

AN OPEN DOOR BEFORE YOU

Revelation 3:7-13

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Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut
(Rev. 3:8).

During the years in which I served as a pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA, I would often wonder about a sign affixed beside the door for staff entry behind the church. I would approach the door with my keys in hand to enter the locked door, to read on the sign the words of Revelation 3:8, “See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut” (NIV). I often commented to myself on the inappropriateness of that sign: a locked door with a sign saying that it can never be shut. The sign was referring, of course, to the work of preaching the gospel. It referred not to the door into the staff offices but rather the door opened by Jesus granting entry into his kingdom of salvation. As I entered the church building as a preacher, I was intended to remember this promise of the sovereign Christ about the gospel opening he has provided during this present age of grace.

THE KEEPER OF DAVID’S KEY

Each of the seven messages to the churches in Revelation had the purpose of focusing the believers onto the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ himself was to be the great reality that shaped their thinking, whether they were anticipating persecution or standing up for false teaching and temptation into sin. In the sixth message, to the church in Philadelphia, Christ presents himself to a congregation that is reminded of their calling to spread the gospel. To “the angel of

the church in Philadelphia,” John was to write: “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Rev. 3:7).

Jesus is presented as holy and true. As “holy,” Jesus is set apart above all others, pure and spotless in righteousness. As the Holy One of God, he commands the reverent attention of his people, as when Moses stood before the burning bush of Mount Sinai. He is also “true.” This can be taken to mean that Jesus is the *genuine* Lord and Savior of his people. The particular word used by John, however, normally emphasizes *truthfulness* (Greek, *alethinos*). Jesus is the holy and faithful sovereign as he stands before his church in Philadelphia.

The most significant feature is that Christ “has the key of David” (Rev. 3:7). To possess a key is to control access and entry. In 1:18, Jesus said he has “the keys of Death and Hades,” referring to his conquest of death and his control over eternal life. Here, Jesus refers to the salvation kingdom over which he reigns as the heir of David. Jesus has the key to the household of God and the ancient covenant blessings promised to Israel.

The language of verse 7 refers back to an episode in the book of Isaiah. The Lord had rebuked a faithless steward named Sheba. In his place, God established a faithful servant, Eliakim, to administer the kingdom of David. The Lord added: “And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (Isa. 22:22). This faithful steward would control access to the king and would dispense the resources of his kingdom. Eliakim was symbolic of Jesus Christ, who has “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Rev. 3:7).

This description makes two essential statements. The first is that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he said. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). We can therefore enter into God’s kingdom of salvation only through faith in Jesus, God’s Son, the holy and true one. This teaching was especially significant in Philadelphia, where the Christians were opposed by Jews who denied Jesus Christ.

Yet Jesus, as David's royal heir, possessed the only key and he alone could open the way into the kingdom of God.

Second, since Jesus holds the key to salvation, opening and shutting the door to God's kingdom, the church relies on Christ to grant success to its ministry. John Stott comments: "If the door is the symbol of the church's opportunity, the key is the symbol of Christ's authority."¹ Realizing this, the church must faithfully preach Christ's gospel. We must pray to God in Christ's name for saving power. And what exciting news it is that Jesus holds the key to God's kingdom of salvation, since he is the Savior who has proved his love for sinners by his atoning death on the cross. Christ the heir of David, who holds the keys, calls us to minister his gospel. He grants us the great privilege of knowing that as we tell others about his saving love we are being used by him to grant eternal life to those who believe.

A DOOR OPENED FOR SALVATION

If we understand what it means for Jesus to hold the keys to God's kingdom and to grant success to the gospel, the message he gave the Philadelphians is thrilling. "Behold," he told them, "I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut" (Rev. 3:8).

Some scholars argue that Jesus means simply that he has secured salvation for the believers in Philadelphia. Given opposition from the Jews, many of them would likely have been cast out of the synagogue for their faith in Christ. But though the synagogue door was closed, Christ opened to them the door of heaven, which none can shut. This is certainly part of Jesus' message to this church, and it is in keeping with the vision of chapter 4, which begins with "a door standing open in heaven" (Rev. 4:1).

It is likely, however, that Jesus also has in mind an open door for their ministry of the gospel to others. Paul often spoke of an open door for opportunities to bear witness to Christ. He requested prayer "that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ" (Col. 4:3; see also 1 Cor. 16:9 and 2 Cor. 2:12). This interpretation is made likely when we learn that Philadelphia was a fairly young city, having been established in the 2nd century B.C. as an outpost for Greek culture in Asia. This means that "Philadelphia was a missionary

¹ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105.

church in a missionary city. So the promise Jesus gives is that its witness to him there will be successful.”²

History shows that Jesus’ promise to Philadelphia was true in general of the entire age of the early church, as God had prepared the Mediterranean world for the rapid spread of the good news of Christ. Under the *Pax Romana*, the world from Spain to Asia was united under a well-ordered government with good roads, safe travel, and a common official language. In far-flung cities, dispersed Jewish communities had taken the Old Testament ahead of the apostles so that ideas involved in the gospel had a head start. Moreover, the old gods of paganism were waning in influence and the Roman world was prepared for a potent, challenging worldview. John Stott writes that “wherever they went, [Christian evangelists] found groping minds and hungry hearts.”³ In short, God had prepared the entire ancient world for the arrival of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ has opened similar doors in history at many times. The best example today may be China, where the underground church movement has spread like wildfire and where disenchantment over Communist ideology has left a worldview vacuum that may well be filled by the gospel.

As in several of the previous letters, Jesus tells his readers, “I know your works” (Rev. 3:8). Whereas in other churches Christ had serious matters to correct, here in Philadelphia he had no criticism. He knows, however, that they are not a strong church. “I know that you have but little power,” Jesus said, “and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (Rev. 3:8). Because of their steadfast faith, and because of the saving power Christ would unleash through their ministry, the weakness of this church would not hinder the open door that Christ had specifically granted their ministry.

It is not hard to imagine ways in which the church of Philadelphia was weak. The people may have come largely from lower economic and social classes. They probably did not have influence with the government or great material resources, and their numbers may have been fairly small. But their spiritual attainments contained a great power, as they preached and obeyed the Bible and continued their witness to Christ. In all these respects, the Philadelphians faced a

² James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 11:5

³ Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 100.

world not much different from that facing believers today. Douglas Kelly writes that contemporary Christians

contemplate the aggressive secularism of modern America and Western Europe, with systematic unbelief in high places, such as the universities and the media. Add to that the entrenched Modernism of the educational system, and the precipitous moral decline in once-Christian populations. It is true that over against them our strength is small. But Jesus says that we are not anxiously to worry about it. “You have little strength; use what little you have, and I am going to supernaturally multiply it by opening the right doors.”⁴

Not only would the weakness of the church not hinder Christ’s open door for the gospel, but neither would the opposition they faced. Jesus continues: “Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie – behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you” (Rev. 3:9).

When Jesus refers to “the synagogue of Satan,” he means that the Jewish community was mocking the faith of Christians just as the Pharisees and scribes had denied the claims of Jesus. Moreover, as the Jewish leaders had delivered Christ to the cross, the synagogue rulers sought for the Romans to persecute the church in Philadelphia. These people “say that they are Jews and are not.” By this Jesus does not deny their ethnicity but rather their covenant status. In John 8, he made this clear to the Pharisees who were accusing him. If they were the true followers of Abraham, they would have Abraham’s faith in Christ (Jn. 8:37-40). “If God were your Father,” Jesus said, “you would love me, for I came from God” (Jn. 8:42).

Not only does Jesus reject the false faith of unbelieving Jews, but he promises that their opposition will not even hinder the gospel’s witness to them: “behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you” (Rev. 3:9). This is an allusion to Isaiah 45:14, where God promised Israel that the Gentiles would confess Israel’s God. “They will plead with you, saying, ‘Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.’” What the Jews failed to realize was that by denying Jesus they had themselves become Gentiles, that is, aliens to God’s covenant. The Old Testament prophecy would be fulfilled as unbelieving Jews are brought to faith in Christ through the witness of the church.

⁴ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 74.

Notice that it is Christ who achieves this conversion: “behold, I will make them come and bow down,” Jesus promises, and he will cause unbelievers, including unbelieving Jews, to acknowledge that God’s love is upon the followers of Christ. This promise accords perfectly with Paul’s description of how the church will be used to bring unbelieving Jews to faith in Christ. Paul said, “I magnify my ministry [among the Gentiles] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them” (Rom. 11:13-14).

The fierce opposition may have caused the Philadelphians to back down in their witness. They may have believed that discretion called for a muted testimony, especially to the Jews. But Jesus shows that those who oppose the gospel will be those most likely to hear and be affected by its power. Having opened a gospel door for ministry, Jesus assures the church that through their bold witness to him, some of their most violent persecutors will be among those who are saved.

Christ’s open door for ministry would not be hindered by the weakness of the church, by opposition against the church, or, thirdly, by God’s judgment at work in the world in which the Philadelphians lived. Jesus writes: “Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 3:10).

The hour of trial to which Jesus refers does not seem to be a local tribulation, as Jesus had foretold for Smyrna (Rev. 2:10). Jesus uses a word for “world” that means its inhabitants (Greek, *oikomone*), and says it will be the “whole world” that is tried. For this reason, most scholars believe Jesus is referring to the worldwide tribulation foretold before the coming of Christ at the end (see 2 Thess. 2:3-12). It is not that the Philadelphia church would be removed from the tribulation to come but that it would be kept safe in and through the tribulation so as not to be overcome by God’s judgment on the world. Moreover, the tribulation of the end is anticipated by God’s judgment on man’s rebellion throughout history (see 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Jn. 2:18). For this reason, the Philadelphians, like Christians now, were called to witness in a world under God’s judgment. Yet, Jesus had set before them an open door, and even the outworking of God’s judgment would not hinder Christ from bringing men and women to salvation through faith in his Word.

One way in which Christ would empower the gospel in the midst of rebellion and judgment is by keeping safe his faithful people. Jesus says the Philadelphians would be preserved because “you have kept my word about patient endurance” (Rev. 3:10). Notice that it is Christ who keeps his people safe, and that this safety takes place through a living and persevering faith. Christians are kept eternally secure by God’s sovereign will and power, yet this security is experienced by an active, striving faith by which Christ’s people conquer in this world (see 1 Pet. 1:4-5).

There is an historical fact that makes Christ’s claim here all the more remarkable. Jesus warned that the seven churches of Asia would lose their lampstands if they did not repent and believe, and history shows that these churches did ultimately cease to exist. The sole exception is the city and church of Philadelphia, which Jesus promised to keep safe even under the tribulation that would come at the end. It turns out that the city of Philadelphia was never destroyed, surviving repeated invasions until it fell to Moslem conquerors. Yet even then the Christian community endured and, in the modern Turkish city of Alasehir there remain churches descended from the original congregations, organized under their bishop whose succession is traced back to the apostolic times.⁵

How thrilling it must have been when the book of Revelation was read in Philadelphia and this passage came when Christ’s message for this congregation was delivered: “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Rev. 3:8). This door was kept open by Christ’s power despite weakness, opposition, and divine judgment, to Christians who held firmly to the Bible, refused to deny Christ’s name, and patiently endured in faith.

BLESSINGS IN THE CITY OF GOD

If Christ’s message of an open door was thrilling to the believers, their blessing was compounded when he concluded with promises for those who endure victoriously in faith: “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, 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 from my God

⁵ Richard Bewes, *The Lamb Wins: A Guided Tour Through the Book of Revelation* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 33.

out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:12-13).

The history of Philadelphia had been tragically marred by its location along a dangerous fault-line. Earthquakes had shattered the city, with aftershocks terrorizing the people for weeks and even years afterwards, so that the city suffered from a lack of physical stability. But Jesus promises that his faithful followers would never lack for spiritual stability. Jesus promises to make every conquering Christian “a pillar in the temple of my God” (Rev. 3:12). The idea is that Christians who endure will be permanent fixtures and beautiful ornaments in the eternal temple, the church of Christ, in which God will dwell forever. In this way Jesus promises unshakable security to Christians whose faith is proven. Philip Hughes writes that “a pillar, by its very nature and function, is not removable!”⁶ How wonderful it is that Christians who were acknowledged as having “little power” will through faith in Jesus be made pillars of strength in the eternal habitation of God.

Jesus further gave a threefold promise involving a new name for the faithful believers: “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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (Rev. 3:12).

History records that after Philadelphia was badly damaged by the great earthquake of A.D. 17, it was rebuilt with generous financial assistance from the Roman emperor Tiberius. In gratitude, its citizens changed the city’s name to Neocaesarea. Not long before John’s writing, the city had been renamed once more as Flavia, the family name of the emperor Vespasian.⁷ In contrast, Jesus says, a Christian is under the patronage of God himself and will bear the name of God their Savior. They will also receive the name “of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven” (Rev. 3:12). This theme will recur in Revelation. In the final chapter we see our citizenship eternally consummated: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads... and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:4-5). Hughes writes: “This naming represents the stamp of the overcomer’s authentic citizenship,”

⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), Page.

⁷ Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 51.

showing that there is no uncertainty a true Christian's loyalty or his right to enjoy the citizenship of God's eternal city.⁸

Finally, Jesus says the faithful believer will be marked with "my own new name" (Rev. 3:12). This new name is not unknown to believers, since Revelation 19:16 says: "On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords." By saying that believers will receive his new name, Jesus means through faith they are made certain of his ownership and protection, and are thus assured of the blessings of eternal life in glory. James Boice writes: "If the believers in Philadelphia are to be given this new name, it is because they have conquered in life and are now to reign with him."⁹

OPEN AND SHUT

The same Jesus who spoke to the church in Philadelphia, saying, "Behold, I have set before you an open door" (Rev. 3:8), speaks now to us through the book of Revelation. We should observe that Christ said this in the perfect tense, meaning that a past completed act has created an enduring present situation. The past act was Christ's death on the cross for the atonement of sin. The present reality is the open door for salvation to all who will confess their sin, believe the gospel, and come to Jesus in a true and living faith. People like open doors because they suggest opportunity. Here is the greatest opportunity one could ever have: forgiveness of sins, a renewed and cleansed nature, and a destiny as a pillar in the household of God, bearing his name and enjoying his blessing forever. How can you receive this matchless salvation? The image of the open door tells you: enter salvation by believing in Christ.

There is a warning, however, that goes with the opportunity of Christ and his gospel. Jesus said that no one can shut the door that he has opened. Yet Christ himself will one day shut the door, after which no one will ever come in. The Bible thus presses you with the urgency of coming to Christ in saving faith: "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Finally, Jesus gave an instruction to the believers in Philadelphia and to us today: "I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no

⁸ Hughes, *Revelation*, Page.

⁹ Boice, *Revelation*, 11:10.

one may seize your crown” (Rev. 3:11). It is clear that Christians do not conquer in our own strength, since Jesus knows we have “little power” (3:8). Christians do not cast down opposition but need to be kept by Christ in the tribulation of this world. Yet there is something we must do. We must hold on. We must never give up.

James Boice concluded his sermon on this text with a line from the popular movie *Rocky*. The journeyman boxer Rocky Balboa was given a chance to fight the undefeated champion, Apollo Creed. People told Rocky that he could never win but he went on training for the fight. The day of the fight came and Rocky confided to his girlfriend, “There’s no way I can beat Apollo Creed.” Christians will feel this way in our witness to a hostile and rebellious world. Rocky didn’t plan to win, but said, “I just want to go the distance.” To everyone’s astonishment that is what Rocky did. He was not knocked out but went the full fifteen rounds in the ring against the terrifying foe.¹⁰

This is what we are called to do, holding fast to the Bible, honoring Christ’s name, and bearing testimony to his gospel. Jesus says, “I am coming soon” (3:11). We say in answer, “Jesus, with your strength, I will go the distance.” Trusting in him, no one will seize our crown of eternal life, but instead, as Paul said, “there is laid up 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 his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 11:12.