

4. The Open Door

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we have our Bibles open at Revelation 1 and 3. We'll have a moment of prayer. Come then with prayer and contemplation. See how in Scripture Christ is known.

Father, we praise you for this written word which so fully and faithfully points to the living word. We pray now that you will take my human words in all their imperfection.

You will use them faithfully to unfold the written word and so lead us to the living word Christ Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.

If we look at the history of the missionary church throughout the ages, there are few more impressive figures than Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary to China who founded the Chinese Inland Mission which is now OMF and who went to China for many, many years and learned the culture, learned the language and almost became Chinese himself in order that the gospel could be presented.

One time when he was in London, he was having a meeting with a group of young men whom he was trying to encourage to join him. And one young man in particular was tremendously enthusiastic.

[1 : 32] He thought, this is for me. This is where the Lord is calling me. He's calling me to China. But somehow or other, it didn't work out. When he spoke to Hudson Taylor, this young man, there seemed to be too many obstacles.

And Hudson Taylor says, frankly, I don't think you're the right person to be doing this. But the young man was bitterly, bitterly disappointed, as you can imagine.

But in the years to come, hundreds and hundreds of street boys in London had reason to be very, very grateful to the Lord that Thomas Bernardo had not gone to China but had stayed in London to do the work that he did.

This church in Philadelphia is the church of the open door. The church of opportunity. It is the church to whom Jesus comes as the one who is the key of David who opens and no one shuts and who shuts and no one opens.

We have to be very clear about this. Sometimes people, because they hear, maybe they hear a vigorous presentation, say, about the work of God in Peru and they instantly think, oh, I'm called to go to Peru.

[2 : 49] And then a month later, they hear an equally vigorous presentation, say, about the work somewhere else in South America and they feel they ought to go there.

The point is surely this. The mission field, whether it's the mission field across the ocean or across the street, there is always need. And what we must do is we must find the place that God is calling us to.

I heard Eric Alexander saying more than once that there is only one ideal place to serve the Lord and that is the place the Lord has put you. And before I'm misunderstood, I'm not simply talking about missionaries and ministers.

I'm talking about people whom God has called into all walks of life. We'll come back to that later on. Because God has called us all to be a mission church.

And that, of course, has been the subject of our Sunday morning studies over the last weeks, as well as the studies in Acts. We're not all called to be evangelists or pastors and teachers.

[3 : 50] We are all called to take Christ to the world. And that's where I want to begin our consideration of the church in Philadelphia. I said in the beginning of these studies that these churches, the seven churches in Asia, Western Turkey, and I meant to have a map up there for you, but I failed once again.

We may manage for next week, for the very, very last week, to show the sweep of the churches. They're probably in the way in which a messenger would have travelled as he landed at Ephesus and went further inland, then turning east.

And now he's turning south again to Philadelphia and then to Laodicea, where once again he'll take ship and return. Philadelphia was a very impressive place, full of temples, and a particular hostility between the church and the synagogue.

That's the point of verse 9 to come back to. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say they are Jews and are not. We'll come back to that. So this is a church of opportunity, a church where there is an open door.

That's my title tonight, The Open Door. But one other thing about it, like the church in Smyrna, and unlike all the other churches, there is no criticism given of this church.

[5 : 16] That's very remarkable. That does not mean the church was perfect, of course. It cannot mean that. There is no perfect church on earth, and Philadelphia wasn't the perfect church either.

But you'll notice, and you'll notice how we know it, it wasn't the perfect church. There is the same challenge to them as there is to the other churches. Verse 12, the one who conquers, the one who overcomes, the one who perseveres.

And then verse 13, he who was an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. I think that's an important lesson to each one of us. It's not enough to be part of a living church, and carried along, going with the flow.

We must individually listen to the voice of the Spirit as he speaks to the churches. We must have our individual commitment. And as we saw in the church in Sardis last week, that although Sardis was pretty well dead, it was still possible to conquer.

And in Philadelphia, it is still necessary to conquer. Let's never forget that. While we appreciate and enjoy the fellowship of a living church, that's no substitute for a living relationship with the Lord.

[6 : 35] I want to say three things then, about the message to the church in Philadelphia. And the first thing is, it is God who opens doors. Verse 7, 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.

Now what is the key of David? The key of David is mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 22, verse 22. And it is the key that's given to the steward, who guards access to the royal palace, and in particular to the king.

And at this particular time, when Isaiah is speaking, the king is Hezekiah, one of the better sons of David, to reign on his throne. And this man called Eliakim becomes the steward, and he's given the key to the king's palace.

Now the point surely is this. Here the lamb is the descendant of David. He is the son of David, great David's greater son. So the open door, first of all, is the door that he opens into his kingdom, the door that no one shuts.

When the Lord calls someone into his kingdom, no one can shut that door, and no one can snatch us out of that kingdom. That's the other point as well. That's such an important point to remember.

[7 : 56] He is the one who opens the door, who welcomes into his kingdom, and who keeps safe all those who enter that open door.

Now as you read throughout the Old Testament, you find the prophecy of David's sons reigning. And not only David's sons reigning permanently in Israel, but that all the nations would come there. Like, for example, that glorious passage, which you get both in Isaiah and Micah, the mountain of the Lord will rise, and the nations will come to it, and will walk in the light of the Lord.

But how on earth was that going to be fulfilled? Since the exile, there had been no king on the throne. By the time John writes Revelation, Jerusalem has fallen to the Romans, and the people have been scattered all over the earth.

Now, if you want to find the answer to that, later on read Romans chapter 15, where Paul makes that very point. How is it that the son of David will rule the nations?

[9 : 01] The point he makes is, as the gospel spreads throughout the nations, as people come into the kingdom of the son of David, the lamb who was slain, then that kingdom is spreading throughout the nations.

Even in this world, and of course, one day all the nations will bow. As the hymn says, I cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage, how he will satisfy the needs and aspirations of east and west, of sinner and of sage.

That is how the son of David is ruling now, and that's how he will rule in the days to come. And at the end of Revelation, it is the root, and it is the offspring of David, who calls the world to come. That's the passage immediately before the words I quoted earlier, the spirit and the bride say come. Now, who is the bride? The bride is the church. And the spirit's main way, not his only way, but the main way in which the spirit calls people to come is as God's people, as the church, present that message, and people respond to it.

And so therefore, the open door is first of all, the door into the kingdom, and then the open door is the mission of the church. Men and women are called to enter that door, called to him.

[10:25] We're going to sing this at the end of the service, to him we come. Not to the church we come, but to him. And that's so important. We are calling people into the kingdom of the son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So it is God who opens doors, the door into the kingdom. And another aspect of this, as I say, is the making disciples of all nations.

The one who has the key of David opens some doors and closes others. Now, I mentioned already about Hudson Taylor and Thomas Barnardo.

Many of us, I'm sure, in our own lives can think of instances where God closed the door which we were absolutely convinced that was the door we were to go through.

And then looking back, we realize that that was not the door we were to go through. This happened to Paul himself. In Acts 16, Paul and his friends wanted to go to Asia. And Luke writes, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them.

[11:29] Now, we don't know why the Spirit of Jesus didn't allow them. We don't know how the Spirit made his will clear. But in any case, they turned westward and they landed at the town of Philippi and eventually that movement of the Gospel westwards brought the Gospel to our shores.

We are here this evening because Paul and his companions were not allowed by the Spirit of God to turn east but rather to turn west.

And no doubt, in the kingdom to come, we will see patterns which we couldn't even begin to see now both in the terms of the Church's worldwide mission and in the terms of our own lives.

Because he places us all where he wants us to be. Now, as I said a moment or two ago, that does not mean we are all called to be evangelists.

After all, Ephesians says he gave some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers. What it does mean is that wherever we are, we are to make the Gospel attractive and accessible.

[12:36] It's not that if you are a Christian involved in what we call secular employment, you're not doing the work of the Gospel. That is the work of the Gospel as you bring Christ into the circumstances, into work, into leisure, at home, at all these sorts of places.

That is part of the great movement that makes disciples of all nations. And that is part of the way in which people eventually come to listen and come to hear.

I mean, sometimes evangelism in the past was more or less a kind of running out of the stockade, snatching a few scalps and bringing them back. I know nowadays, of course, it can be too much the other way.

Spend so much time being nice to people, we never actually talk about the Gospel. Make bridges that we never cross. But the truth of the matter is, there will always be people, the Lord will have his people everywhere, in every job, in every profession, in every walk of life, as well as those who are particularly called to word ministry.

So that's the first thing. It is the Lord who opens the doors, the one who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

[13:50] The second thing is there will always be opposition. Verse 8. And verse 8 again. 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, little strength, and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name. This is always an echo of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16.

A wide door has opened for effective work. Now if I'd been continuing that sentence, I'd have said a wide door has opened for effective work but there are many who oppose.

That's not what Paul says. Paul says a wide door has opened for effective work and there are many who oppose. In other words, the wide door opening and the opposition are two sides of the same coin.

See, when the church begins to wake up, then the devil begins to wake up as well. When the devil sees a promising gospel work beginning, he's always going to be there to sow discord, to sow tension, to try and divert God's people and to try and discourage them.

[15:03] There will always be opposition. Now sometimes that opposition will be internal opposition, our own weakness. You have but little power, says the risen Lord.

That doesn't mean necessarily the church was a small and insignificant church. I think it's little power, little strength in comparison with the world around.

After all, think of our situation here in Buchanan Street. The many, many opportunities that people are using so well to bring people, to talk to people, to introduce people to the gospel.

On Sundays, 300 or so people, 400 sometimes. Think about the thousands upon thousands who pass the doors and never come in and never go anywhere else either.

And that's why, faced with the forces of secularism and godlessness, we really feel, are we actually doing anything? Are we actually, like King Canute, trying to stem the water through can't do?

[16:08] But the point surely is, the fact that they have little strength and recognize that, means that God is able to work there. Why was God not able to work in Sardis, as we saw last week?

Why was God not able to work in Laodicea, as we'll see next week? Because there was pride, there was complacency. Remember Sardis? Back in verse 2, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Any church that rests on its laurels and does not realize that its strength comes from the Lord is soon going to be in great and grave difficulty.

So there's apparent weakness. The internal opposition, if you like, then there's external opposition. The faithfulness provokes opposition. You have kept my word and have not denied my name.

So much of our opposition today comes exactly from that, doesn't it? You have kept my word. Every dispute in the church including the recent disputes about sexuality are at root the Bible and its proclamation.

[17:19] At root, whether we believe the Spirit has spoken to the churches in a way that is powerful, relevant, and for the whole church until the Lord returns.

You have kept my word. And not just that, not just a theoretical idea about theology, but do we really believe that the Scripture can be trusted to be the Scripture.

That it is the proclamation of the word that builds the church and converts the world. Because so often, it's perfectly possible to be thoroughly orthodox in the sense that we believe all the biblical doctrines, but secretly not really believe that the Bible is the Bible, that the word is the word, and have to try and add other things to make it more attractive.

And so often, and so often, this is the problem. So often, we don't actually believe in the living power of the living word. We need to trust the Bible to be the Bible because it is the Spirit who speaks to us through that, the living Spirit, and the honour of Christ's name.

You have not denied my name. Now, in our pluralistic and multicultural society, that is, and is going to become an increasing problem, the honour of Christ's name, the uniqueness of Christ.

[18:39] You see, if you say to people, Christ saves and satisfies, most people would prefer, oh yes, yes. If you, however, say only Christ saves and satisfies, immediately there will be problems and hostility.

But, you have kept my word and not denied my name. Do we believe he is the only saviour who opens and closes the doors but notice here, though, that although there will always be opposition, the enemies will be challenged.

This is verse 9. Behold, I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who say 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 loved you.

Now, those who say they are Jews and are not, I think what the Apostle means is that if they were genuinely Jews, in other words, if they really read and understood their own scriptures, they would realise what the Gospel was.

The Gospel, remember, is the whole Bible and right through scripture, that's what we're doing in Release the Word at the moment on Thursday evening, showing how Christ is the great subject of scripture from beginning to end.

[19:51] See how in scripture Christ is known. And John is saying if they only realise what their own scripture says, that's why he says Jews and are not, that's why he calls it the synagogue of

Satan, because they've been deceived, they don't really trust in their own scriptures.

I will make them come and bow down. Now, that could mean two things. It could mean that they will be crushed, or it could mean that they will be converted. After all, that's a possible meaning, is it not?

What happens when people come to know Christ? They bow down and they learn that I have loved you. That's a wonderful description of conversion, isn't it? Some time ago, when we were looking at the story of Elisha, we saw how Elisha brought the Syrians to the court of Israel, blinded and helpless, and two things happened then.

God's enemies were humbled, and God's enemies received God's grace. And that's a picture of conversion. So, that's a possible meaning of that. But after all, one such enemy did.

Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the church. He was made to bow down and learn that I have loved you. He was reconciled to God in Christ.

[21 : 12] So, enemies will be judged. And there is the call because of the opposition to persevere. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the trial.

There's a great deal of argument in the commentary of what this trial is. Is it some especial trial? It may be one that we don't particularly know about. But I think it also is a more general thing.

What Paul talks about in Ephesians, the flaming darts, the battling with the principalities and powers. And this is the wonderful balance. Because you have kept, I will keep you.

Let's not misunderstand this. That doesn't mean I'm not going to keep you unless you jolly well keep my commandments. That's not what's being said. What is being said is this church in Philadelphia is genuine through and through.

It's not that they're working for their salvation. It's the fact that they are keeping shows that they are being kept. Jude says exactly the same thing. Keep yourselves in the love of God.

[22 : 18] That would be pretty terrifying unless he went on to say there is one who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with shouts of joy.

That's the same idea here. Persevering, conquering, going on to the end not by our own strength but because the one who has the key of David has opened the door and the one who has the key of David sends his spirit and gives us his protection.

So in this church then, this is the church of the open door, the church that is facing opposition. And the first thing I want to say is that the end is secure. The future is not in doubt.

Look at verse 11. I am coming soon. This is the only reason that perseverance is possible. Soon, really. Nearly 2,000 years have passed since these words were written.

What can it possibly mean? Now remember Revelation is a particular genre of writing called apocalyptic which uses imagery, metaphor and picture. I want to suggest the word soon has two particular meanings.

[23 : 29] One is that it is absolutely certain. There is no possibility of this not happening. And this is how the New Testament speaks about the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection is the guarantee that the judgment day has begun and that the kingdom will come. That's what Paul says to the Athenians in Acts 17. God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world.

How do we know that? He's raised the judge from the dead. It's not just that we go on and then there is eternity. It's that there is an irreversible movement towards the new creation. The gospel cannot be prevented from succeeding.

And it seems to me we need to sound that note more often than we do because otherwise we'll get the kind of people that Peter talks about.

In the last days mockers will come who will say where is this coming that he promised. A few years ago I read in the work of a leading theologian an event that has not happened in 2,000 years is a non-event.

[24 : 37] It isn't going to happen said he speaking of the coming again of Christ. Proving that what Peter said in the last days mockers will come. And why does Peter say that coming is delayed?

Because he wants more and more people to come into the kingdom more and more people to bow to the son of David and to become children. So it is certain and the other thing is this the other nuance of meaning is since we don't know when he'll return we have to be ready.

Every generation of the church must live as if it might be the generation to which the Lord will return. It's a very very different thing of saying we know that. We of course are in the last days

we've been in the last days since Christ came to the world that's what the last days mean. God has spoken his final word there is no other word to be spoken. So it is certain we don't know when it will happen therefore we have to be ready.

And there are two glorious promises given which are almost opposite. First of all there is the promise of eternal security. Verse 12 The one who conquers I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God never shall he go out of it.

[25 : 51] Now this is a pillar which suggests stability and permanence. The end of the kind of ruthlessness and alienation that's so much part of life on earth.

That's going to end. Now commentators tell us that Philadelphia was in an earthquake zone and was particularly prone to earthquakes and earth tremors that may give an extra nuance of meaning here but in any case it's this sense of eternal security.

But that's balanced by another metaphor because if we simply talk about eternal security that would be a bit boring never again will he go out. And that's balanced by another metaphor that suggests eternal newness.

I will write on him the name of my God the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which comes down from God out of heaven and my own new name. There's much more than rest. There's much more than security. There are eternal vistas to explore. Throughout all eternity God will continue to reveal new things about himself about his son and about the new Jerusalem.

[27 : 03] And this is what we sometimes have glimpses of on earth. What C.S. Lewis called joy. And he had a very particular meaning for the word joy.

His autobiography where he describes his conversion is called surprised by joy. And Lewis says joy are these kind of inexplicable feelings we have in this world.

Why is it a particular landscape moves us to tears? There are plenty other landscapes like it but a particular place moves us to deep emotion. A particular tune perhaps.

Even the smell. All these things which sometimes we call nostalgia. Lewis says they're not nostalgia. They're not looking back. They're actually looking forward. And particularly of course someone you love particularly why that person?

And Lewis says these are what he calls stabs of joy. Anticipations of the world to come. You won't be surprised to know that I think Lewis is right. But it's a wonderful idea.

[28 : 06] And it does help to explain these inexplicable longings and these inexplicable experiences we have in this world. So as we come to a close first of all we must look for doors which are opening.

Not as I say necessarily missionary doors in the strict sense of the word but places who will bring the fragrance of Christ in our work in our homes wherever we go.

We must secondly keep the word. We must love and honour Christ and never compromise on the truth of the gospel or on the honour of his name.

And finally we must wait for the coming. I am coming soon. It will not make us otherworldly. Indeed the more firmly we believe that one day Christ will return and wind up the affairs of this world and usher in a better one.

The more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father how we praise you that you have opened the door of salvation.

[29 : 28] We pray if there is anyone here who has not yet gone through that door that they will be given grace to go through that open door and receive a welcome into your house.

And Father we pray that indeed we will keep your word we will honour your name and that with the words with which the book of Revelation falls silent we will join with the missionary church throughout the ages saying Amen come Lord Jesus and we ask this in his name Amen Amen Jesus