

Handout 6: Revelation, Chapter 3:1-13 (Talk 6)
David Crabtree, Reformation Fellowship, August 1, 2021

I. Introduction

- A. We have gone through four of the letters to the seven churches.
 - 1. Ephesus
 - a) Biggest city, city where both the apostles Paul and John lived and taught for an extended period of time
 - b) Praised for identifying those who are false apostles
 - c) Criticized for having lost the love for one another that they had at first
 - 2. Smyrna
 - a) City known for its beauty and suffering
 - b) Poor and slandered by the Jews
 - c) They will soon experience suffering for ten days
 - 3. Pergamum
 - a) Roman capital of the province of Asia
 - b) A center for the worship of pagan gods
 - c) They have been faithful even to the point of martyrdom.
 - d) But there are those among them who compromise their faith.
 - 4. Thyatira
 - a) Military outpost
 - b) They have been faithful and have grown in their works.
 - c) But there is a woman in their midst who seduces their members to compromise their faith.

II. Sardis

- A. The most storied of the seven cities
 - 1. Famous for wealth
 - 2. Famous for history
- B. Geographical setting
 - 1. Inland
 - a) Located on a large plain
 - b) Pactolus River flows through the plain
 - 2. City was thought to be impregnable.
 - a) City was on the top of a small plateau.
 - b) 1500 feet above the plain
 - c) But it was taken several times due to overconfidence.
 - 3. A portion of the city had always been at the base of the hill.
- C. Historical setting
 - 1. Sardis was the capital of Lydia.

- a) Sardis was referred to in Obadiah 20.
 - b) Gyges was the fabled king at one time.
 - (1) Historical prototype of Gog in Ezekiel (?)
 - (2) Fabulously wealthy
 - (a) A lot of gold in the area
 - (3) Surprised and slain by the Cimmerians in mid 600s BC
2. Much of the lore about Gyges was carried over to Croesus.
 - a) Croesus tried to stop the advance of the Persians under Cyrus.
 - b) He fought Cyrus to a draw, then withdrew to Sardis.
 - (1) He thought Sardis was impregnable.
 - (a) So he did not post guards all around the city.
 - (2) Persians found an unguarded area and climbed up into the city.
 3. The impact of this event on the ancient world was enormous.
 - a) The Persians had done what couldn't be done.
 - b) It opened the way for the Persians to advance all the way to the Aegean.
 4. Became a Hellenistic city
 5. Then lost political significance under Rome
 6. Hit hard by earthquake in 17 AD
- D. Social setting
1. Population at end of first century—100,000 to 200,000
 2. Buildings
 - a) Large gymnasium
 - b) Large theater
 - c) Racetrack
 - d) Large aqueduct
 3. Economy
 - a) Trade
 - b) Natural resources
 - (1) A center for the production of wool and woolen products
 - (a) Especially white wool, which could be dyed any color
 - (b) Dyes
 - (2) Gold, silver
 - (3) Wood
 - (4) Agricultural products
 4. Jews had a presence there from a very early date
 - a) Before Babylonian exile
 - b) Attracted by trade opportunities
 - c) May have had citizenship early
 - (1) This was often a mixed blessing.
 - (a) More rights
 - (b) More antagonism from the native population

- d) There was a large synagogue.
 - (1) Decorations included some Lydian religious symbols.
- e) Jews appear to have been accepted and appear to have assimilated to a certain extent.
 - (1) Jews appear to have been affluent.

“The Jewish community in Sardis was one of the largest and most important in Asia Minor.”
(Smallwood as cited in Beale, p. 274)

- 5. Local religion
 - a) Apparently a hold-over from Hittite religion
 - b) A goddess often known as Artemis
 - (1) Temple in Sardis competed with the temple in Ephesus.
 - (2) Associated with serpents
 - c) Preoccupied with death and immortality
 - (1) Serpent losing its skin was seen as resurrection

III. Revelation 3:1-3

To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

- A. To the angel of the church in Sardis
- B. From
 - 1. The one who holds the seven spirits and the seven stars
 - a) Jesus upholds the body of believers.
 - b) Their destiny is in his hands.
 - (1) Similar to the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians
 - (2) This seems to be highlighted when there is some question as to whether this church is a legitimate part of the body of believers
- C. Critique
 - 1. Jesus knows the deeds of the Christians in Sardis.
 - a) This critique is based on knowledge of the situation.
 - 2. Their reputation is good.
 - a) But that reputation does not match the reality.
 - (1) It has given them a false sense of security.
 - 3. Wake up!

- a) They have allowed themselves to become complaisant.
 - b) There is still a spark left.
 - c) But even it will go out if something is not done soon.
4. Their deeds are not complete.
- a) What is are incomplete deeds?
 - (1) John uses this word 6 times in other writings in the phrase “may your/our joy be complete.”
 - (a) “Complete” appears to mean “as great as possible.”
 - (b) So deeds that are not complete are deeds that lack, deeds that aren’t all that they should be.
 - (2) Later in the letter there are hints that they are reluctant to be straight forward about their belief in Jesus.
 - (a) It could be that their works are lacking, in that they conduct themselves in such a way that their belief in Jesus is kept secret.
 - (b) Are they afraid to be open about being believers in Jesus?

Possibly these professing Christians are in danger of losing their salvation, to which they are barely hanging on. However, it is preferable to see them as analogous to the people “who say they are Jews, and are not, but lie” (3:9; cf. 2:9). These false Jews prove they are not genuine, faithful Jews by their ungodly lifestyle (e.g., by persecuting the church). Likewise the *so-called* Christians of Sardis are living in such a way as to call into question whether or not they possess true, living faith in Christ. Does the *name* Christian genuinely apply to them? (Hemer, p. 273)

(c) More later

- 5. They are to remember what it was that they first responded to.
 - a) That is what they need to preserve, what they need to return to.
- 6. So be alert
 - a) The history of Sardis is one of complacency.
 - (1) Thinking they are safe and secure when, in fact, they are not
 - b) Jesus (death) will come at a time they do not know.
 - (1) So they need to act now, rather than wait.

IV. Revelation 3:4

4 *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.*

A. Commendation for the few

- 1. They have remained pure.
 - a) In a very impure place.
 - b) This may be an allusion to sexual purity.
 - (1) There are some indications that Sardis was sexually licentious.

2. They will walk with the Messiah.
 - a) Dressed in white (truly pure?)
 - b) Possibly an allusion to marching in a triumph with Jesus in the lead
 - c) They are worthy.

V. Revelation 3:5-6

5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

A. Closing

1. Those who overcome will be rewarded.
 - a) They will be dressed in white.
 - b) They will have their names written in the book of life.
 - c) Jesus will confess their names before the Father.
 - (1) This suggests that the Christians in Sardis were reluctant to be outspoken about their belief.
 - (2) Are these Jewish believers who hide their belief in Jesus to keep their membership in the synagogue?

The 'victor' cannot be rigidly distinguished from the 'few' of the previous verse. The 'book of life' recalls the citizen-registers common to the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, an image apt in an ancient center of the royal archives. It is suggested that here a majority in the church had gained acceptance in the synagogue at the cost of implicit denial of the 'name' of Christ. The faithful few had perhaps faced deletion from the synagogue-register, a matter of serious import under Domitian, but were assured that their names should never be deleted from the heavenly book. On this view they were resisting a temptation like that which the 'synagogue of Satan' had imposed on the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. The peculiar reiteration of ὄνομα in the letter will suit the emphasis on the book or register. (Hemer, p. 151-2)

2. Let the one who is willing to hear this critique take it to heart.

VI. Observations about church in Sardis

- A. A proud and storied past
- B. The saints in Sardis allowed their reputation within Christian circles to make them overconfident in their faith.
- C. But they tended to keep their faith secret to avoid persecution.
- D. However, some were uncompromised.

VII. Philadelphia

- A. Geographical setting
 1. Located in the Cogamis river valley

- a) Plateau to the east is 2000 feet higher
 - b) Best routes to the east pass through this river valley.
 - (1) It was called “gateway to the east.”
- B. Historical setting
- 1. Fewer references to Philadelphia in ancient literature than Thyatira
 - 2. Founded in 189 BC by Eumenes II king of Lydia
 - a) Named for his brother Attalus II who was very loyal to his older brother
 - (1) Attalus was told (falsely) that his brother had been assassinated.
 - (a) Attalus took power.
 - (b) But relinquished power when his brother returned
 - (2) Romans pressured Attalus to stage a coup (with their support).
 - (a) Attalus refused.
 - (b) He was honored by this brother, Eumenes.
 - 3. It was created to be a “missionary city.”
 - a) Purpose was to spread Hellenistic culture to the east
 - b) By 19 AD, Greek was the only language spoken in the area.
 - 4. Had military significance
 - a) Guarded the routes to the east
- C. Social setting
- 1. Devastated by earthquake in 17 AD
 - a) Sardis and Philadelphia were the hardest hit.
 - b) Tremors and aftershocks rocked the area for many years after.
 - (1) A large aftershock struck in 60 AD.
 - (a) This one hit Laodicea the hardest.
 - (2) Philadelphia was slow to recover.
 - (3) Strabo, writing a few years after the quake:

Beyond the Lydians are the Mysians and the city of Philadelphia, full of earthquakes, for 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. But one is surprised even at the few, that they are so fond of the place when they have such insecure dwellings. And one would be even more amazed at those who founded it. (As quoted in Hemer, p. 156)

- (4) The emperor gave Philadelphia financial aid to rebuild.
 - (a) Philadelphia was called “Neocaesaria” in gratitude.
 - (b) Philadelphia was granted the epithet “Flavia.”
 - c) City was still not completely rebuilt at the end of the century.
2. Economically crushed by imperial decree
- a) The soil around Philadelphia was ideally suited for vineyards.
 - (1) All the farmland was put into wine production.

- b) Italian wine producers did not like competition from the eastern side of the empire.
 - (1) So they pressured emperor to reduce foreign wine production.
- c) In 92 AD, Domitian issued an edict that over half of the vineyards in the provinces be destroyed and no new ones planted.

How did the crisis affect Philadelphia? Perhaps no city in Asia was so heavily dependent on viticulture. Dionysus was the principal deity and vines are extensively grown in the neighborhood even today. Corn was also produced, but this was probably not enough even for local needs in times of bad harvest, when even the richest areas lived under threat of famine. The economy of the city was probably precarious in any case after its sufferings. If the local harvest failed, the payment of famine-prices and transport costs to bring corn from outside may have been beyond the slender resources of the place. Its one regular source for the necessary revenue was its wine production. To such a city the edict of Domitian would have been the last straw. Already the widespread overproduction of wine may have reduced the price disastrously for the Philadelphian economy. The compulsory cutting down of vineyards removed the last resource. Volcanic soil, ideal for vines was not in any case necessarily suitable for corn. (Hemer, p. 158-9)

- d) The emperor fell out of favor with many in the wake of this decree.

The character of Christ stands in implied contrast with that of the imperial god. He will never betray a church which has continued to confess his name when weak and rejected (cf. 3:8). His name will permanently characterize them and be a pledge of their relationship with God (3:12) (Hemer, p. 160)

- 3. Very few Jewish residents
 - a) But indications of considerable Jewish influence on the economy
 - (1) Possibly by Jews living in Sardis

D. Letter is positive with no negative.

Attention has often been called to the similarities between the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Kiddle, for example, points out that both are designed to strengthen the faithful and, in fact, point by point cover the same ground. They are the two churches that receive unqualified praise from the Lord. (Mounce , p. 100)

VIII. Revelation 3:7-13

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.

- A. To the angel in Philadelphia
- B. From
 - 1. First time John does not use phrases from chapter 1 to describe the Messiah
 - 2. The holy one, the true one
 - a) The holy one is a title for God
 - (1) But here it is being used to describe the Messiah.
 - b) The true one
 - (1) He is the real Messiah.
 - (a) Contrary to the Jews' claim that Jesus was not the Messiah
 - c) These are most similar to 1:5.
 - 3. The one who holds the key of David
 - a) The one with the power to open or shut the gate to Jerusalem

Specifically, in view of the following clauses, it means the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem. (Mounce, p. 100)

- b) This is obviously an allusion to Isaiah 22:15-25.

Is. 22:15 This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:

*"Go, say to this steward,
to Shebna, who is in charge of the palace:*

Is. 22:16 What are you doing here and who gave you permission
to cut out a grave for yourself here,

*hewing your grave on the height
and chiseling your resting place in the rock?*

Is. 22:17 "Beware, the LORD is about to take firm hold of you
and hurl you away, O you mighty man.

Is. 22:18 He will roll you up tightly like a ball
and throw you into a large country.

*There you will die
and there your splendid chariots will remain—
you disgrace to your master's house!*

Is. 22:19 I will depose you from your office,
and you will be ousted from your position.

Is. 22:20 "In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiyah. 21 I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

- (1) In this passage a selfish steward of the kingdom of Judah, is being replaced by a faithful steward (by God).
 - (a) As a sign of God's trust in the new steward, God is giving him the power to control who can come and go from Jerusalem (the key of the house of David).¹
- (2) Related to 1:18
 - c) What he opens no one can shut.
 - d) What he shuts no one can open.

The quotation could be a polemic against the local synagogue, which claimed that only those worshipping within their doors could be considered God's true people and which may even have excommunicated Christian Jews. In this respect, the Targumic paraphrase of Isa. 22:22 rendered the quotation even more appropriately to the situation of the church. "I will place the key of the sanctuary and the authority of the house of David in his hand." Ethnic Israel, which was claiming to be the divine agent wielding the power of salvation and judgment, no longer held this position. Christ's followers could be assured that the doors to the true synagogue were open to them, whereas the doors remained closed to those who rejected Christ. (Beale, p. 284)

- e) This may hint at what was happening in Philadelphia.

It may be an intentional contrast with the practice of the local synagogue in excommunicating Christian Jews. (Mounce, p. 100)

- f) John might be contrasting their access to the synagogue with their access to the New Jerusalem.

Now in v. 8 he reminds the Christians at Philadelphia, who may have been excommunicated from the local synagogue (v. 9), that he has placed before them an open door into the eternal kingdom, and no one can shut it. Roloff writes that "Jesus has opened the door to the kingdom of God to this church." No matter if the door to the synagogue has been closed, the door into the messianic kingdom remains open. (Mounce, p. 100)

C. Commendation

- 1. I know your deeds.
 - a) These letters do not talk about Jesus seeing people's souls.
 - (1) He sees their deeds.
 - (2) Deeds are an excellent window on one's soul.
- 2. I have placed before you an open door.
 - a) A golden opportunity that can't be taken away from you by anyone
- 3. Jesus knows they are worn out.

¹ There is a very interesting section in Beale (pp. 284-5) where he discusses why the passage in Isaiah should be understood as an indirect typological prophecy.

- a) Probably by poverty and oppression
- 4. But they have remained faithful in spite of this.
 - a) They have kept Jesus' commandment to endure.
 - b) Or they have endured like Jesus endured.

"You have kept the word of my endurance" is best understood as referring to "the word about *Jesus' own* endurance . . ." (Beale, p. 289)

- c) They have not forsaken Jesus' name.
 - 5. Their oppressors appear to be Jews.
 - a) Businessmen? Merchants? Landowners?
 - 6. Jesus is not reluctant to see them as agents of Satan.
- D. Reward

- 1. They get a reward.
 - a) Jesus will make their oppressors admit that the Christians are God's people, whom Jesus loves (Isaiah 45:14; 49:23; **60:14**).

Now, in what Moffatt calls "the grim irony of providence," what the Jews fondly expected from the Gentiles, they themselves will be forced to render to the Christians. They will play the role of the heathen and acknowledge that the church is the true Israel of God. (Mounce, p. 100)

- b) Jesus is going to spare them the trial that God is going to send to the whole world to test the whole world.
 - (1) Because they have endured patiently.
 - (2) Will they avoid the trial, or will they successfully make it through?
 - (a) Beale goes with the latter,

Therefore, the promise of v. 10 is not that they will escape the coming trial, but that they will be able to endure through it because of his sustaining power. (Beale, p. 293)

- (b) I think it is the former.
 - (i) I have trouble seeing how the wording can be construed the way Beale takes it
- 2. When will these rewards happen?
 - a) In the time after the writing of Revelation?
 - b) Or is this predicting what will happen in the Day of the Lord?
 - c) I take this to be something that will happen in the near (to them) future.
 - (1) Analogous to the predictions about Jezebel in Thyatira
 - (a) They function as signs.

IX. Revelation 3:11-13

11 *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him 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 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

1. I am coming soon.
 - a) So that no one will take your crown (wreath)

The use of the athletic metaphor was appropriate in Philadelphia on whose inscriptions games and festivals are especially prominent. Here the language derives point from the precariousness of life in a community so liable to ruin from natural disaster or economic change. So too enemies of the Christian might seek to disqualify them but the victory was theirs by right if they only maintained their witness and were not now tempted to turn aside from the rigours of their appointed course. (Hemer. P. 165)

- b) Hold on to what you have.
2. I will make the one who overcomes a pillar in the temple of my God

The “pillar” here however is that which stands firm (cf. Jer. 1:18) rather than that which supports (Isa. 22:23, a passage already cited in the letter, and Isa. 56:5). (Hemer, p. 166)

I will write on him 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.

3. Jesus will write three names on the one who overcomes.
 - a) The high priest had the name of God written on a gold plate attached to the front of his turban (Ex 28:36-38).
 - b) The name of the new Jerusalem will be “The Lord is there” (Ezekiel 48:35).
 - c) The Messiah will be granted a new name (Isaiah 62:2).
 - (1) A new name seems to mark a major achievement.
 - d) “My God” repeated three times
 - (1) Jesus’ God is the one true God.
 - (a) This challenges the Jewish conception.

B. The potential for subsequent history to shed some light on John’s letter to Philadelphia in Revelation

1. The letter of Ignatius to Philadelphia

- a) Written before 117 AD (Ignatius was martyred sometime before 117)
- b) He had visited Philadelphia and had personal knowledge of the church.
- c) He describes a congregation plagued by strife.
 - (1) This is unlike the letter of John.
 - (a) John has no criticism.
- d) The threat Ignatius identifies is those trying to convert Christians to Judaism.
 - (1) Possibly even Gentiles trying to convert Christians to Judaism
 - (2) Possibly related to this, there were those who argued that only that which could be supported by Old Testament Scripture was to be believed.
 - (a) Hemer speculates that both Gentile and Jewish Christians may have been tempted to convert to Judaism (to avoid persecution) and then tried to proselytize others to convert to Judaism.

Ignatius, *Philad.* 6:1, refers to “hearing Judaism from the uncircumcised”: apparently Gentile proselytes to Judaism were themselves active in proselytizing Christians. If acceptance in the synagogue offered a status of exemption from the liability to imperial cult, this was a standing inducement to the weaker Christian. (Hemer, p. 169)

The church was being challenged to prove its case from the Old Testament, and its claim to be able to do so was itself in dispute. There were now left no eyewitnesses of the Gospel events. . . . The church could then be deeply troubled by an attack on them and by the insistence that Christians use only the acknowledged Scriptures. The situation was readily usable as a Jewish rationale to induce the wavering Christians to return to the fold of the synagogue. (Hemer, p. 169)

- (b) In response, others might have doubled down on the “steadfastness” for which John commended the church.
 - (i) The book of Revelation might even have been one of the writings in dispute.
- e) The response to that threat might have been a pre-Montanism.
 - (1) Montanism was ecstatic and apocalyptic.
 - (a) Believed that God was still inspiring prophets
 - (b) Believed that the return of Christ was immanent
 - (2) Montanism first appeared in Phrygia.
 - (a) But there are indications that it followed the trade roads from Philadelphia to the east to Phrygia.
 - (b) Ramsay argues that the “open door” that John mentions in his letter was referring to an opportunity for missionary activity.
 - (3) A letter from Smyrna to Philomelium makes mention of 11 martyrs from Philadelphia.
 - (a) This underscores the “fanaticism” of the church in Philadelphia.
 - (i) This could also have been tied to pre-Montanism.

X. Observations about the letter to Philadelphia

- A. Jesus says nothing negative.
- B. They are living under difficult circumstances.
 - 1. Even apart from persecution, things are difficult.
 - 2. Persecution at the hands of the Jews
- C. God is going to give them the pleasure of seeing their tormenters acknowledge that they are God's people.
- D. God is going to spare them the approaching hour of trial.
- E. God assures them of their secure and eternal destiny.