

11,12,20 The Spiritual Formation of the End Time Remnant (Part 7)

As I mentioned at the close of our last study, the church at Philadelphia was the only one of the last four churches addressed that received no criticism; this church was fully approved by God.

This is the bottom-line church for those wanted to understand what honors the Lord the most.

Let's begin by looking at the transition from Sardis to Philadelphia; this is a historical, as well as spiritual, overlay;

"Following the reformation there came a time when a cold, lifeless formalism seemed to settle down over all Protestant Christendom - an era in which men were content simply to confess a creed ... But in the 18th. and 19th. centuries there came over all those lands where the Reformation had gone, a great wave of blessing. God began to work afresh in mighty power. There were marvelous awakenings all over Europe and the British Isles. A half century later the same mighty power began to manifest itself in America. Spirit-filled servants of Christ went through these various countries like firebrands of the Lord, calling on sinners to repent, and saints to awaken to their privileges. A little later, in the early part of the last century, God, in a very special way, began to arouse many of His people to a deeper sense of the value of His Word, and its all-sufficiency for the guidance of His people in this scene. This led to the recognition of the fact that Christ Himself is the gathering Center for His people; and for His name's sake thousands left all human systems, and began to meet in simplicity, seeking to be guided alone by the Word of God."

Even though increased missionary activity was one result of this move of God's Spirit, Philadelphia marks what was primarily a "church" revival – it was a bringing in of fresh life to God's own people.

Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only two churches that received only praise. If you combine the conditions of each of these two churches you have "Love" and "Suffering".

So, the bottom line is this: Patient, suffering love is what is of highest value to God. This is the image of Christ formed in a local assembly. A patient, suffering, loving Savior in corporate expression.

The Lord is seen expressing His own Life in the surrendered churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

Let's look at some of the dangers Philadelphia faced.

“I know your works; I have set before you an open door that no one can shut for you have a little strength and have kept my Word and have not denied my Name” (vs. 8)

The “open door” was not only a reference to the evangelistic outreach of Philadelphia in the first century, but also applies to the prophetic nature of this letter to Philadelphia which predicts the age of expanded missionary outreach, (1800 to the mid-1900's).

This confirms to us that the victorious, remnant at the end of this age will increasingly find “open doors that no man can shut” in terms of world missions.

This is overwhelmingly the case in China, Iran and other countries. In the West we are praying for the time when the Spirit of missions will be poured out on us as well, so we can be involved in the Lord's final, global harvest before the rapture.

This verse also mentions the Philadelphian's “little strength”. This is an extremely important aspect of what lies at the heart of being an overcomer (as strange as that seems), but I want to wait to touch on that at the end of our study tonight.

Holiness and purity of truth are sometimes difficult to retain in a 'loving' assembly. Paul warned the Roman Christians of the same danger in Romans 12:9,

“Let your love be without hypocrisy. Hate that which is evil and cling to that which is good.”

Love may forgive anyone, but it should not embrace everything.

Love must have Truth and Holiness as foundations or it is a cheap imitation - like ecumenical "love" that is willing to compromise, to sacrifice Truth, in order not to offend anyone.

This is the spirit of the age; the spirit of religious globalism, invading the church in our generation. And here's what the Lord plans to do with this;

“I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews but are not, but instead are liars; I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and they will acknowledge that you are the ones I love.”

There is coming a time in the near future when all the compromising, apostate ecumenicists will be shown who it is that the Lord *really* loves and supports.

But that's the Lord's work – ours is to reach everyone we can reach regardless of who they are; and being surrounded by, and pressured by, 'liars' is always a challenge to “love”.

Walter Scott wrote,

"We have only to read the New Testament and contrast its teachings with Protestantism as a whole, and then ask: Have we not in our midst and around us, a huge system of Judaism in its principles, traditions, practices, and character? Judaism here meets the Lord's withering condemnation. Popularity, numbers, wealth, and influence are on their side. Philadelphian saints are few, feeble, and of no account. Confronted on every hand with a spurious character of Christianity, which adapts itself to every variety of taste and temperament, the special danger is that the separate position would be surrendered, that an easier path be sought at the expense of a deviation from truth and holiness. A large and increasing number in the professing Church is here termed 'the synagogue of Satan.' What is it if not

that? There never was a moment when human charity was so in the ascendant, and surely never a moment when divine love is so needed. The former says 'Union is strength', the latter says, 'Union in obedience is strength'. But the relative positions of those composing 'the synagogue of Satan' and the Philadelphian Church are soon to be reversed. The former are to be humbled; the latter exalted. What a reversal of the present order of things! But, more, these Church pretenders shall know that those whom they had despised are special objects of divine love. They 'shall know that I have loved thee'." (Scott)

These two dangers tend to press against any group of Christians seeking God's best

- The tendency to compromise personal holiness and
- The temptation to be influenced by the popular, contemporary forms of professing Christianity.

Small, weak, insignificant Philadelphia had God as their support – and so will we.

But whenever God moves, so does Satan.

The greater our advance spiritually, personally; and the greater our advance practically in penetrating the Kingdom of Darkness, the greater will be the opposition against us.

And it will come in numerous forms – personal discouragement and defeat; temptation to sin; unexplained depression; physical illness and suffering, pressure in our circumstances above what we are used to – and a thousand other things to stop our momentum.

Paul told Timothy to 'endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ'. He knew that Timothy's heart was set on glorifying Christ – so he also knew that Timothy would be attacked on every side.

For the Laodiceans, which we'll look at next time, life had become both easy and enjoyable; even restful. They were absolutely worthless as far as God's Kingdom was concerned, but they had joyfully settled into the comfort zone of spiritual stagnation.

The growing, obedient, Christian pays a heavy price for his determination to follow Christ at any cost – he sometimes pays with his life (as Antipas, in Pergamum, did).

I guess the question we have to ask is this:

“Going forward will be harder than going back. Is enduring the hardship of determined service to the Lord and hearing Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”, worth losing out on a multitude of personal comforts and pleasures in this life?”

That's a question no one can answer for us – it's very personal.

In some ways settling this in our hearts might be the most 'alone' time any of us will ever have.

Now, listen to Paul's words in 2 Cor. 9:8-10;

“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that you will always have all you need to accomplish every good work. As it is written, ‘He has dispersed abroad; He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever.’”

As Philadelphia's love increased, their works of love increased, therefore, God promises His full support for them. Ironside wrote this;

"Acting on the truth that Christ is Son over His own house, and that He has commanded His servants to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, thousands have gone forth, in dependence on Him alone, not only in the home-land, but to lands beyond the seas, without any organization or Board behind them and have found the Lord Himself all sufficient to meet every need, and to open and close doors just as He wills."

The experience of Philadelphian Christians was simply this: they determined to go on with the Lord no matter what, and as a result, the Lord went with them, no matter what.

“Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations,
. . . and I will be with you unto the end of this age.” (Matt. 28:19-20)

Philadelphia was an incredible church; abounding in love, reaching out to a dying world with life-giving truth and fully commended, blessed, and supported by her Lord.

Now, there’s a very important pre-tribulation-rapture promise given in vs. 10;

“Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.”

Notice, He does not say He will keep them from the testing in the sense of protection or safety, but from the "hour", the “time”, of testing.

When that time of testing the ‘earth-dwellers’ begins, we will be gone.

This promise of the pretribulation rapture is only promised to Philadelphia. Here’s why. We see these phrases in the following churches:

“Hold fast till I come” (Thyatira, Rev. 2:25)

“I will come as a thief” (Sardis, Rev. 3:3)

“I will deliver you from the hour of testing” (Philadelphia 3:10)

and Laodicea is a given because of its place in the historical order of the churches.

There's no mention of the Lord's coming in Ephesus, Smyrna or Pergamos.

Characteristics of each of these are no doubt found in churches in the last generation, but only four of the churches make up the primary characteristics of our time in history.

The promise is only to Philadelphia because everyone in Philadelphia is an overcomer. That can't be said of the other three churches that reach to the end of the age.

Finally, vs. 11 reinforces the promise of the crown to those who stay true to the end of this life. We will spend some more time on this in our study of Laodicea. For now, just notice that ruling with Christ in His kingdom (represented by the offer of a crown) can be forfeited by not "holding fast that which we have."

Here's vs. 11, "I am coming quickly; hold firmly to what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

The crown that was meant for us, will simply be handed to someone else.

Here's how Robertson's words it;

"This is a purpose clause and second aorist active subjunctive of 'lambano'; to take away 'thy crown' which will be thine if won and not forfeited by failure. In that case it will go to another."

Here are two of the verses he uses (one, specific to the church age; one applied in principle);

2 Tim. 4:8; ". . .in the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved ("longed for") His appearing."

Matt. 25:28; “Therefore: take the talent away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.”

Then vs. 12 offers the overcomer a unique and powerful position in the millennial temple (pillars represent the strength of a structure) and the privilege of both knowing and displaying the glory of Christ's new Name in the New Jerusalem.

“The one 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 on 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.”

There are no temples in the heavenly Jerusalem; Christ Himself is the temple. So, this promise is a place of honor and strength in the spiritual temple of the Body of Christ.

1 Cor. 3:16; “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”

1 Pet. 2:4-5; “And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by people, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house . . .”

Eph. 2:19-22; “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

To whatever degree the overcomers in Philadelphia (and anyone who follows their example) attain likeness to Christ will be reflected in them in a very unique way throughout eternity - to the praise and glory of their Savior.

I mentioned earlier that I wanted to close with a brief discussion of what the “little strength” comment in vs. 8 means.

In Robertson’s Word Pictures, Vol. 6 the author gives an explanation of the phrase “little strength”.

“Little power refers to little influence or weight in Philadelphia, the members were probably from the lower classes.”

This lines up perfectly with 1 Cor. 1:26-29;

“For consider your calling, brothers and sisters, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the insignificant things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no human may boast before God.”

In the sight of the world (and much of the Western church) overcomers are absolute nobodies; which qualifies us to be objects of grace and to need enablement from outside our natural strength.

Joseph Seiss describes them this way,

“They were but a little flock, poor in worldly goods, and of small account in the eyes of men. They had but little strength and were greatly oppressed by heretical teachers and pretenders; but they held fast to the Word of Christ.”

I want close with what I believe is the true spiritual reality of Philadelphia. Here’s what they understood that brought them past the limitations of their weakness to the experience of His strength.

In the Old Testament, the relationship between the Lord and His people can be summarized as Him being “with” them. But in the New Testament, He is not only “with” us but is “in” us.

This is the mystery and the reality of the new creation “in” Christ.

Just before I woke up this morning I was dreaming of riding in a car (no idea where I was or where I was going), but all of a sudden, I saw the meaning of Christ and I as one spiritual person.

I’ve known and taught this for years, but I’d never “seen” it before. I’m not sure how else to say it.

There is such an incredible difference between learning something objectively and having God reveal it to us spiritually.

The difference between a spiritual life and a religious or carnal life, is in having the Son revealed “in” us, not just “to” us.

After we really understand what has happened to us in Christ, there *is* no more Christianity – there’s just Him living in us and us living in Him.

And of course, the greater the realization and experience of Christ, the greater the hatred of the enemy; who will do all he can to prevent us from knowing or living in the reality of these truths.

Increased personal suffering is actually a sign of increased conformity to Christ.

This is what it means to share the sufferings of Christ. He is suffering, continually, in His body the Church and has been for 2000 years.

He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit. Not two spirits in unity. This is the meaning of the mystery God showed Paul and it is the essential nature of the new creation in Christ. We are the body of Christ.

In Jn. 17, Jesus prayed that our oneness with Him would be the same as His oneness with His Father. That wasn’t just a prayer for unity, for all of us to “get along”.

It was a prayer that was answered at Pentecost. And every time a person is ‘added to the Lord’, they are incorporated into Christ.

We are already there. The issue isn't waiting for Jn. 17 to happen, but seeing and experimentally entering into the reality of what the Lord has already done.

Christians don't create unity, it's the setting aside of the flesh long enough to express what already exists in the Spirit.

This is where the Philadelphians were; these are the realities that they had entered into.

The big difference between Philadelphia and Laodicea was Christ inside vs. Christ outside (which we will see in our study next week).