

Golden Opportunity

by Steve Zeisler

'Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut,' is one of the ringing declarations of scripture. It is found in Revelation 3, in the letter to the church in Philadelphia, which we will look at today. A mysterious key, 'the key of David,' is mentioned in this passage, together with a dramatic call to go through a door that has been opened by Christ.

Last week I had the joy of having some wonderful interaction with people in and around the grounds of Peninsula Bible Church. I met with a brother who soon will leave for his native France where he is an elder and teacher in a church in Grenoble. Together we studied the book of 2 Timothy, which he is preparing to preach upon his return. I met with a scientist and businessman who is planning with others how American Christians can best present the gospel in Turkey so that Turkish scientists might be won for Christ. I prayed with a young woman who will be returning with her husband and family to Peru next week to serve in a health care ministry in Lima.

Other events that brought joy to my heart included prayer that was offered over the 'renewing of the inner man' of several in this church who are terminally ill. A young couple who have been active in this church are on their way to graduate school in Colorado. I can hardly wait to see how the Lord will use them as teachers, musicians and youth leaders there. One of our elders, Bruce Cairns, and his wife Sue have just about turned their home into an extension of this church building. All summer long people have been studying in the Bible in their home, attending meetings, or just showing up for fellowship. Last week also I had opportunity to disburse money from- our need fund to a widow and her four children. Those kinds of ministries are taking place all around us. What a thrill it is to be involved in them! I report them to you so you can share in the joy that is ours when the Lord blesses us with such opportunities. Open doors set before us!

Let us look together at the encouraging words of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia because in many ways we parallel their situation. Revelation 3:7:

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: "I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie--behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it any more; and I will write upon 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

In this series of letters we have observed that the Lord corrects his churches. Further, we have seen the churches try to defend themselves against the persecuting power of the Roman Empire, from error within, from false prophets and beguiling, sinister teachings that had found their way into the churches. If we were speaking of athletics we might note that there is repeated reference to defense with little discussion of offense. Each letter contains a means for defense to offer protection against various spiritual problems. In this letter to the church in Philadelphia, however, the offense is finally introduced. Here the Lord directs his people to not just hang on and root out the evil in their midst but to walk through the open door of opportunity he had given them. There is no word of correction here, rather a call to advance.

Thus as the offense takes the field in this letter, as it were, we could not be faulted if we expected them to be as big, as strong and hard--hitting as their opponents. Recall that some of the antagonists against whom the churches labored were extremely impressive. Jezebel was a powerful, extraordinary beguiler. Balaam was an immensely capable, charismatic figure in his day. But the church on offense is anything but powerful and charismatic. This is hardly surprising. God's servants are often insignificant shepherds and fishermen, ordinary, uneducated people, lacking anything the world would regard as commendable. These are the people who will, for his sake, take the territory through the open door he has set before them.

The unnamed individual who is alluded to here is Eliakim. The reference to the 'key of David' and an 'open door which no one can shut' was directed to Eliakim in Isaiah's prophecy. Eliakim, a very ordinary man, was a steward in the house of Hezekiah, a godly, influential king in Israel's history. But Eliakim, not King Hezekiah, is the Old Testament hero Jesus recalls to encourage the Philadelphian Christians. Neither does he spotlight Isaiah, perhaps the greatest of the prophets, a lyrical, powerful preacher and a contemporary of Eliakim. In fact, as a steward in Hezekiah's house, Eliakim communicated messages between the prophet and the king. Yet, it is the ordinary man, Eliakim, not the greater figures--Isaiah and Hezekiah--to whom Jesus points in this letter. The central events in his life are discussed in Isaiah, chapters 22 and 36-37.

Eliakim served alongside the wicked Shebna, another servant of Hezekiah. Shebna used his position in the king's house to feather his own nest, to seek out riches for himself and to sow turmoil and discord among the people. Shebna's influence was only one of the difficulties Eliakim faced. During an attack on Jerusalem by the Assyrians, Eliakim stood on the wall surrounding the city, looking down on an Assyrian army led by Rabshakeh, a powerful commander who laughed at the God of the people of Israel and directed his taunts at Eliakim. Although Eliakim knew that this would have a demoralizing influence on his people, he was not even allowed to answer back.

This then is the man we are reminded of as we read this letter. Eliakim is the man in question in the quote from Isaiah,

'Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulders. When he opens, no one will shut. When he shuts, no one will open, and I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father's house.'

The church at Philadelphia was neither large nor commanding. It did not control vast revenues. It did not have the world changers, the people of significance in its midst. But the Lord brought for them the key of David that once had been placed on Eliakim's shoulder. That is what we are to bear in mind as we study this letter. As events turned out, an angel of the Lord passed among the Assyrian hordes who ridiculed Eliakim and his God, and 185,000 men lay dead in the morning. As events turned out, the commander of the army had to go back to Nineveh and was not allowed to attack the city. As events turned out, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, was slain as he worshipped an idol shortly after these events took place. As events turned out, the power of God was greater than the power of the enemy. Eliakim, the ordinary man, saw a great victory won for the Lord, not because of his own strength but because of the prayers that were offered by his people.

I am encouraged to see my good friends Bob and Pearl Smith here this morning. Bob's heart is not functioning as well as it used to. It is performing at only a fraction of what it ought to, though his inner man is being strengthened day by day. We could say of him, 'Here is a man in reduced circumstances, one who was once physically strong but is now weak.' Yet he is still a man of godly influence--a pastor to pastors. An effective ministry does not require robust physical health. An effective ministry does not demand the smartest, richest, best educated people in order to see an effective outcome for the Lord's sake. The call to this church in Philadelphia, a church of little strength was, 'You go through the doors that I have set open for you.' A faithful response was all that was required.

Think for a moment about the symbols of a door and a key. A key is a physical implement that opens a door. A key could unlock a code. A key allows entry and opens vistas. A key brings about change. Although in and of itself a key is not necessarily weighty or important, it creates access. Peter was given by Jesus the 'keys to the kingdom.' The first chapter of this book of Revelation has a picture of Jesus with another key in his hand, the 'key of death and Hades.' David's house (the key of which was laid on Eliakim's shoulders) was to be

Messiah's house. The Son of David (Messiah) would be the one who would come to bridge the chasm between God and man. All of this suggests that the key the; is mentioned here gives access to the living God. It grants us a place in God's kingdom; frees us from the prison of death and Hades. This key opens up opportunity to know the living God and to receive life from him.

Christians are given an incredible opportunity to tell people that God loves them, that he has drawn near to them. 'The key, in a sense is the gospel message, the means by which the truth becomes available, the truth that says, 'You do not have to be dominated by death and desperate for relief. You do not have to be a people forever on the run, afraid to face yourself. The gospel is the message that says, 'Access to God is possible. life everlasting is possible.' Jesus has the key to death and Hades and he says to his servants, 'I set an open door before you for service in the gospel.'

The President of the United States is in the hospital, having just undergone major surgery. The scene is easily imagined. Hospitals for kings and presidents are still hospitals. Tubes are still tubes. People in white are still people in white. The drugs, the hustle and bustle, the fear are the same. It does not matter that, by human reckoning he is the most important person in the world. When cancer threatens his life, he and his wife pray the same prayers that every husband and wife pray under those circumstances. They fear the same things. They seek the same answers, the same access to the same God that everybody seeks. What the human heart requires is what Jesus says of himself as he speaks to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, 'The one who is holy, the one who is true has the key of David.'

We want to be holy. We want to do right, to set aside all the ugly things we are so prone to do. We want genuine life, not life that is phony and deteriorating. It does not matter how important we are. We all long for the same thing. The Lord said to Eliakim, 'I am the one who has the key to life. The fact that you are not powerful does not matter. You are not a great king like Hezekiah, nor a prophet like Isaiah. You do not have degrees in theology; you have never written a book. You are Eliakim, but before you,' he is also saying to this church, 'before you stands an open door.' They had opportunity to share the gospel. All they had to do was avail themselves of it.

We too have similar opportunities for service, whether it is by our giving, our prayers, our willingness to meet together to pray for others, our seeking out hurting people, our responsiveness to the cries of needy people around us. The Eliakims among us, the ordinary people are the ones who are given an open door for service. The offensive team has taken the field, and we are somewhat surprised to find they are a rather unimpressive, motley crew, quite unlike the opponent we met in earlier letters. But before this team has been set a door of opportunity for service for the Lord, a door that cannot be shut.

Let us briefly consider what the Lord commends this church for. We have already seen that they are not very impressive or powerful. What is noteworthy about them? We may summarize all of our Lord's commendations under the single word, 'faithfulness.' These people were faithful. Verse 8 'You... have kept My word and have not denied My name.' Keeping his word means that they had obeyed what God had called them to do. When the Lord called them to pray, they prayed. When he spoke to them of purity of life, they obeyed. When he indicated they ought to be generous, they were generous. When he suggested that a quality family life was important to him, then quality family life was chosen by them. They were an obedient people.

And secondly, they did not 'deny his name.' They were willing to speak up so that other people knew they belonged to Jesus Christ. Whether it was appreciated by those who heard it or not, they were willing to name his name. They never backed down from association with him. They never tried to pretend they were something else. And these were continuous actions--they kept on keeping his word. Verse 10: 'You have kept the word of My perseverance.' The same kind of perseverance that Jesus exhibited on earth had become characteristic of them also. Taken together, all of these things suggest that this church's primary characteristic was faithfulness For that reason they had received an open door for ministry to others, an opportunity to serve, a chance to reach out and take territory for Christ's sake. They had become the offensive team. called on to the field because they were faithful.

A friend whom I had not seen for a long time called me recently and asked me to perform his wedding ceremony. We first met when I was a sophomore in college and I was involved as a Young Life leader in a

local high school where he was a sophomore. We would study the Bible together in his house occasionally and meet just to talk. He had since gone on to maintain an up and down Christian experience--one that has of late been much more down than up. He had also become important, rich and successful, living in the last lane of this fast society. He called me up and said he and his fiancée were planning to be married and they realized they needed help and counsel. They had not been attending this church or indeed any church. He told me the reason he had decided to call me was that, in his words, 'For 15 years, ever since I was in Young Life, you have been saying the same things and we need to hear what you have to say. You have maintained your convictions for 15 years. We need to talk with someone who has that kind of faithfulness, that kind of continuity.' If I had told him the truth about all those years, I'm sure he would have been much less impressed! In any event, this man was motivated to telephone me because of what he saw as faithfulness.

Steadfastness and perseverance are tremendous tools in the hand of God. Consistency, not grand success one moment, abject failure the next--that is what people respond to. Before the church in Philadelphia stood an open door. The Lord said, 'It is time for the offense to take the field, time for territory to be gained, time for service to be rendered. It is time for the gospel to go forth. The message of access to God is ready to be preached. Although you do not have anything else going for you by the standards of the world, you have been faithful. A door stands open and it cannot be shut.'

Let us see not only what the Lord commends this church for, but the actions he will take. First, he will deal with their antagonists. Yes, the door stands open, but their opponents must also be dealt with. He identifies these enemies as members of the synagogue of Satan--Jews. They had a Jewish heritage but they had long since stopped caring about the things that concerned God. They spent their days resisting his Messiah. Jesus says of them, 'Those of "the synagogue of Satan" I will humble before you. I will make them know that I have loved you. I will humble them and make them acknowledge that.' What a great turnaround! These Jews expected the Gentiles to grovel before them. As we consider our world and the antagonists and opponents we face, this should encourage us to believe that the Lord who opens the doors of ministry will also deal with whatever problems we will encounter.

Then our Lord adds, curiously, perhaps, 'I will keep you from the hour of testing, the hour which is about to come upon the whole world.' The church in Smyrna also suffered slander from pseudo- Jews, but although the Lord acknowledged that fact he did not promise to remedy their situation; they would continue to face that test. But here he promises a special kind of ministry to get these people through it or else remove them from the test. We can only imagine how the church at Smyrna felt upon hearing that their brethren in Philadelphia would be relieved from the forthcoming test. But we must recognize that God has the right to give different assignments to his church.

These tests differ in another way, however. The test in Smyrna was a controlled situation (destined to last a certain period of time to be determined by Christ), intended to lead them to the crown of life. The Bible speaks of such tests in many places. The Lord will at times put his people through tests so as to taring about a positive, beautiful result. What he speaks of here, however, is the test that will destroy the unrighteous world system that is opposed to his rule. It is intended to display failure. He will not put Christians through that test that will undermine and crumble the strongholds of evil in the world. The book of Daniel describes an opulent, drunken feast given by Belshazzar which was suddenly interrupted by a finger which appeared and began writing on a wall. Daniel interpreted the writing as saying, 'You have been weighed in the scales (you have been tested) send found deficient (found wanting).' That is the kind of test that will finally come on the world, the assaying of the Lord to bring about judgment. But Christians are not called to go through that. When we are called to suffer it is so that something beautiful will result.

Finally, Jesus says, 'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.' If you can be of service to the Lord, take advantage of the opportunity. Do not let another have your crown because the Master is coming soon. At times the trials, the suffering seem endless. We are tempted to say, 'Why work so hard? Why should I spend myself? It seems like I'm getting nowhere. But the word of the Lord is, 'Every moment the day draws nearer and nearer. I am coming soon into history, into your life. I may even come in some powerful way into your present experience. Persevere, remain faithful,' is his word to the church at Philadelphia.

At the end of the letter the permanence of the new city, the new Jerusalem, is highlighted. Permanence is the dominant theme of verse 12. The things of the earth will crumble and pass away finally but Jesus will give these overcomers, these faithful ones a place of honor in the 'city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God.' Philadelphia was subject to earthquakes. People oftentimes had to flee their homes as the ground shook beneath them. In the great brush fires in California recently the news reports showed people snatching a few belongings before the inferno reached their homes. One moment they were perfectly secure and the next everything they owned burned to ashes. What the Lord is promising the church in Philadelphia is that once the process is over the new city, the New Jerusalem, with sturdy pillars and names indelibly engraved, will last forever.

The Lord placed the key of the house of David on the shoulders of an obscure man; not Isaiah, not Hezekiah, but Eliakim. Some in this congregation think they are too insignificant, too weak or too unworthy to use their gifts, to reach out to children, to care for the needy, to teach the Scriptures, to serve the brokenhearted, to share the gospel with the unbelieving world. But human ability and recognition are not what God requires; faithfulness is what he is seeking.

We all have been given an opportunity to review whether we are going through the doors that are open. Do we care? Are we willing to serve, to spend ourselves and then experience the joy of the crown that goes with that? 'I set before you an open door no man can shut.' Whether we will walk through the door is up to us. Whether we will use the gifts he has given us, whether we will pray and learn and serve is up to us.

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