

OPEN DOOR

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 3:7-13
Eighth Message
Scott Grant
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Revelation 3:7-13

Just before getting married, I spent a few afternoons reflecting on what I had learned from being single. Six days before the wedding, I shared those insights in my message to the young adult ministry that I was shepherding at the time. Among other things, I said I learned that:

– One can knock on a locked door for a long time before figuring out that it is locked.

– It really doesn't matter what technique you use (knocking harder, softer, varying the tempo, etc.); if a door is locked, it's locked.

– One's hand can get really sore from knocking for a long time on a locked door. (The text of the message is at https://cdn.pbc.org/Main_Service/2000/08/01/BeingSingle.pdf)

Indeed, many doors had been closed to me, both relational doors and vocational doors. In some cases, I tried to force my way in, but I couldn't. How can we respond when doors close in our face?

True witness

Revelation 3:7:

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia 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.’”

In Revelation 6:10, God is identified as “holy and true.” In that Jesus identifies himself as “the holy one, the true one,” he equates himself with God. In the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is some ambiguity about the deity of Christ. In those Gospels, Jesus comes across as definitely human and possibly divine. In Revelation, after the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, there is no doubt.

In Revelation 3:14, Jesus identifies himself as the “true witness.” Here, Jesus identifies himself as “the true

one,” who speaks the truth. In the address to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus is setting up a contrast with certain Jews who “lie.” Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, king of Israel, Lord of the world, holy and true.

As the Messiah, Jesus “has the key of David,” who was the king of Israel from whose line the Messiah was to come. Jesus here is drawing on Isaiah 22:22, where access to the earthly throne room was in view. Jesus, as the Son of David, opens the door to the kingdom of God, to the throne room of God, bringing us into the very presence of God (John 10:7, 9; Acts 14:27; Revelation 3:20; Revelation 4:1). On the one hand, for those in Philadelphia who have been shut out of the Jewish synagogue because they believe that Jesus is the Messiah, this would be especially meaningful. On the other hand, those who don't submit to Jesus will be shut out of the kingdom of God.

No one other than Jesus can open or close the door. Everyone who submits to him gets in. No one who doesn't submit to him gets in, no matter who they are and what do.

We live now in what's been called a “post-truth” world. Who do you believe in such a world? You believe “the true one,” “the true witness.” He speaks truthfully. When we listen to the words of Jesus, both in this letter and elsewhere in the New Testament, we're listening to the truth. In the letter to the church in Philadelphia, what does he tell us?

Open door

Revelation 3: 8-9:

“I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 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.”

The works that Jesus knows are defined in the third sentence in verse 8. Although the church in Philadelphia has “little power,” it has remained faithful to the Jesus’ word and has not disowned him in the face of persecution (Revelation 1:2, 9). Later, Jesus praises the church because it has literally “kept the word of my endurance”—that is, his word, centering on the Gospel, that calls for endurance (Revelation 3:10). The church has persevered in faith. Compared to the Romans and even to the Jews, who were more numerous and who enjoyed certain protections in the Roman empire, the little church in Philadelphia, indeed, had little power. It was small both in size and stature.

The church need not be concerned for earthly power, however.

First, the church need not be concerned for earthly power because Jesus has opened to it the door to the kingdom of God, and no one, neither the Romans nor the Jews, will be able to shut it. If the church has access to the throne room of God, what does it matter what the Roman emperor decrees from his throne room or what the Jews plot in their synagogue?

Second, the church need not be concerned for earthly power because those with more earthly power who are currently threatening it will one day submit to it.

Just like the synagogue of Jews in Smyrna, the synagogue of Jews in Philadelphia is a “synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9). These Jews are unwittingly serving the purposes of Satan by opposing Jesus’ followers. As such, Jesus says they’re not even Jews. Oh, they’re Jews ethnically, but they’re not Jews spiritually, which in the end is the only thing that matters. In fact, Jesus says, these Jews “lie,” first to themselves, convincing themselves that they are the people of God when they are opposing the people of Jesus, whom they believed to be a false Messiah. Jesus is the true one, but these people lie.

In the end, Jesus will “make” these Jews in Philadelphia bow before the feet of the believers in the city. The prophet Isaiah predicted that Gentile nations would bow before Israel, but Jesus predicts that these Jews will bow before the Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Isaiah 45:14, 49:23, 60:14). What gives?

In the New Testament, the people of God constitute Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus. We have already seen that believers have a role in the final judgment, even “authority over the nations” (Revelation 2:26-27, Luke 22:28-30, 1 Corinthians 6:2). Jews who do not believe in Jesus will be among “the nations” who don’t

believe in Jesus. In the end, they will submit first to Jesus, because every knee will bow to him and confess that he is Lord, and then to the people of Jesus and whatever role he assigns to them in the final judgment (Philippians 2:5-11).

These Jews in Philadelphia, though they persecuted the church in the city, will recognize that Jesus has loved it. No doubt this will be in the context of bowing to Jesus and confessing that he is Lord. If these Jews were in the present to hear that Jesus loves the believers in Philadelphia, it would be a non sequitur to them: how can someone who’s dead and gone love anyone, and even if he could, what does it matter? One day, it will not be a non sequitur, and Jesus’ love for these people will matter greatly. If only these people could recognize that Jesus loves them too!

Enjoy the presence of the king

Have you felt that doors have been closed to you, even slammed in your face—educational doors, relational doors, or vocational doors? Perhaps you have been forced out of places, with the door swinging shut behind you. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out,” they say. Indeed, it may seem that you, like the church in Philadelphia, have “little power” to open doors that you want to be opened.

Little power? No problem.

Instead of instructing the church in Philadelphia to seek for more earthly power, Jesus commends the church for its faithfulness, and he commands ongoing faithfulness:

- “You have kept my word.”
- “[Y]ou have not denied my name.”
- “You have kept my word about patient endurance.”
- “Hold fast what you have.”

Historically, the church has often compromised its witness when seeking earthly power.

Listen again to Jesus’ words to the believers in Philadelphia: “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.” Our text tells us that Jesus has loved us. How has he loved us? He has loved us by opening the door to the throne room of God. And we know what that cost him!

Regardless of what doors have been closed to you, if you believe in Jesus, the door into the throne room of God, into the very presence of God, is open to you.

It's been said that when God closes a door, he opens a window. That's not what this text says, however. Jesus says that a door is always open to believers regardless of any other door that is closed to them.

Is there a greater place to be than the throne room of God? In Revelation 4-5, John is given a vision of the throne room, and it's positively breathtaking. John will take us with him.

What do you do in the throne room? You praise, you confess, you lament, you give thanks, you appeal, you offer yourself to God. You enjoy the presence of the King! In the throne room, we learn that everything—literally everything—is going to be fine. I've found it helpful, since diving into this text, to imagine myself in the throne room of God when praying.

In the throne room of God, decisions get handed down that impact all eternity (Revelation 5:1). Amazingly, the King listens to our prayers and incorporates them into his redemptive plan for all creation. In our country, people talk about having access to the Oval Office. Forget about the Oval Office! In any case, you can't just walk into the Oval Office. On the other hand, the door to the throne room of God is wide open—any time, any place.

Jan Johnson writes:

"Even filling the gas tank of a car presents possibilities for conversation with God:

Thank you for enough affordable energy.

—Please help developing countries find ways to afford more resources

—Watch over the people I share the road with—the distracted business executive, the distraught parent, the excited teenager.

Becoming intentional about enjoying God's presence invites God to invade the in-between moments of life. Any place can be a holy place.

Becoming intentional about enjoying God's presence invites God to invade the in-between moments of life. Any place can be a holy place—even the bathroom. A friend who has suffered a great deal of pain from endometriosis finds the bathroom to be her best place to interact with God. There, doubled over in pain, she can say what she needs to say and find relief.¹

Perhaps in such in-between moments of life, we could reach for our smartphones less and enter the throne room of God more.

Jesus opens the door to the throne room of God, granting us access to God. He also promises that such access will not be taken away.

The hour of trial

Revelation 3:10:

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.

In a play on words, Jesus promises that because the church has "kept" his word by persevering in faith, he will "keep" it from "the hour of trial." What does Jesus mean by this?

In Revelation 2:10, Jesus told the church in Smyrna, the only other church among the seven that comes in for no correction, that it would be "tested" by persecution. (The verb translated "tested" is related to the noun translated "trial." The verb is translated "try" in Revelation 3:10.) It's unlikely that Jesus is saying that the church in Smyrna would be tested but not the church in Philadelphia. The trial in Revelation 3:10 is "coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth." In Revelation, earth dwellers are unbelievers.

Yes, the church in Philadelphia will be tested. What church isn't tested? But it will not be tested in the way that unbelievers will be tested. The believers in Philadelphia may experience the same kinds of things that unbelievers experience, but they will experience those things differently so that their faith will be refined.

In John 17:15, Jesus uses the words "keep" and "from" in a prayer for his disciples: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." (James uses the same words in like manner in James 1:27.) Likewise, Jesus told his disciples, "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your lives" (Luke 21:16-19). They would be killed, but not a single hair on any of their heads would perish: they would be protected spiritually. Eternal life is not threatened by suffering, persecution, or death—or by closed doors.

Therefore, it looks as if Jesus is promising not that the church in Philadelphia will be spared "the hour of

trial” but that it will be protected, in a way that “those who dwell on the earth” aren’t protected, should the hour of trial come upon it. He doesn’t mean that those in the church won’t suffer or be killed. After all, he told the church in Smyrna that some of their members could expect to suffer and be killed. He means that the church will be protected from spiritual harm.

But what is the hour, or time, of trial that is literally “about to come on the whole world”? Jesus told the church in Smyrna not to fear what it was “about to suffer,” which would suggest that the church in Philadelphia is about to suffer what the church in Smyrna is about to suffer, the hour of trial, though the church in Philadelphia and presumably the church in Smyrna will be protected from spiritual harm. The hour is imminent.

The churches that John was writing to were suffering sporadic persecution, but Jesus informs them, through John’s letter, that persecution is about to intensify in a big way throughout the “whole world”—not the inhabited world that we know today but the inhabited world that the church in Philadelphia knew (Luke 2:1, Acts 11:28, 17:6).

Spiritual protection

Revelation 3:12-13:

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 out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Doors may slam in our face, and Jesus may not protect us from persecution, suffering, or death, but he will protect us from spiritual harm. Whatever is done to us, no one and nothing can take away our access to the presence of God.

From time to time, you will hear athletes who have just won a championship say, “No one can take this from me.” I wonder when I hear such words. Has the athlete had something important taken from him in the past? And is this championship so important that it should be cherished in such a way? And who, by the way, would even want to take this championship from him, supposing that such a thing could be done?

In any event, what we have—access to the presence of God—is something worth cherishing, and it’s something that no one and nothing can take from us. Jesus has opened the door to the throne room of God, and “no one is able to shut” it. Whatever comes upon you or the world, Jesus will “keep you.”

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29). In Revelation 3:8, Jesus says, regarding his followers in Philadelphia, that “no one is able to shut” the door that he has opened. In John 10:29, he says, regarding his sheep, that “no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

Whatever happens, and whatever is taken from you, you can always pray. And remember, no matter how little your power, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16).

I’ve been both inspired and challenged by the story of M.Y. Chan, who was imprisoned in a labor camp for his faith. The authorities thought the best way to reform Chan was to appoint him to empty the cesspool of human waste, thinking it was the best way to reform him. Their plan backfired. Chan writes:

But I enjoyed working in the cesspool, because I liked the solitude. In the labor camp, all prisoners were under constant surveillance—none of us could be alone. Only when I worked in the cesspool on Saturdays could I be alone. Then I could pray to our Lord as loudly as I wanted. I could recite the Scriptures and Psalms of the Bible that I still remembered. No one would come close enough to protest! ²

Once again, in verse 11, Jesus commands faithfulness.

Hold fast

Revelation 3:11:

I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

Jesus tells the first-century church in Philadelphia, “I am coming soon.” He is coming—in the present and on an ongoing basis. Jesus is always coming, in judgment and/or salvation, and at times he comes in particularly noticeable ways until one day he will come finally and permanently.

In light of the ongoing comings of Jesus and the final coming of Jesus, the church should “hold fast” what it has—not least Jesus and the kingdom of God, which he has opened to it. Earlier, Jesus promised believers in Smyrna the “crown of life,” which symbolizes victory over evil (Revelation 2:10). Here in Philadelphia, believers already possess the crown. Again, in the book of Revelation, as in the New Testament as a whole, the now and the not yet are in view. As the church perseveres in faith, it is triumphing over evil, though it may not appear to be doing so, especially if persecution increases. Again, persevering faith in Jesus, which also involves persevering allegiance to Jesus, is necessary.

If Jesus were to come to this church soon, before his final coming, and it is holding fast to him, then he would come not in judgment but in salvation of some sort, which would involve vindication.

God’s sovereignty and human free will

On the one hand, Jesus promises his followers eternal life. On the other hand, in the addresses to the seven churches in Revelation and especially in his address to the church in Philadelphia, he insists that his followers remain faithful to him. His promises seem conditioned upon keeping his word, not denying his name, keeping his word about patient endurance, and holding fast what they have. Theologians have argued endlessly about the sovereignty of God and the free will of humanity, most famously Calvin (sovereignty trumps free will) and Arminius (free will trumps sovereignty). Calvin says you can’t lose your salvation; Arminius says you can.

Although I lean toward Calvin, it seems to me that the Scriptures are not so much interested in taking sides in the debate—and maybe aren’t all that interested in the debate, to begin with. If we lean too far toward the sovereignty of God, we disregard the responsibility of humans. If we lean too far toward the responsibility of humans, we disregard the sovereignty of God. It is urgent to trust in the sovereignty of God. It is no less urgent to remain faithful to Jesus, although (leaning toward Calvin here) God in his sovereignty will help us do so.

Finally, one more door will open to us.

The one who conquers

Revelation 3:12-13:

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 out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

As in each of the specific letters to the seven churches, Jesus makes promises to “the one who conquers”—the one who perseveres in faith and therefore triumphs over evil.

First, Jesus will make the one who conquers “a pillar in the temple of my God.” He’s not speaking literally; he’s using imagery again to picture life in the new creation. This imagery would be particularly meaningful to believers in Philadelphia, a city that was subject to earthquakes. A pillar pictures stability.

Moreover, in that the one who conquers will be a pillar in the temple of God and won’t go out of it anymore, he or she will enjoy eternal intimacy with God. There will be no temple in the new Jerusalem because it will be a temple: the presence of God will be everywhere (Revelation 21:22). People went in and out of the earthly temple. In the new creation, we won’t go in and out of the temple, because it will be a temple.

Second, Jesus promises to write three names on the one who conquers. Will he do so literally? I don’t know. I don’t suppose we’re supposed to imagine that we will be literal pillars, stuck in one place. But maybe Jesus will give us three tattoos. Who knows?

The first tattoo is the name of Jesus’ God, which means that the one who conquers belongs to God. The second tattoo is the name of the city of Jesus’ God, the new Jerusalem. In a later vision, John reports, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . .” (Revelation 21:2). The second tattoo means that the one who conquers will reside in the new and eternal Jerusalem. The third tattoo is Jesus’ own new name. We don’t know what that name is, but it’s a surprise no doubt worth waiting for. And when we learn the name, it will seem so right, so pregnant with meaning.

Last week I attended the Hillsong concert at the sold-out Event Center at San Jose State University. It was quite something to worship together with thousands of others (most of whom were half my age or less!). The climax of the concert was singing, regarding the name of Jesus, “What a beautiful name it is.” What will be we sing

when we find out his new name? And what will that be like, when we all sing it together in the new Jerusalem?

One more door

Don't obsess over the doors that have been closed to you, first of all, because Jesus has opened the door to the throne room of God. Moreover, if you obsess over the doors that have been closed to you, you may fail to appreciate the other doors that have been opened to you. God closes doors, and he opens doors.

Paul and Barnabas found that the Jews, by and large, weren't open to the gospel, but they also found that God had "opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). For Paul, it made all the sense in the world that he, as a Jew and a former persecutor of the church, would evangelize the Jews, but that door was mostly closed. When he prayed in the temple, which was considered the place from which the Lord reigned on earth, the Lord said to him, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:17-21).

Employing a different metaphor, the Eagles (those great theologians!) sing, "Now it seems to me, some fine things / Have been laid upon your table / But you only want the ones / That you can't get."³ (I've been known to play that song in pastoral counseling.) Some fine things have been laid upon your table. Some fine doors have been opened to you. Watch for the doors that God opens, and walk through them.

Finally, one more door will open to us. Actually, later in the book of Revelation, the imagery is not a door but gates: gates to the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21). In the city of God, there will be no destabilizing earthquakes, be they actual or metaphorical, and we will enjoy uninterrupted and eternal intimacy with the King. Talk about an open door!

Eugene Peterson, the author of the Message, a popular paraphrase of the Bible, was in many ways a pastor to pastors. He died on Oct. 22, but as he was dying, he knew he was on his way to another place. Eugene's family released this statement:

During the previous days, it was apparent that he was navigating the thin and sacred space between earth and heaven. We overheard him speaking to people we

can only presume were welcoming him into paradise. Among his final words were, "Let's go." And his joy: my, oh my; the man remained joyful right up to his blessed end, smiling frequently.

When the pilgrims of old made their way to Jerusalem of old, they sang, "I was glad when they said to me, / Let us go to the house of the Lord! / Our feet have been standing / within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122:1-2). Eugene was on his way to the new Jerusalem. We're on our way there too. Let's go!

One more word

One can knock on a locked door for a long time before figuring out that it's locked. It really doesn't matter what technique you use (knocking harder, softer, varying the tempo, etc.); if a door is locked, it's locked. One's hand can get really sore from knocking for a long time on a locked door.

Sometimes, it takes getting a few doors slammed in your face to appreciate that the most important door is the one that opens to the throne room of God and that you can walk through that door at any time to enjoy the presence of the King.

One more word:

Jesus has the key to the throne room. He not only "opens and no one will shut," he also "shuts and no one opens." Only he can open the door. He opens the door to all who believe in him. You can't open the door yourself. You don't have the key. All you can do is believe in him. Therefore, if you don't yet believe, believe! Give your allegiance to Jesus, and walk through the door into the kingdom of God, into the very presence of God. A whole new world will open up for you.

EndNotes

- ¹ Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1996), 68-69)
- ² Brother Andrew, *The Church That Loves.* Lausanne Movement. <https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/132.pdf>
- ³ Eagles. Desperado. Asylum Records SD 5068, 1973, album.