

Enjoy Christ's Approval: The Church at Philadelphia

LHC: Message Nineteen (980621AM)

Week 19: Enjoy Christ's Approval

(Revelation 3:7–13 — The Church at Philadelphia)

This week as we approach the end of days, you can find hope as you enjoy Christ's approval!

SUNDAY: Flight 961 to Eternity

You do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

—James 4:14, emphasis added

Thanksgiving Day, 1996: It was a typical flight—one that occurs thousands of times every day around the world. Ethiopian Air Flight 961 took off November 23, 1996, from Addis Ababa. Onboard were 163 passengers and twelve crewmembers. Among those flying that day were Mr. and Mrs. Andy Meakins. Andy, an elder at the International Evangelical Church of Addis, at one time pastored that large Bible-believing church. In less than two hours, more than 120 people died, including five from that church. Andy, a good friend of mine, did not survive the crash.

Somewhere near Kenya, the horrifying hijack began. Escaped convicts, brandishing an ax and a supposed bomb, stormed the flight deck, savagely beating the copilot and throwing him down. They then ordered the pilot to turn the plane eastward. In spite of the plane's dangerously low fuel tank, he was forced to submit to their demands. The pilot kept pleading for a refueling stop, but to no avail. The hijackers threatened to blow up the plane if he didn't comply. After trying to hug the coast of Africa, the pilot attempted to make it to the Indian Ocean island of Comoros. When it became evident they would not make it, the captain announced to the cabin passengers: "Listen, guys, we're all dead people. There is no argument now." "People began to scream," one witness said, "and others began to pray."

The crash is now well known: a Japanese honeymooning couple filmed the descent, dip of a wing, the flip, the crash, and the disintegration of the 767 over the water. News reports, however, never contained what was in a fax to me from Andy Meakin's wife. This is what she told her church: "As soon as the captain told us we were going to crash I heard the distinct snap of my husband's seat belt. He was up and out of his chair. Going down the aisle row by row he earnestly shared the gospel of Christ with any who would listen. Before the sickening screech of twisting metal and the 110 mph crash of our plane into the water, Andy had signaled me that 20 passengers had trusted in Jesus for their salvation. Andy never made it back to the safety of his seat belt. But he took twenty souls with him to paradise."

You see, there was a safe spot in that plane—a shelter where no twisted wreckage could permanently harm—a haven that no crushing impact could erase. Andy knew and shared the divine directions with those souls being rushed into eternity: “God’s directions are the only way to make it to happiness now and forever!” He knew how to escape the plane before it was too late for eternity. Do you know those directions? Are you following them? Are you sharing them with those whom God has placed around you?

My Prayer for You This Week: *Thank You, dear Father, for our wonderful Lord Jesus Christ who has written a letter to both the church at Philadelphia and us. This is perhaps the most important letter we could ever read in the world—for it expresses what those who will be good and faithful servants are doing during their earthly lives. How we long for Your approval! Do we have Your approval? If not, what can we do? How can we live? What can we invest our life’s breath in that will lead to Your saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”? That is what we long to be. We want to have Your spiritual ears today to hear what You have to say. We want to be doers of Your Word, like Andy Meakins, and not just hearers. To that end we commit ourselves and pray with expectancy for You to illumine our hearts and quicken our wills that we might have Your approval. In the lovely name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*

MONDAY: Seeking Christ’s Approval

*“Well done, good and faithful servant; **you were faithful** over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”*

—Matthew 25:21, emphasis added

The approval of those we love means so much, but there is an approval that far surpasses what anyone on earth can offer us. When our lives are over, our last breaths have been taken, and time has ceased to exist for us, all things on earth fade away quickly. In fact, as we weaken and approach death, the fading starts even before we die. At such a time, our thoughts ought to center more and more on the joy of seeing our beloved Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and hearing Him say, “Well done!” Is that what you are living for?

We have come to Revelation 3:7–13, the sixth of seven letters our Lord Jesus wrote to seven literal, historic churches. Each church was given a powerful message from Christ. Each letter closes with an application to all to “*hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Before we begin our study of this sixth letter, ask yourself: *Why did Christ not admonish this church for any error?* There are only two churches out of the seven that received the approval of Jesus—the assemblies at Smyrna and Philadelphia.

The reason for Christ’s approval of those two churches is this: Smyrna was purified by obediently suffering persecution; Philadelphia was purified by obediently fulfilling God’s commission and winning souls. Smyrna was triumphing through adversity; Philadelphia was ministering through opportunity. Smyrna was a suffering church; Philadelphia was a serving church. Smyrna was a church that stood alone; Philadelphia was a church that spoke out.

Like the Smyrnians, are you being purified as you obediently suffer persecution? Is God enabling you to triumph through adversity? Are you willing to stand alone for Christ in any situation? And are you, like the Philadelphians, obediently and joyfully telling people about Christ's offer of salvation? Are you ministering Christ to others in need? Do you speak out for Christ every chance you get?

Which of the six churches we've studied so far most represents your life right now? The two who received Christ's approval or the others who were subject to hearing His "*I have this against you . . .*"?

I pray that you are longing for His approval—to hear His "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

TUESDAY: Real People in a Real Place

*"To the angel of **the church in Philadelphia** write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true.'*"

—Revelation 3:7a, emphasis added

Jesus wrote to the church at Philadelphia—a real place, with real people, experiencing real problems—to whom He offered real answers. Revelation 3:7 is the seventh time that the word "Philadelphia" is used in the New Testament. *Philadelphia* literally means "brotherly love." Hebrews 13:1 says, *Let brotherly love [Philadelphia] continue.* What a name! What a church that must have been back in the first century! And we are to be the same kind of church today—a church for God's glory!

Philadelphia was located thirty miles southeast of Sardis, on the road to Laodicea. The most striking historical note about the city was the very frequent tremors and earthquakes that were characteristic of its area. It had been destroyed by quakes several times. Fissures, ground cracks, volcanic activity in thermal pools, hot mud, and regular tremors were common. In fact, at times (sometimes even weekly) the Philadelphians would have to grab their tents and go live outside of the city to be safe from shocks, aftershocks, and bigger quakes.

The frequent tremors and quakes in Philadelphia help us to better understand Christ's words in Revelation 3:12: "*He who overcomes, I will make him a [stable] pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.*" The saints at Philadelphia had seen everything dear to them devastated many times, but they had enduring safety in following Christ. For Jesus gave them a precious promise: "Live out My love in you, and someday you'll be safe with Me forever!"

The people of the assembly at Philadelphia realized, like those souls on Flight 961, that "the plane was about to crash"—the plane of this world, that is. Later on we will see just how bad the crash is going to be; but for now, we need to understand that at the end of the world one out of every two people will die a gruesome, unnatural death. There is no doubt about it: the world is headed for a devastating and deadly crash.

Before you are taken out of this world, you have the privilege of going up and down the aisles of this life to tell those who are afraid and lost how to find a permanent place of safety in Christ, our refuge. Are you willing to do that for them? For Jesus?

WEDNESDAY: Jesus Is Holy

*“I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall **be holy; for I am holy**. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on earth.”*

—Leviticus 11:44, emphasis added

What the Lord said in Leviticus has never changed. In fact, in Revelation 3:7 Jesus identified and introduced himself as: *“He who is holy.”* There is no doubt about it: Jesus wants to remind us that He, as God the Son, is the holy, eternal God of the universe—the *High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, **whose name is Holy*** (Isaiah 57:15, emphasis added).

Although God is referring to dietary laws at the end of Leviticus 11:44, there are worse things than that which *“creeps on the earth.”* Many things on this earth defile us. In stark contrast, however, the preeminent feature of the character of God is holiness. Holiness is utter other-worldliness, a complete detachment from anything that is impure or unclean. There is a great gulf between what we are as fallen, defiled creatures and who God is in His eternal godhood. He is separate from all He has created, which is deteriorating. But God Himself is eternally self-existent; everything else derives its existence from Him.

Nothing will last forever that is not attached to God. When the tornado comes, the earthquake comes, or the plane is crashing, grab hold of that which will last forever: *“I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones”* (Isaiah 57:15). God says that He is holy, but we can dwell with Him. However, *the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. “There is no peace,”* says my God, *“for the wicked”* (Isaiah 57:20–21).

The wicked are like the sea churning up mire and dirt, or an overflowing sewer ditch. But the holy infinite God of the universe says that if you are contrite, and humble yourself, He will bring you out of that ditch by His grace (Psalm 40:2) so that you can dwell with Him. That is the wonderful gospel! A miraculous gift!

When your life is almost over, and your last breath is about to be drawn, time will soon cease for you. As all things on earth are fading away, may the words of this fourth stanza of the old hymn, “Rock of Ages,” represent your prayerful spirit as you enter eternity.

*While I draw my fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown,
And behold Thee on Thy throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.*

—Augustus M. Toplady (1740–1778)

THURSDAY: Jesus Is the Truth

*The Son of God has . . . given us an understanding, that we may **know Him who is true**; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the **true God and eternal life**.*

—1 John 5:20, emphasis added

There is a lot of doctrine in that verse. Jesus is God, and our source of eternal life. John is particularly fond of that word “true.” Paul describes the end of the age as a time of lawlessness and deception, but Jesus Christ is declared to be holy and true. When lawlessness surrounds us, He who is holy keeps His children safe; when deception abounds, there is One who is Truth.

Look at how Jesus introduced himself to the church at Philadelphia: “*He who is holy, **He who is true**, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’*” (Revelation 3:7, emphasis added). The word for “true” in that verse is very specific. In Greek there are two words for true: *alethes* and *alethinos*. *Alethes* denotes the reality of the thing; that which is “true to fact.” For example, “Hitler led Germany” is true to fact, but the *truth* is that he led them in error. *Alethinos* denotes “true” in the sense of “real, ideal, genuine.”¹ The Greek word for “true” in Revelation 3:7, thus means “genuine truth”; Jesus Christ is Truth. When you confront Him face-to-face, you are facing Truth himself, and not merely true statements. As John MacArthur has said, “There is no substitute for God, and Jesus Christ is the genuine reality of God.”

Jesus has the key of David. Except for Revelation 3:7, the only other place “the key of David” appears in the Word of God is in Isaiah 22. At that time, King Hezekiah was on the throne of Israel, and 185,000 Assyrian enemy soldiers were on their way. These fierce warriors had their tents, chariots, and all their battle gear with them; they covered a vast territory, which greatly intimidated the Israelites. But Hezekiah came out on the wall of the city, looked at all those Assyrian warriors, got down on his knees, and asked God to defeat them. That night, God sent one angel and killed them all!

What is this “key of David”? In Isaiah 22, the city of Jerusalem was weak; its walls were broken down, but its people had not even looked to their Maker for help. God said that He would therefore find a faithful servant through whom He would work. Shebna, the unfaithful steward of the king, had an unrepentant heart and was judged; but God found Eliakim to be a faithful servant, so he was entrusted with the royal authority of God to speak. In other words, God said, “I will give My authority to Eliakim.” In Revelation 3:7 Jesus was saying, “That is what I am like. I am the faithful Son of God who has been entrusted with the authority of God.” He continued, “If I open a door of ministry for you, no one can shut it. If I close a part of your life, no one can open it. You should trust My authority.”

The “*key of David*” is all about Christ’s authority. After Jesus healed the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda, people were so excited about His authority to heal that they gathered around Jesus and were willing to listen to Him speak: “*He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me [Jesus has the key of authority] has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. . . . The hour is*

coming . . . when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (John 5:24–25).

In that passage, Jesus is saying that all of us are dead, but if we can hear His voice, we can come alive. We are born spiritually dead and spiritually blind: *“For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”* (John 5:26–29).

That resurrection has many parts. In 1 Corinthians 15:20–24, Paul speaks of multiple resurrections. There are resurrections that we will also be a part of in which the dead in Christ will rise first, and get their celestial bodies; those who are still alive will be caught up together with them, so both groups go up together. Jesus has all authority and judgment given to Him; this is the *“key of David”*—the authority of Christ; His voice can thus speak and the dead will rise.

What the people were when they went in the grave will reveal what they will be forever. If they went into the grave clothed with sin, they will be condemned to hell. Every time I think of that dreadful sentencing, I am so grateful that, though I am a sinner, I shall not die in my sins! My sins are gone and will never be remembered by God because Jesus, in His mercy, tenderly forgave me. I hope you know that to be true in your own life as well! For Jesus has said, *“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death”* (Revelation 1:18).

FRIDAY: Doing What Jesus Wants

*“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for **you** have a little strength, **have kept My word, and have not denied My name.**”*

—Revelation 3:8, emphasis added

What did Jesus approve of in the church at Philadelphia? In Revelation 3:8 Christ shows us what He commends.

Holiness: “He who is holy” said to them, “I am intimately acquainted with your deeds, and they are pleasing to Me.” How can God be pleased with what we do? By our being holy, as He is holy. That means agreeing with God, being clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and responding to the Holy Spirit by saying YES to Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful thing to walk in holiness, in the power and energy of His Spirit, accomplishing the life of Jesus Christ here on earth.

Disciple-Making and Evangelism: Jesus commended the Philadelphians, “I have given you great opportunities that you have taken and fulfilled. I have put before you an open door, and no one can shut it.” This is disciple-making and evangelism. All of us are supposed to be doing that. Like my friend, Andy Meakin, we are on a plane that is crashing, so it is time to undo our seat belts and share the gospel with as many as we can.

Do you know what today's church does? The captain has announced over His intercom that our plane is crashing! Instead of undoing our seat belts, and jumping up to rescue people for eternity, we are pulling out our personal VCRs and playing a movie because "we are going to heaven." Everybody else can go to hell. Do you get the metaphor? It is very dangerous to think that if we send our money for someone else to evangelize, we are all right because we did our part. No, God says that we are all to be disciple-makers. We need to get out of our seats and start walking the aisles of life urgently telling people about Jesus. Jesus praised the Philadelphians for going through that open door.

Dependence: Jesus told them, "I know you are weak and leaning on My power because you have little strength." This is dependence. We are all supposed to be weak in this manner—knowing that we are ineffective apart from God's power. For Jesus has said, "*without Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

I often hear excuses for not witnessing, such as: "I'm too afraid to share the gospel"; "People might laugh at me"; or "I might be asked a question I don't know the answer to." When ideas like that pop into your head, resist them and tell Jesus, "I don't want to be apart from You. I want to depend on You and Your power." If you are asked a question you do not know how to answer, be honest, and say, "I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know this: I am going to heaven; are you?" You do not have to be a great Bible scholar to witness. Just let people know that when the plane crashes they are going to die. Did you know that Jesus talked more about hell than He did about heaven? Are you ready? Are you willing to find out if others you come in contact with are ready?

Obedience: Jesus told the saints at Philadelphia, "I know you are devoting yourselves to My Word, and have kept it." This is obedience, which gives proof of our love for Christ, for He has said, "*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*" (John 14:15).

Commitment: Jesus said to the Philadelphians, "I know you love Me so much that you magnify My name unashamedly, and have not denied My name." This is commitment. There is passive and active denial. Active denial is like getting up and flat out saying, "I don't believe in Christ"; passive denial is simply remaining quiet about Jesus and any relationship with Him.

When I was a student at Michigan State University, a professor walked into the class of about 500, looked us over, and smiled as he said: "This semester we are going to talk about the mythology of the Bible. Some of you have been taught to believe that thing. I am going to teach you it is not true. You don't have to be bound by that weakness." He was very effective, and then he asked if we had any questions about the mythology of the Bible. Since I did not know any better, I raised my hand and stated: "I believe the Bible is true—and it is not mythology." He just pointed at me, and everyone started laughing and snickering. He made his point silently: "There! Look at the dinosaur. A relic from the past sits among you!"

That professor never did answer me; he only said, "We will talk about the mythology of the Bible this semester." Afterward, fifty students who said they were Christians came up to me and asked if I would help them start a campus Bible study that

semester. Be committed! Raise your flag at work, at home, at school. Even if you are scared to death, speak out! When you are weak, the Lord promises to make you strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

If speaking out for Christ is what He likes in someone, shouldn't we be seeking those pursuits in place of others that crowd Him out? God gives the same promises to us as He did the Philadelphian assembly.

Victory over God's Enemies: *"Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you"* (Revelation 3:9). Not even the gates of hell can withstand the attack. This is representative of the historic Philadelphian church of great outreach (approximately A.D. 1800–1950) when the gospel went all over the world through men like William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Jonathan Goforth, C. T. Studd, and D. L. Moody. Although that zeal for spreading the gospel seems to now be a relic in a museum, Jesus still promises: "I will give you victory over your enemies—if you will just go."

Deliverance from the Tribulation: *"Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth"* (Revelation 3:10). This is referring to the Great Tribulation, and is a promise that the church will be delivered out of the world.

In Luke 18:8, Jesus says, *"When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* He wonders: "There are so many people caught up with chasing after stuff that I am not sure they are really in My kingdom!" Are you chasing after the pleasures that this world brings—or after Christ, who is to be your greatest joy?

SATURDAY: Approved!

"He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 I will write on him My new name."

—Revelation 3:12, emphasis added

Like Smyrna, the church at Philadelphia received no criticism from Christ due to laxity or disobedience. Smyrna was the suffering church; Philadelphia was the soul-winning church.

As vital as these words to the churches must have been 2,000 years ago, so they are to us today. Thus, we need to listen to what Christ has to say in these powerful appeals.

Be watchful—no quitting is allowed: *"Behold, I come quickly!"* (Revelation 3:11a). *We need to heed Paul's call to finish the race to the very end: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7). God intends that we race all the way to the end of life, and not simply walk the last lap. There is no such thing as retirement from serving the kingdom of God. From all the New Testament metaphors of races, finish lines, rewards, and crowns, it appears that how you *end* is how you will be rewarded!

Be diligent—no coasting is allowed: “*Hold fast what you have*” (Revelation 3:11b). Paul gives a call to life-long spiritual growth: “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). No coasting is allowed in life; we ought to be found doing what we were left here to do.

Be cautious—no self-indulgence is allowed: “*that no one may take your crown*” (Revelation 3:11c). How can we lose our crown? By becoming disqualified. Self-discipline is a fruit of God’s Spirit; we must not give in to laxity and self-indulgence. It used to be in Israel that they had boundary stones that marked off inheritances. God always condemned moving the ancient boundary stones. Do you know what the church has started to do? We don’t set boundaries by saying we will not participate in anything that God hates (like watching bloodshed, seeing iniquity, nudity, immorality, and witchcraft). Instead we say that we are careful not to see *too much* of what God hates, or stay *too close* to what He has condemned. Beware of becoming conformed to the ways of this falling world.

One of the most glaring Christian sins today is self-indulgence. We live in a world where people are suffering horribly, and yet we indulge ourselves. We spend too much of our time being beautiful and pampered. Paul who was probably the greatest born-again Christian who ever walked the face of the earth, said, “*I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Paul did not want to “step out of his lane” in the race and get disqualified. He was intent on finishing the course well. God always counts how we finish—not just how we start!

Christ offers true believers an inescapable destination with wonderful promises. Look at Revelation 3:12 again: “*He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God [security], and he shall go out no more [stability]. And I will write on him the name of My God [eternal life] and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God [purity]. And I will write on him My new name [intimacy].*”

To the earthquake-weary citizens of Philadelphia, weak and insecure, Christ gave permanence. As for us, we can be *pillars* in the end of days because we are *secure* in Him. Have you lost your treasures on earth to disasters? Have you lost your loved ones to death? Have you lost your dreams to unexpected changes? If so, then you know there is nothing better than stability: “*Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. And . . . I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also*” (John 14:1–3).

We are given an intimate name because we are a love gift from the Father to the Son (John 17:24). That means we are adopted: *and if children, then . . . heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ* (Romans 8:17). To those who have confessed Christ, Jesus promises: “*He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels*” (Revelation 3:5).

Make a choice to live in hope: We need to listen to Jesus *today*. For He has said, “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (Revelation 3:13). Do you have hearing ears? Are you saved and listening to Jesus?

- A cold wave cooled the loving passion of the **Ephesians**. Watch out! Don’t catch cold.
- Tribulation and poverty tempted and tried to discourage the **Smyrnians**. Watch out! Don’t be discouraged.
- False doctrine and impurity tripped up some **Pergamites**. Watch out for imitations and immorality.
- False teachers and wickedness killed the **Thyatirans**. Watch out for truth and purity—not lies and deceit.
- Lifelessness robbed the **Sardians** of the Name. Watch out! Be sure you are clothed with Christ. Born-again believers will listen to Jesus, overcome, and be crowned.
- An open door stood before the **Philadelphians**, and they stepped through by faith. Watch out for open doors of ministry. Serve Christ for eternal rather than temporal gain.

I wonder: Do you know that the plane is crashing? This world is headed to a very abrupt conclusion. Think about the people you love: your family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and neighbors. If they don’t know Jesus Christ, do you mind that they are going to a place of blackness of darkness where worms do not die and there will be endless fire? Does it matter to you? Jesus wants you to unashamedly go forth and tell them about Him!

Oh, how I pray that you earnestly desire the blessing of Christ’s approval, and therefore covet hearing His “Well done!”

¹ James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), words 227 and 228.