

The Epistle to the Philadelphians

Our Daily Reading planner has taken us through the commencement of the Apocalypse, and to the messages of Christ to seven ecclesiastis. Sometimes it is suggested that each ecclesia's condition, whilst having an application to those first century congregations, also each represent epochs of human history from the time of John onwards. Be that as it may, it is also important to recognize that the situation of each ecclesia is also representative of the brotherhood as whole. They provide examples of a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses, each of which can be found in all of the ecclesiastis down through the ages – including the age in which we live. We must therefore search these messages with all due diligence, to find out exhortation, encouragement – and rebuke – applicable to our individual circumstances wherever and whenever we happen to live. For our exhortation today, we shall consider the circumstance of one of the ecclesiastis: that of Philadelphia.

The name “Philadelphia” literally signifies: “brotherly love”, which contrasts with the ecclesia to Ephesus, who were told: “thou hast left thy first love” (Rev. 2:4). The Philippian ecclesia was the only ecclesia which were not rebuked for anything. This letter is one of encouragement, and edification, not rebuke. There is a time and place for every work under the sun, the Preacher informs us (Eccl. 3:1). There is “a time to break down, a time to build up” (Eccl. 3:3), and the time and circumstance of this ecclesia demonstrated a need to build up, without an edifice of apostasy to pull down.

The Master introduces himself as:

“he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth” (Rev. 3:7).

Holiness and Truth are the hallmarks of Divine Wisdom, and are traits of those who seek first the Kingdom in all their ways. Christ here identifies himself as the One who has a key. That key, it is evident, permits access through a particular door, which is the entrance to the house of David – hence it is called “the key of David”. 2 Samuel 7 records the promise the Yahweh made to David concerning his house: “**Thy house** and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam. 7:16). The head of this future House is Messiah himself, as indicated by the words speaking of a coming seed: “He shall build an house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his Father, and he shall be my Son ...” (2 Sam. 7:13-14). And David himself recognized the application of this promise to his own household, understanding that the House which Yahweh will build him was the glorification of his own house, under the headship of Messiah. Hence in his prayer of thanksgiving, he says: “thou hast spoken also of thy servant’s house for a great while to come ...” (verse 19).

To admit entrance into the house of David therefore, is to associate those who wish to enter through the door when is it opened by Christ, with the promises that Yahweh made with David. To pass through that door, is to be made a partaker of these promises, and to live and reign with The Greater Seed of David throughout the ages to come.

I KNOW THY WORKS

These words precede the substance of each of the letters to the seven ecclesiast. Christ is he who walks “in the midst of the seven lampstands” (Rev. 1:13), and knows the intimate details of each ecclesia – whether good or bad. It is a great blessing indeed, to know that even in the most dire circumstance that life may bring, Messiah is there with us, in the midst of our troubles. It is written that: “the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers” (1 Pet. 3:12, see also Psalm 139). What a great privilege it is! But if we are constantly mindful that all that we do is being observed, we would probably not do many of those things! To know that Jesus knows our works is therefore both a comfort, and a warning.

THOU HAST A LITTLE STRENGTH

This statement can be taken in two ways: Either thou only hast a little strength, and should have more, or in the midst of apostasy, thou hast a little strength which enables thee to continue. Probably the second is the correct view, as the sentence continues: “and hast kept my word” (Rev. 3:8), which indicates that this “little strength” is enabling them to keep the Word. We are told that “when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6), indicating our impotence to save ourselves. But Jesus taught his disciples that: “if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Mat. 17:20). A little faith then, is all that is required. Or to borrow the phrase from another parable (Mat. 25:21,23) all we need to do is to be faithful in a “few things”. But how hard that is! Nevertheless, with a “little strength”, and a faith as a grain of mustard seed, we can prevail, and overcome the mountains of oppositions we may experience in this life.

AND HAST KEPT MY WORD

The “Word” here, is called the “word of my patience” in verse 10, and speaks of the Word that came out of trial, and which enables the saints to endure trials patiently. Linked with this idea, is the theme of Love, which permeates all the letters of John:

“But whosoever keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him” (1 Jno. 2:5).

The “keeping” of the Word then, is a characteristic of the faithful. There are those who claim that we are “legalistic” in upholding and teaching the principles of the Truth as being of essential value. But the opposite is true: if we love Christ, we will keep his commands to the best of our ability: and in this, is the love for God perfected. The apostles (with the exception of Judas) also kept the Word of Messiah, as he said in his prayer: “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; ***and they have kept thy Word***” (Jno. 17:6).

The word for “keep” also carries the connotation “to guard,” and is rendered such in other translations. To “keep” the word therefore, is not only doing what it prescribes, it is also to be on our guard not to “wrest” it to our own destruction, as the manner of

some is. We must be on our guard against those who would have us believe in another gospel, and guard the word of our salvation within our hearts, that we will hold fast in a day of evil.

AND HAST NOT DENIED MY NAME

Of the ecclesia at Sardis, it was said: “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and are dead” (Rev. 2:1). The living Name is the Name of Jesus Christ. As John gave the purpose of the Gospel record which bears his name: “But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing ye might have life through his name” (Jno. 20:31).

The Name of Yahweh’s Son is holy and is able to give life: there being “no other name under heaven given among men, *whereby* we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). But there are those who have an semblance of godliness, yet who deny it’s power – like having a living name, but being dead (above). Paul speaks of these to Titus: “They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate (Tit. 1:16). It is therefore quite possible appear religious and godly in speech, yet deny our Lord in works. We must be wary of both, lest we deny our Master who purchased us with his own blood.

A PILLAR OF THE TEMPLE

Of the faithful in Philadelphia, it is written that:

“Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God” (Rev. 3:12).

It is interesting to note that in the Temple that Solomon built, there were two notable pillars:

“And he set up the pillars in the porch of the temple: and he set up the right pillar, and called the name thereof Jachin; and he set up the left pillar, and called the name thereof Boaz” (1 Kings 7:21).

The name “Jachin” as the AV marginal rendering suggests, means “he shall establish”. And the name “Boaz” literally means, “by it is strength”. When the two are combined we have “He shall establish by strength”. And this seems to be echoed in the epistle under consideration, with the faithful being able to be established by “a little strength” in the apocalyptic Temple, composed of living stones.

THE NAME

The promise to the faithful is that they will have written upon them the Divine Name:

“... I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God ... and I will write upon him my new name” (Rev. 3:12).

The Name of God is “Yahweh”, being chosen by our Creator to be a term of reference to Him: “this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations” (Ex. 3:15). The High Priest under the Law had to wear a golden plate upon his forehead, which had the Name written upon it:

“... and they made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote upon it a writing, like to the engravings of a signet, HOLINESS TO YAHWEH” (Ex. 39:30).

The head is that which contains the brain, and to bear words upon the forehead is to have those words engraved as it were, into the mind. The High Priest was not to declare Holiness to Yahweh in words only: everything he did in Divine service was to declare the fact, and demonstrate the only acceptable way to approach Him. The book of Revelation uses this symbol, in allusion back to the Law:

“I saw another angel ascending from the east, having ***the seal*** of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice ... saying Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, ***till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.*** And I heard the number of those who were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of the children of Israel” (Rev. 7:1-4).

Notice the allusion here: just as the High Priest had the Name written on his forehead, like a signet, or seal, even so a particular class of people had a seal written in their foreheads: and that seal marked out those who were faithful. Ezekiel also spoke in similar terms. In speaking of the activities of six angels of destruction, the prophet also describes another man, bearing an inkhorn instead of weapons. Of him it is said:

“... he called to the man with linen, which had the writers inkhorn by his side; and Yahweh said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and ***set a mark upon the foreheads*** of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezek. 9:4).

Those who were thus marked by the linen clothed man, were to be spared in the day of destruction. The Name was a Name of salvation: a Name that saves. It is bestowed upon Yahweh’s Anointed, which is literally: “he shall save”. The future name of Jerusalem also contains the Father’s Name:

“In those days shall Judah be saved and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called: ***Yahweh our righteousness***” (Jer. 33:16).

There are those who, like the false prophets of old (Jer. 23:27), forbid the use of our Father’s Name. Most English translations of the Bible remove the Name, and render it as “LORD” and “GOD” instead – with no authority to do so. But those who wish to become the name-bearers of the Age to come ought to have no such problem with it. So Simeon declared: “God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out from them a people for His Name”. And James continued to describe the company of the

redeemed out of all nations as being: “all the Gentiles upon whom my Name is called” (Acts 15:14, 17).

CONCLUSION

Drawing our considerations to a conclusion then, we have considered the circumstances of a wonderful ecclesia that was blameless in the sight of their Master and Saviour. They – and we – have been given the encouragement to trust in the work of Messiah, as the keyholder who will give us access to being participants in the promises made to David. We, like them, must use a “little strength” to overcome, and with faith as a grain of mustard seed remain steadfast in the Truth. And if we do so, we have the promise of being pillars in the house of our God: established in strength. We look forward to that time when we shall be born after the Spirit, like our Master, the firstborn from the dead. In that day, we shall become immortal members of a Divine Family, part of the expanding glory of Yahweh whose Name shall be revered throughout the earth.

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