

15 April 2007

“Philadelphia: the Faithful Church that Stood Before an Open Door”

Reading: Revelation 3:7-13

Have you ever felt well and truly stymied? You had a plan but your plan was thwarted. Somebody placed an obstacle in your way. Or circumstances arose that forced you to abandon your dream. It may have been at work. You were up for a promotion, but somebody blocked it. It could even have been in the church. You *so* wanted to serve in a particular capacity and you were convinced God was leading you to do so, but another person was placed in that position. Perhaps someone with influence has it in for you.

You may be in the fortunate position of being able to say, “That’s never happened to me. I’ve never felt obstructed or frustrated. Everything always falls into place for me.” Never mind, your turn is probably coming! At such times – indeed at all times – there is something we need to remember: “What (the Lord) opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open.”

I SOONER OR LATER, WE ENCOUNTER OBSTACLES

- A. This may occur in the general course of life. Whether it is skulduggery in the workplace or obstruction in day to day circumstances, you experience a block. It can happen very close to home. In a family setting, there can be favouritism or even blatant injustice.
- B. It can also be as a direct consequence of your faith. It could take the form of outright persecution. You feel the heat. But it may simply be exclusion or ostracism. You face the freeze.
- C. You don’t have to be intimidated or overawed. This is exactly what was happening at Philadelphia. Let me explain by way of illustration.
 - 1. Don’t you sometimes feel a little frustrated when you hear one end of a telephone conversation? Ruth takes the call and I wonder if it’s for her or for me. “*Hello!* How are you? I was just thinking about you. (Now I’m really in the dark). The conversation continues: “Yes, absolutely! Oh *really?* That’s a great idea. It all depends on Ellis’ schedule. I haven’t a clue what he’s doing.” (I still have no idea who she’s talking to).
 - 2. When you listen to these messages to the seven churches, it’s as though you are listening to one half of a conversation. Clearly, the Lord is speaking right into a very specific situation. Fortunately, we are usually able to reconstruct the other side of the conversation accurately. That’s partly because we have some knowledge of the situation that prevailed in the cities where the churches were to which the messages were addressed. We are also given enough clear

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indications in the messages themselves that help us to work out what was happening in the church.

The church at Philadelphia was being blocked. Someone had tried to close a door. We know for sure that there was a large and influential Jewish population at Philadelphia, and we know that at least some of the Jews did everything they could to thwart the proclamation of the gospel. That's why the Lord says here:

'I 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.' (9)

Here's the most likely scenario. A section of the Jewish population had the ear of the civic authorities. They had maligned the Christians and possibly influenced the 'powers that be' to pronounce some kind of prohibition that effectively slammed a door in the face of the church. So, they were up against it and felt hemmed in.

3. This can happen to us. I certainly don't want to engage in sensationalism or scare tactics, to become paranoid about conspiracies, or to foster a persecution complex. There is mounting pressure to portray witnessing as proselytism and even to depict the maintenance of convictions as a kind of "hate speech." Even if we do not have to face this kind of "in your face" prohibition that was common when this message was delivered, society erects its own barricades and so do many of your relatives and acquaintances. In your particular circumstances, you may feel that you have been 'painted into a corner,' maybe even misrepresented and maligned.

No matter what the circumstances, we need always to remember that . . .

II THERE IS ONE PERSON WHO IS IN ABSOLUTE CONTROL AND ALWAYS HAS THE LAST WORD

Listen to him:

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. Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

A. First of all, he says, "This is who I am." He uses three terms to describe himself.

1. When he describes himself as "holy," he is not simply making a general comment about his character. This is a designation of divinity and it is purposely used here. God declares himself to be "the holy one of Israel" (Is 40:25). In the context of these messages and of the book as a whole, he is identifying himself with "the Holy One of Israel."

2. There are two words that could be translated “true”. The one (*alēthēs*) means true in the sense of true rather than false. It is the usual word for true. But the particular word used here (*alēthinos*) means genuine rather than illusory or spurious. In this context it conveys the idea of “complete dependability.”
3. The third term he uses to describe himself is even more significant: “These are the words of him who is holy and true, *who holds the key of David.*” The reference is to a man called Eliakim who lived during the reign of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:17; Is. 22:21, 22).¹ This man was held in a position of such high trust that the king had given him the key to the palace. No one, absolutely no one, gained access to the royal palace other than through Eliakim. We know that Jesus is the heir to the throne of David and that “the household of David” represents the kingdom of God. Just as Eliakim had sole powers to open and close, so Jesus has the exclusive right to control access to the kingdom of God. The Philadelphians needed to remember that, and so do we.

B. Secondly, he says, “This is what I have to say to you.”

⁸I know your deeds. Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

1. I find it interesting that he injects this statement at this point. One would have expected him to say: I know your deeds. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” But he thrusts this thought forward because it is key to all he has to say to them and to us.
2. I agree with John Stott that there are two aspects to what the Lord is saying here.²
 - In the first place, he is referring to the door of salvation. That is its most obvious sense. It is he who holds the keys of the kingdom. The Jewish Christians had found the door of the synagogue shut in their faces. They had been written off by their compatriots. The implication was that they were beyond the pale, excluded from the salvation which God gives. But he who holds they key of David says: “I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” And it is he who holds that door open before us, inviting us to enter. In fact he not only holds the key; he is the door (John 10:7-10).

¹ “The passage in Isaiah appears to have received a messianic interpretation with the Jews, and it is used here to express the Lord’s supreme power in the messianic kingdom to open and close its door as he will; cf. Heb 3:6; Mt. 28:18.” Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919, Reprinted 1967), 479.

² John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105-9.

- But, in addition to the door of salvation, there is also the door of opportunity. I think there are three very good reasons why the open door also refers to a door of opportunity. William Ramsay points out that the city Philadelphia had been founded in the first place, in a strategic location, in order to spread the Greek language and culture among the people of the region (the Phrygians).³ Its location at the border of three countries and as a gateway to the east made it an agent for the spread of Hellenism. For that selfsame reason, it was ideally situated for the proclamation of the gospel among the people of those lands. The second reason is that the term “open door” is used elsewhere to describe the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Listen to what Paul says to the Corinthians: “I will stay on in Ephesus until Pentecost because a great door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Cor 16:9). In fact, he uses the metaphor several times. He later informs them that when he went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, he found that the Lord had opened a door for him (2 Cor 2:12). He asks the Colossians to pray for him while he is in chains so that God may “open a door” for his message about the mystery of Christ (Col 4:3; cf. Acts 14:27).
- Most importantly of all, it was second nature for Christians to think in terms of sharing the good news. From the outset, that was part and parcel of what it meant to be a Christian. The good news about Jesus was something you couldn’t keep to yourself. Interestingly, when Paul tells the Corinthians about the great door for effective work that opened to him, he adds in the next breath, “And there are many who oppose me.” So, what if there is opposition? Is that a time to retreat and hunker down? Is that a time to (euphemistically) “consolidate” and stay out of trouble? Max Lucado tells of a time when his dad took him and a friend fishing. But unfortunately, the incessant rain and the snow meant that they had to spend a week cooped up in a camper truck, bickering and griping. Listen to Lucado’s observation:

I learned a hard lesson that week, not about fishing, but about people. When those who are called to fish don’t fish, they fight. When energy intended to be used outside is used inside, the result is explosive. Instead of casting nets, we cast stones. Instead of extending helping hands, we point accusing fingers. Instead of becoming fishers of the lost, we become critics of the saved. Rather than helping the hurting, we hurt the helpers

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And, sadly, poor go unfed, confused go uncounseled and lost go unpreached.

When those who are called to fish don’t fish, they fight. The next time the challenges ‘outside’ tempt you to shut the door

³ Ibid., 103.

and stay inside, stay long enough to get warm. Then get out.
When those who are called to fish don't fish, they fight.⁴

Listen to the one who holds the keys of David: *"Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut"*.

But there is more good news.

III YOUR EFFECTIVENESS DOESN'T DEPEND ON YOUR OWN STRENGTH

I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

- A. Apparently, the church at Philadelphia was relatively small and, naturally-speaking, had little in the way of resources and influence. Yet they had done the really important thing. They had kept the Lord's word and had not denied his name. The word 'compromise' was not in their vocabulary.
- B. And, paradoxically, their weakness was the very thing that rendered their service effective.
- C. God uses people who realize that they don't have the wherewithal to accomplish anything that is of real spiritual value.
 - 1. Think, for a moment, of Moses. He was "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in word and deed" (Acts 7:22). His decision to identify with his fellow-Hebrews was a good one (Heb 11:24-26). He understood that God had providentially placed him where he was, but he miscalculated and made a huge mistake in the way that he identified with his compatriots. "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not" (Acts 7:25). Perhaps he imagined that he had the wherewithal to deliver his countrymen. After he had spent forty years at the far side of the desert, God appeared to a very different Moses. Now he says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11) It is possible to oversimplify the entire account and I don't want to do that. In a fascinating sermon entitled, "Any Old Bush Will Do," Major Ian Thomas suggested that Moses spent forty years learning to be something, forty years learning to be nothing, and then forty years actually being something for God. Only God could get the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses could be his instrument, but it would be God's strength, not Moses' education that effected that deliverance.

⁴ Cited by Darrell Johnson from, *In the Eye of the Storm*. Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 111.

2. Then there was Paul. We do not know exactly what his ‘thorn in the flesh’ was. We know that it tormented him terribly, so much so that he described it as “a messenger of Satan.” It was debilitating and probably humiliating. He pleaded with the Lord to remove it, but received this answer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul concludes, “Therefore I will boast more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:7-10).

No wonder he could write: “God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:27-29).

- D. When it comes to really effective Christian service, there are only two kinds of people. There are those who are weak – *and know it*, and there are those who are weak and *have yet to discover it*.

IV NOW LISTEN TO THE ASSURANCES HE GIVES US AS HIS CHILDREN

There are no fewer than four in this message. I shall simply list them and make a brief comment on each.

- A. “I will do the unexpected.”
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.

Jews expected that, one day, the descendents of their oppressors would bow before them, falling at their feet, and calling them the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 60:14). Here the tables are turned. The idea is not, of course, “one-up-man-ship.” This is more than ultimate vindication. When God’s people faithfully proclaim the gospel, the unexpected happens and some of our most hostile critics come to faith.

- B. “I will protect 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 upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

Clearly the Philadelphian Christians had faced some severe trials and they had endured patiently. Now the Lord, who controls everything, promises to keep them from the hour of trial. This could mean either “keep you from undergoing the trial”

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or “keep you right through the trial.” The Greek is capable of either meaning.⁵ One way or the other, this must have been a reassuring promise to them.

C. “I will honour you.”

¹²*Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God.*

This may seem like a strange statement to us. But, in each of these messages, the Lord addresses his people in terms that they would understand. William Barclay explains:

When a person had served the state well, when he left behind him a noble record as a magistrate or a public benefactor or a priest, the memorial which the city gave to him was to erect a pillar in one of the temples with his name inscribed upon it. Philadelphia honoured its illustrious sons by putting their names on the pillars of its temples, so that all who came to worship might see and remember.⁶

Jesus speaks in pictures that his hearers will understand. He honours those who are faithful to him by making them pillars in the only temple that lasts.

What’s more, “he grants ‘overcomers’ the triple honour of bearing the name of his God, the name of the city of his God, and his new name.”⁷

D. I will grant you permanent security

¹²*Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.*

Here again, this statement would have struck a special chord with the Philadelphians. The city was located right on the edge of a volcanic area and was subject to frequent earthquakes. In AD 17, the entire city had been devastated by an earthquake. So the people lived an unsettled life. Whenever tremors came, and they came often, they would flee the city out into the open country. So they were forever going out and coming in. But here, by contrast, he says: “*Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.*”

These are great words of assurance. They are made in the context of the one over-arching word of encouragement: “*See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.*”

Conclusion

In a general sense, this word is applicable to us all. Left to their own devices, the Philadelphians may well have concluded that the door had closed. Certainly, if they allowed their circumstances to dictate their action or lack of action, they may have hunkered down

⁵ Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 79.

⁶ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 98.

⁷ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 108.

and waited for better days. But our orders come from the one who holds the key of David. It is always true that “what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open.”

Sometimes the Spirit of Truth takes a general word of truth and makes it very specific. He says: “This is a special word for you, my child: “Look, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” You may have what seem to be good reasons why you should not enter – not now anyway. You may have to suffer reproach for the name of Christ (Heb 13:11-14). There is the fear of failure. There is the risk factor. But these things pale into insignificance. If it is he who has opened the door, you simply cannot do better than to enter.