

# PHILADELPHIA: DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY

*SERIES: JESUS: LORD OF HIS CHURCH*

by Ron Ritchie

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Four years ago my dear friend Pastor Frank Vander Zwan of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church told me that the Lord Jesus had opened a door for him to minister in some Russian orphanages north of Moscow. After a season of prayer, he became confident that the Lord would enable him to walk through that open door. On his first trip he took a small team of men and women from his church and soon found that they were free to share the love of Jesus Christ with those children and their caretakers in word and deed. On the next trip he was led to adopt a Russian teenager, who now lives with his family.

In the first two weeks of July Frank was in Russia again with two teams of thirty men and women. He led one team of fifteen folks to one orphanage, and my son Ron, Jr. led the other team to another orphanage. Both teams came home with hearts filled with a deeper love for the Lord, and for the many abandoned children with whom they played, traveled, ate, slept, prayed, and shared the love of Jesus. They are making plans to return within the year with several more teams so they can go to more orphanages. The children were blessed by our Lord, but Frank thought the greatest blessings came to the men and women who were willing to walk through that door into Russia that the Lord had opened for them.

Frank and I had lunch last Tuesday. As he began to share with me some of the photos of those children and their stories, we both found our food being seasoned with the salt from our tears of joy and thankfulness to our Lord Jesus for opening those doors so that he could express his love through these folks to the orphans of Russia.

Jesus told his spiritual children in Philadelphia, "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." The response he was obviously expecting was for those dear people to walk through that door and buy up the many opportunities they found to express his love in word and deed.

## **The church in Philadelphia: doors of opportunity**

Revelation 3:7:

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

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.

While John was a prisoner of Rome on the island of Patmos in 94-95 A.D., he was free in the Spirit to enjoy a visit with his glorified Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the courts of God. On that Sunday, Jesus commissioned his beloved apostle to write what we now call the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Part of John's commission was to record our Lord's words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise; and then make sure the letters were delivered to his bride, the seven churches in western Turkey. Jesus chose those seven churches as a symbol of completeness. That is, his spiritual evaluation of them is what he wanted to say to every church then and to every church in every generation since then until he comes again. So far in our study we have seen that Jesus, the Lord of the church, warned the church of Ephesus to guard their first love for him, encouraged the church of Smyrna to remain faithful to him in the midst of suffering, encouraged the church of Pergamum to remain faithful to the truth of the gospel, exhorted the church of Thyatira to deal with the Jezebel in their midst and remain holy, and exhorted the church of Sardis to wake up spiritually or lose their lampstand.

Now we are going to look at the church in Philadelphia, for whom our glorified Lord had nothing but words of encouragement, exhortation, and promise as he presented to them open doors of opportunity to serve him in the midst of their trials.

Philadelphia ("City of Brotherly Love") was located about sixty miles east of Sardis. The city was a border town founded by Greek colonists from Pergamum (160 BC). The government of Pergamum had given those colonists an "open door" to teach the surrounding inhabitants about the Greek culture and language, and they were so successful that the whole region was peacefully converted to a Greek colony by the year 19 A.D. In 17 A.D., while the city was in the hands of the Romans, it suffered a devastating earthquake, which also destroyed about ten other cities in the area, including Sardis. The aftershocks continued for years, and at times they were so bad that most of the population lived outside the city in huts.

Philadelphia, with its open, cosmopolitan lifestyle, was a gateway to central Asia Minor (Turkey). As was customary in the other seven cities on the postal route, the city had its temples to the Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. It also had its Jewish synagogue, which, as in the city of Smyrna (see 2:9), actively persecuted the Christian church. Yet the church of Philadelphia would receive the greatest praise from the Lord Jesus.

"These are the words of him who is holy and true...." Jesus is holy, set apart to God to carry out his will in heaven and on earth. He is holy in that he is wholesome, perfect, living in absolute purity before the Father and above all creation. A little while later John would be taken up into heaven and would be allowed to watch the Lamb of God open up the fifth of seven seals. When Jesus came to the fifth seal, John said that he saw under the altar "...the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'" (6:9-11). Peter had written to a former generation living in this area, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Peter 1:15). As our Lord Jesus set himself apart to God his Father, so we are to set ourselves apart from the world and give ourselves wholly to Jesus.

In Revelation 19:11 Jesus is called "Faithful and True." In his humanity, Jesus told his disciples that he was the way, the truth, and the life. That means that without a relationship with him, there is no way back to God the Father. Without his word of truth, there is no absolute foundation of eternal reality for our lives in relationship to him or each other, there is no good or evil, there is no broad road or narrow road, there is no heaven or hell; we are left to swim a stormy sea of uncertainty. Jesus is the only truth in a world filled with false gods, false doctrines, and vain philosophies.

Before his imprisonment, John had written to the saints in Ephesus, "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true---even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). Without his life within us, there is no hope or joy of an abundant life now and into eternity.

"These are the words of him...who holds the key of David." The key of David is a metaphor for complete control over the royal house, the kingdom. Isaiah the prophet had written (725 BC) about the key of David when Sennacherib king of Assyria, having already captured Samaria (the capital of the ten northern tribes of Israel), had moved on to the holy city with the hope of defeating King Hezekiah of the house of King David (1000 BC). But King Hezekiah told the very frightened people in the city that God would protect them if they would not give in to fear of the hostile Assyrian army, but would rather turn to God and depend on him to defend them (see 2 Chronicles 32). The Lord then put Eliakim, one of his servants in Hezekiah's court, into a position of power. Then the Lord said of Eliakim, "He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (Isaiah 22:21-22).<sup>1</sup>

Eliakim prefigured the coming Messiah, for Jesus is the one who has all the authority and power over God's household and the church, over God's spiritual kingdom. As Eliakim had the key of David, so now in this immediate context our Lord, who is of the house David and who will one day sit on the throne of David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16), is the one who has the key of David, the key that opens the door to truth and holiness. Jesus also has the keys to the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 16:19) and the keys to death and Hades (see

Revelation 1:18).

The Christian community in Philadelphia was to walk through the door that Christ had opened in order to (1) continue to preach the gospel (Acts 1:8), (2) continue to remain the faithful lampstand that held up the Light of the world, and (3) participate in the good works that God had prepared beforehand for them to walk in (see Ephesians 2:10). As long as Jesus holds the door open, no one can close it, but once he closes the door of salvation and service, no one will be able to open it. (What an awesome thought that one day the doors of salvation will be closed forever. And then will come the judgment.) John Stott observed, "So if the door is the symbol of the church's opportunity, the key is the symbol of Christ's authority."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, the Lord of his church, now offered...

### **A word of encouragement**

Revelation 3:8-9:

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 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.

Jesus reminded this group of believers, as he had the other five churches, that having risen from the dead some sixty years earlier, he was now present and forever personally involved with each one of his churches, as well as with each individual who believes in him as their Lord and Savior. He knows all about us on an intimate level, there is nothing hidden. He knows all about our deeds and the motives behind them.

These dear "Christ-followers" were living in a city where the population was enslaved and tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil. They were also persecuted by the Jews in the local synagogue of Satan. Our Lord's encouraging word was, "I have placed before you an open door so that you can go about making the invisible Christ visible in word and deed." The Romans had built the many roads leading to Rome, and this community of believers was living in the time we call the Pax Romana, the great Roman Peace. Greek was the common trade language, and the Old Testament had been translated from the Hebrew into Greek in what is now called the Septuagint (LXX). The Spirit of God was moving among a spiritually hungry people who were questioning the old Greek and Roman religious superstitions.

Peter had been given an open door with the Jews on the day of Pentecost. Philip had been given an open door to bring the gospel to the Samaritans. Paul had been given an open door to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul told the Corinthians, "...I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me..." (1 Corinthians 16:8-9). He told the same believers later, "...I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me..." (2 Corinthians 2:12). It is interesting that Brother Andrew calls his ministry Open Doors. And he and his staff are committed to going to the nations where the doors of opportunity seem to be slowly, if not at times swiftly, closing to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those doors will stay open or will be closed only by the One who has the key of David.

Jesus said to the brothers and sisters in the church in Philadelphia, "I have placed before you an open door...walk through it with my gospel and the goods works that I have prepared for you to walk in." Our Lord Jesus continues to open doors for his church in every generation, including our Peninsula Bible Church at this very hour--open doors for the presentation of the gospel and for service, open doors that will enable us to express the love and light of Christ in a very dark society.

Just this week Tom Means and Mark Ledwith walked through an open door with their spiritual gifts of mercy and service to provide food and comfort to a frightened wife living alone, because her husband had been ordered out of town for two weeks of military duty. Scott Grant, Irene Dashler, and Ken Fong walked through a door that Christ opened so they could use their gifts of teaching and encouragement to minister to Japanese Christians in Brazil. Kathy Woodhall has walked through an open door Christ provided on the Internet, which

enables her to make connection with women from around the country and the world offering words of encouragement and spiritual wisdom. Rich and Marty Carlson are walking through a door of opportunity in Romania next month in which they will be teaching the Scriptures at a couples conference, then at a camp with Dana Harris, and finally at a conference designed to encourage pastors and their wives.

Chris and Susan Knepper are walking through an open door of hospitality as they seek to love their neighbors. Ted Wise has found an open door at a cafe in downtown Palo Alto where he sits and shares the love of Christ with the customers. Next weekend a young man I know is going through an open door by faith to present the gospel to his girlfriend. And next Saturday a couple named Greg and Hillary want to use the open door of their wedding to glorify our Lord and to present his love and his good news to their family and friends. I will have the joy and privilege of officiating. It is amazing how many doors our Lord opens up for us to walk through to present the gospel, teach the Scriptures, and serve him in word and deed. It is wonderful how so many of you understand and are willing by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit to walk through these doors. Keep it up!

"I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." It appears that in this city the Christian community had very little spiritual influence, and yet they refused to stop living out their lives for Jesus. And at times when it was politically and socially unwise to speak of Jesus as their Lord and Savior, because it was the season to worship the emperor as god, they publicly and privately refused to conceal their relationship with Jesus.

In the May 20, 1996 issue of *Christianity Today* there was an article entitled "Will the Jerusalem Church survive the Peace Process?" by Tim C. Morgan. The author stated that the city of Jerusalem has a population of some 584,500 people and only 16,000 Christians. The Christian influence has been greatly diffused by the explosive growth of the Jews since 1967. "Christian ministry in the Holy Land has four concentrations: evangelistic outreach, social justice concerns, end time prophetic fulfillment and holy places pilgrimages. Yet, few believers have found a way to integrate all four efforts, thereby effectively confronting the swiftly changing circumstances and shifting tensions in the Holy Land" (p. 61).

At first glance one might be tempted to consider asking Christians from around the world to move to Jerusalem in order to get the upper hand politically and spiritually. But the word of Christ to his people was, "Don't let the outward appearance of a city filled with powerful people and pagan temples, as well as a synagogue of Satan pressing down on your church, discourage you. I know about your little strength, but, more importantly, I'm delighted with the fact that you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

"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." The Jews in the nation of Israel who were led by Satan to crucify Jesus and who continued to persecute Christians up to that very moment would one day be brought to a position of humility before King Jesus and his saints. According to God the Father, his Messiah will come back to Israel. Isaiah 49:7:

"This is what the Lord says---  
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel--  
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,  
to the servant of rulers:

'Kings will see you and rise up,  
princes will see and bow down,  
because of the Lord, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'"

These same enemies of Christ will one day be made to come and fall down in humility not only before Jesus but before the Christians in Philadelphia and in each generation, and acknowledge that Jesus loved the very ones they hated.

Note that Jesus gave a word of encouragement, but no word of correction; then...

## The promise

Revelation 3:10:

Since 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.

The Lord had given them, as well as his church in every generation till he comes again, a command to endure patiently in the midst of persecution and trials. Our Lord first mentioned this to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. He was speaking of the signs of the end of the age: the many false prophets, wars, famines, earthquakes, tribulation, and the fact that some would be killed and others hated for his name's sake. At the same time, some would fall away, false prophets would arrive on stage, lawlessness would increase, and finally, most people's hearts would grow cold. "But the one who endures to the end [the genuine believer], it is he who shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13). They remained under the pressure without giving in to the temptation to flee. They remained with patience because they knew that behind the immediate pressure stood their risen Lord who also endured as he faced evil men and an unjust trial and death. "...While suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Peter 2: 23-24).

The writer to the Hebrews encouraged the Jewish believers, "...Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3). As Jesus endured his suffering, he kept his eyes focused not on the cross but on the crown.

"...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." We need to understand several issues here: (1) The hour of trial is a divine judgment that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. (2) It is not a local trial but a worldwide trial. (3) It is a test, a spiritual purification. (4) It is designed to affect those who live on the earth. (5) Jesus will keep the Christian community out of the hour of trial.

Further, there are a couple of ways to understand the Lord's protecting the Christians in Philadelphia from the "hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth." There is a near view and a far view of this prophecy. First, the near view spoke of a tribulation at that time. Politically these Christians, including the apostle John, were living during Rome's second worldwide persecution of them. The political and social landscape looked bad for the Christians, but the Lord promised that he would be with them and keep them from being destroyed as a church in their generation.

Second, the far view of this prophecy spoke of the great tribulation, of the church at the end of the age. The prophet Daniel spoke of this hour of trial: "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then" (12:2). The prophet Joel (2:2) spoke of

"...A day of darkness and gloom...  
There has never been anything like it,  
Nor will there be again after it..."

In the far view the Lord was speaking of "the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world" in reference to the future events that he would describe to John in chapters 6-19, which include "a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matthew 24:21; see also Revelation 7:14). Once that hour of trial, that test, begins, the Lord Jesus will protect the believers by keeping them from it, not just delivering them through it. Peter spoke of the rescue of Lot from Sodom just before God brought his divine judgment upon that wicked city: "...the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment...." (2 Peter 2:9). Many Bible scholars have thought that the Lord will somehow remove his bride from the earth before the beginning of the

great tribulation (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

A word of encouragement, a word of promise, and then...

### **A word of exhortation**

Revelation 3:11:

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

In our Lord's view of time and eternity, he promised these dear spiritual sons and daughters of God that he would return soon. Soon for him means soon, but soon for us seems like an eternity. The believers of Peter's day struggled with the whole concept of how soon is soon. Peter replied to that community suffering under the evil hand of Nero, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The Christians' hope is that Jesus is coming not only soon, but quickly. That may mean that he will come without any announcement, "like a thief in the night." The idea is that he will come suddenly or unexpectedly, but not necessarily immediately, to take his bride home with him before the worldwide trial or the great tribulation. (Our Lord would end this letter with the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to [all] the churches," not just to the church of Philadelphia.)

"Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." Don't let anyone or anything trip you up in the last few yards of the race. Paul had the Greek foot races in mind when he wrote from a prison cell in Rome to Timothy, who was living in Ephesus, Turkey. As he reflected on the reality that he had but a few months, weeks, or even days left before he would have his head cut off by a Roman soldier he said, "...I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future 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 Timothy 4:7-8). I can hear the Lord Jesus saying, "Hang in with me to the end of the race! Hold on, I know life is difficult for you at this time, I know the many temptations you face to give in to the flesh, I know how many times you wanted to forsake me, I know the pain and struggle you suffer because you decided to follow me! But keep running and keep your eyes fixed on me, for the race is almost over, and then the crown of righteousness!"

Who will ever forget the dramatic battle last Monday night (July 23, 1996) between the U.S. and Russian women's gymnastics teams? Who will ever forget the agony of victory, demonstrated by a 4'9" eighteen-year-old American girl, whom her coach called Baby, but the world now knows is named Kerri Strug. She was chosen to be the team anchor, but few really knew much about her or the thousands of hours of training she had put in, the five different coaches she had in the last four years, the torn stomach muscle that kept her out of competition for some eight months, the accident on the uneven parallel bars, and the years of living in the shadow of so many greater gymnasts.

But all of a sudden, because her teammate Dominique had fallen on her two tries at the vault, the gold medal was held in the balance between the U.S. and the Russians. It was Kerri's moment. Her left leg was already wrapped because of an earlier injury. The pressure was on in spades. She walked up to the eighty-two-foot runway, looked at the judges, raised her hand, and gave it all she had as she hit the vault, flipped over, and landed badly. She limped back for her second and last try. The Russians were watching, hoping for another failure. Kerri looked at the scoreboard as pain rushed through her left leg. "My leg, my leg," she cried. "Shake it off, shake it off!" her coach Bela Karolyi yelled. Then he asked her, "Can you do it?" Kerri nodded. Later she would say, "I knew if I didn't do the vault, we weren't going to win the gold and all the hard work the whole team had put in would be for nothing. I felt I had no choice, I owed it to everyone." She prayed, "Let me do this vault just one more time."

With her left ankle wracked with pain, she ran down the runway for the last time. She did a roundoff cartwheel

and landed her feet on the springboard with her back to the vault. Then she sprang onto the horse, did one and a half twists in the air, and landed on her feet, full force, ripping two ligaments in her left ankle. Pain filled her face as she stood on her good right leg with her injured left ankle lifted, and raised her arms to the judges as tears ran down her cheeks. Then she fell to the floor rocking in pain as the crowd went wild with joy, realizing that she had enabled her team to win the first gold medal in team competition. Her leg attended to, she wanted to be with her teammates to receive the medal, so her coach picked her up in his arms, as Jesus will one day pick us up in his arms, and carried her to the platform to receive her gold medal with the other six women. It was an awesome moment!

She will now be the one you will see each time they show any film on the twenty-sixth Olympiad. She will be the defining athlete, the one who embodied the courage we hear so much about in athletes and rarely see in reality.<sup>3</sup> After seeing that, all I could think of was Jesus' saying to all of us who love him, "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

More promises...

### **The promises**

Revelation 3:12-13:

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

A pillar conveys the idea of strength, permanence, security. The overcomers will have a permanent place in the heavenly places, the temple of God (see Hebrews 9). This was wonderful news to a people who lived in "earthquake country" and had to flee to the countryside more than once to live in temporary dwellings.

Each believer who finishes the race will receive three permanent marks of ownership on their new body, placed there by their Master: (1) The name of God, which will describe his holy character. (2) The name of "the city of my God, the new Jerusalem" (see Revelation 21-22). This is our new home where God lives. We will have a new passport, a new citizenship, security, community, love, joy, and peace. It will be the city of peace. (3) The new name of Jesus will be added to the names we were previously given, which all describe his character and activity. Jesus means "Savior." In the book of Revelation he has been or will be revealed as having the following names: the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord God, the Almighty, the Son of Man, the First and the Last, the Living One, the Son of God, the Witness, the Creator, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb, the Shepherd, the Christ, the Faithful and True, the Word of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Morning Star. One day he will let us know his new name, which will describe his new ministry to us.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Here was Jesus' final injunction to listen carefully to this letter of good news, filled with encouragement, giving promises of an open door for evangelism and good deeds, of righteous judgment, of deliverance, of a crown, a pillar, a permanent home with God and his Son, and a sign he would place on our bodies signifying that we belong to him forever.

In the last message I asked the rhetorical question, "Do you think our church is alive or dead?" One gentleman in the second service blurted out, "It's alive!" If that answer is true for most of us, then may this passage challenge us even more. As men and women who love Jesus Christ, we know that he has given us the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit to express our spiritual gifts within this church and in the surrounding community. So the next thing we need to do is ask the Lord of his church to provide the open doors for service so we can walk through them. There are open doors for learning more about Jesus and his word in Discovery Center. There are open doors for some to walk through in the children's ministry, the student ministry, the young adults ministry, the missions program, the music ministry, the East Palo Alto ministry, and the outreach ministries.

The question remains: What plans are you now making to be able by the power of the Holy Spirit to walk through the doors that Jesus opens up for you to present the gospel of salvation to the world around you as well as to serve others within this church and community? "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...See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."

Notes:

1. Thanks to Joan Ryan of the San Francisco Chronicle (July 24, 1996) for the details of this account.
  2. *What Christ Thinks of the Church*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984, p. 103.
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Ron Ritchie  
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