**Pastor Tim’s Message Notes from 2-7-2021
To the Church in Philadelphia…**

One of the movies that I have long enjoyed is Rocky films. And I think that it is kind of odd, because I am actually really a fan of boxing. Watching people beat each other up is just not very enjoyable for me.

But while the Rocky movies on the surface are movies about boxing, they are really about a lot more than boxing. Boxing is just the cover, but the story is much deeper than that.

They’re really about being an overcomer and defying all the odds as an underdog to be successful.

And they’re about being grounded in one’s identity and not letting fame or fortune lead you away from who they really are.

And they’re about the love of family --- not just biological family but close friends and mentors.

This sounds like kind of like living the Christian life in some ways, doesn’t it?

And it is interesting that Rocky Balboa was from the city of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, as you probably know with living in Pennsylvania, means ‘the city of brotherly love.’

Philadelphia PA unfortunately does not always live up to this great name. Years ago, I heard that they booed someone dressed as Santa at one of their professional sporting events. But nonetheless, the Lord has great plans for Philadelphia, and it is called to be a city that not only walks in brotherly and sisterly love, but also agape love (which is the love of God which does not just love brothers, but even one’s enemies). This is the kind of love that Jesus had which led him to the cross.

Today we are taking a closer look at Philadelphia. But not Philly PA, but Philly from the book of Revelation.

Throughout 2021 thus far, we have been exploring Jesus’ words to the seven churches in Revelation chapter 2-3. Each message from Christ is profound and filled with insights.

It is fascinating to me that the Christians of ancient Philadelphia had many of the themes of the Rocky movies that we mentioned.

Now to help set the stage for Jesus’ words to this church, I would just like to share a little bit about the city and what it was like to be a believer there.

Of the 7 cities mentioned in Revelation, Philadelphia was the most recent to be established. In 189 BC there was a family of 4 brothers who were all very loyal to one another. One of them was Eumenes II, the king of Pergamum and one of the brothers was named Attalus. Attalus became known as Attalus Philadelphus, because he was very loyal to his other brother Eumenes. He had opportunities to try to take his throne from him, but he refused to do it. True brotherly love.

And it was likely from this family that had a role in establishing this city named after Attalus. This city of Philadelphia.

Residents of Philadelphia, however, had their share of challenges. One problem was its proclivity for earthquakes. In AD 17 there was an earthquake that really devastated the city.

Another problem was that in AD 92, Emperor Domitian issued an edict commanding that half of the grape vines in Philadelphia be cut down. This may have been to have more grain crops available to feed the Roman armies, but it may have also been to protect the vine growers of Italy, for Philadelphia was known for its vineyards. And perhaps not surprisingly, the most popular pagan god people worshipped in Philadelphia was Dionysus, who was considered the god of wine.

There was also a small by vocal Jewish community in this city as well.

But as in each of these cities, the gospel of Jesus Christ made its way to Philadelphia and people came to faith in Jesus and the church was established.

And going by Jesus’ words to these Christians, it appears that many of them were Jews that embraced their long-awaited messiah.

Let’s now turn together to hear what Jesus had to share with the Christians in this city of brotherly love. It is found in 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. 8I 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. 9I 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. 10Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.**

**11I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12The one who is victorious 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 them my new name. 13Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

So what is Jesus getting at in these words?

**First, it is helpful to note how much Old Testament imagery Jesus uses in addressing these Christians.** He mentions the key of David, the Temple of God, and the New Jerusalem. These concepts would make a lot more sense to Jewish Christians that were familiar with the Old Testament, although I would expect that the church also included Gentile believers as well.

**Second, it is easy to notice that the church was experiencing a form of persecution.** Jesus commends them for not denying his Name. In fact, only this church and the church in Smyrna had good things to hear from Christ. And both of these churches were going through difficult times of persecution.

So one benefit of persecution, friends, is that it is more likely for a church to be faithful than committed. They are less likely to argue about unimportant things, like which color the carpet should be or things like that.

It also appears that the majority of the persecution that these Christians were receiving was coming by people from the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Many of the Jews who did not embrace Jesus were not very happy to have the message of Jesus spreading in the city. As we read the words of Jesus, it appears that many of the Christians had been kicked out of the synagogue because of their faith and witness of Jesus as the messiah. Definitely not receiving much brotherly love there.

The door of the synagogue has been shut to them. They had been excommunicated, so to speak. They were no longer welcome at the local synagogue. This reminds me of the man born blind in John’s Gospel. Remember Jesus gives this man his sight. This man shared that it was because of Jesus that he could now see.

And as a reward for his testimony, what happened to him? He was kicked out of the synagogue.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency by those in power to become jealous when a higher authority is revealed.

The pharisees were jealous of Jesus. Many of the Jewish religiously leaders were jealous of Peter and Paul and the other apostles. We read in the book of Acts that the apostles were unschooled, but they are the ones walking the authority and power. They are the one whom the people are excited to hear from.

And you can see how jealousy was a real problem for the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

We also read in the book of Acts examples of how some of the jealous Jewish individuals actually travelled a great distance to persecute Christians such as Paul. They traveled hundreds of miles just to stir up crowds against Paul.

It is quite possible that unbelieving Jews in Philadelphia were seeking to stir up the Roman authorities against the Christians there as well.

Looking closer at Jesus’ words, Jesus greets the church by identifying himself in this way. He says:

**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**

Jesus tells them that He is the One who holds the key of David.

Isaiah 22:22 states **“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.”**

In Isaiah, the prophet is writing about how God will replace Shebna the palace administrator, who had been unfaithful to God, who was prideful and so forth. The LORD was about to replace Shebna with a man named Eliakim. Eliakim was to be the new palace administrator. It would be like a Secretary of State role for the nation.

And the key represents the authority and position in the royal house of David.

So back to Jesus’ words to the Christians in Philly. He was telling them that even though they had been kicked out of the synagogue, they are now standing in the place of God’s favor before God, rather than the unbelieving Jews. Shebna would have to acknowledge Eliakim and eventually the unbelieving Jews would have to acknowledge that those who they have abused were actually right to embrace Jesus.

We do not know the timetable for this. But we do know that all who persecuted the Christians there eventually had to stand before Christ themselves.

Jesus mentions that this church had little strength. Likely that meant that they did not have much influence or power. But despite their lack of power on the surface of society, Jesus himself gives them a place of authority in His Kingdom.

I love how Jesus tells them as He begins to conclude His message to them. He says:

**The one who is victorious 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 them my new name. 13**

Jesus is reminding them that while they were kicked out of the synagogue, as believers in Jesus they are now part of the new Temple and will never have to leave. They won’t have to leave because of another earthquake or leave because of their being pushed out of the synagogue, for they themselves have become a part of the temple of God.

So, brothers and sisters, as we think about Jesus’ words to these believers in Philadelphia, what are some takeaways for our lives today.

**First, sometimes followers of God can be costly**. When we are all in for Jesus, sometimes even family may turn our backs on us.

Hopefully that has not been the case for you, but it has been, and it is for many Christians around the world.

But whether it is with family or in another way, there is always cost to follow wholeheartedly after Christ.

And the Lord wants us to know that even though there is a cost, there will be pushback or opposition in some way, it is worth it to follow after Jesus.

It could be leaving a higher paying job in order to follow where Christ is calling you.

**And second, even though following Christ may make us feel powerless from an earthly standpoint, Jesus’ words remind us that by following Him you become part of the answer that God has for the world**. You carry the truth of Jesus with you. You become a temple of God’s Spirit. You become the light and salt of the world.

And third and finally, the words of Jesus remind us that we are to be an overcomer in this world. We are to stand for our faith to the end, knowing that the best is yet to be.

I think once again of Rocky. At the end of the first film, all he wanted to do was to go the distance and make it to the end of the fight still standing. And if you’ve seen the movie, maybe you remember Rocky shouting “Yoe Adrian, I do it!”

Friends, when we make a commitment to be all-in for Jesus no matter the costs or the challenges that could result and when we finally stand before Jesus, we can tell him **“Yoe Jesus, by Your grace, I did it!”**

Sources:

Grant R. Osborne – Revelation commentary

BibleGateway.com