly giving of a full tithe? ...Will you commit to putting in the 5-10 hours a week that all those who are currently carrying the load of our ministries are putting in, and have been putting in for decades?

If not, this congregation will eventually die, along with God’s vision, because the current laborers are already running on a low tank! Who here will make a commitment to take up the baton of leadership, and carry on the 135 year legacy of faithfulness?

Earlier we had all those stand who were members and faithful regulars for more than 10 years. I am going to make this challenge right now...If you have been at GracePoint less than 10 years, and if you are committed to faithfully laboring in the ministries of GracePoint for as long as our Lord keeps you here ...I invite you to stand right now to make that declaration...!

All praise be to our faithful God!