

ECF 19th February 2012 Philadelphia – THE DOOR IS OPEN! Revelation 3:7-13

Harry Houdini was considered by many the world's greatest magician and escape artist at the end of the 19th century. He was especially famous for escaping from any handcuffs, strait jacket, or even jail. Often, to build interest in his travelling show, he would arrive in a town early and challenge the local jailer to keep him locked in a cell, offering a reward if he couldn't get out.

A story is told about one of these events that may or may not be true. He was invited to try a new jail cell in a small town. Bristling with confidence, he entered the cell. Once the door was closed, Houdini set to work with a lock pick he had hidden inside his belt. But he had a problem. Something was unusual about this particular lock.

For 30 minutes he worked and got nowhere. An hour passed, and still he had not been able to open the door. He was sweating and exasperated but even after 2 hours he could not pick the lock. Totally exhausted, Houdini collapsed against the door. And it was then the door swung open and he discovered that his problem was that the cell door hadn't been locked in the first place! The door was always open!

I wonder how many times we don't realise that before us is an open door! This was Jesus' message to the church in Philadelphia. He wanted them to know that he'd placed before them an opened door that nobody could shut! Revelation 3:7-13: "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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.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.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no-one will take your crown.¹² 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.¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

1. Don't be Defeated by Rejection

The city of Philadelphia had been founded about 150 BC by Attalus. It was named "Philadelphia", which means brotherly love, to commemorate the loyalty between Attalus and his brother Eumenes who were both rulers of Pergamum. But the Christians in Philadelphia were not experiencing love from many of the citizens of that

city. In fact they were experiencing severe opposition.

This opposition was coming from "those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars." v9 These were ethnic Jews, physical descendents of Abraham. But they were not the true people of God. They didn't have faith in God. They hadn't accepted Jesus as Messiah.

And like what was happening in Smyrna, they were rejecting the Jewish Christians and putting them out of the synagogue. This would lead to social exclusion but more seriously, it would also remove the protection from persecution of being part of an authorised religion. It left these Christians in a very vulnerable position.

a) We have Access to God's Presence

But Jesus wrote to encourage these believers: "I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut." v8 The Jews had shut the doors of the synagogues on these Christians. They had barred them from that worshipping community. But Jesus had opened the door for them to the real presence of God, and no-one could shut that door on them!

i) Jesus is the Messiah

They could be confident of this because Jesus is "Him who is holy and true" v7. When many of his followers started to desert Jesus, he asked his disciples whether they wanted to leave too. Peter answered "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." John 6:68-69

In the same way, despite what the hostile Jews declared, the Christians in Philadelphia could be sure that Jesus is the holy and true Messiah. They could put their trust in him, they could depend on his promises.

ii) Jesus is the Way

And as Messiah Jesus is the way to the presence of God. He is the one "who holds the key of David." v7 This refers to Isaiah's prophecy. At that time Assyria had invaded the nation of Judah, just as Isaiah had warned. But instead of turning to God for salvation, the Jewish leaders were looking to Egypt for help. One of these leaders was "Shebna, who is in charge of the palace." Isaiah 22:15. He had used his position, not to serve the people, but for his own private gain.

And so Isaiah prophesied that God would remove Shebna from office and instead give it to Eliakim, a true servant of God, who would use his position to care for the people. As a symbol of his new authority, that he was now in control of access to the king, God promised: "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 22:22

In his letter to Philadelphia, Jesus uses this same idea. Jesus holds the key to the New Jerusalem, to the presence of God himself. And so Jesus is the one who can open and shut the entrance into salvation! He said: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** John 14:6.

And so all those who have placed their trust in Christ, can be sure – no matter what other people may say – that they have access into the very presence of and relationship with God! As Hebrews states: **“We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.”** Hebrews 10:19–20 Have you entered through this door?

b) We will be Recognised as God’s People

The synagogue rulers in Philadelphia did not believe this. But one day they would. **“I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.”** v9

This image comes again from Isaiah where he looked forward to the time when the Gentile oppressors would recognise Israel’s special place in God’s purpose: **“They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, ‘Surely God is with you...’** Isaiah 45:14 But here the image is turned upside down as it is the Jewish oppressors who one day will have to recognise that they got it wrong and that this community of Christians, Jews and Gentiles, were the God’s people.

i) Jesus is our Future

As Christians today, we might not look very important in the eyes of this world. We might even experience rejection and ridicule. But we don’t need to be defeated or discouraged because one day, our true identity will be revealed. John wrote: **“Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”** 1 John 3:2

So we can **“endure patiently”** v10 like the Christians in Philadelphia. We can **“hold on to what you have”** v11, knowing that our suffering and rejection is only for a short time. One day we will be recognised as the children of God, not because of what we’ve done, but because of the unconditional and gracious love of God.

2. Don’t be Restricted by Weakness

One day this church would be revealed as God’s people. But just now, Jesus wanted them to live for him. The city of Philadelphia sat on a geological fault. It had been destroyed in AD17 by a major earthquake. And although it had been rebuilt, it continued to be plagued by smaller earthquakes which cracked and damaged many of its buildings. Out of fear of these earthquakes, many of its inhabitants choose to live in the countryside rather than the city.

a) Jesus Understands our Weakness

The church in Philadelphia was also in a weakened state. Jesus said, **“I know that you have little strength.”** v8 This was not a criticism from Jesus. He was just showing that he was aware of their situation. From a human perspective, this church was not strong. Perhaps it was small in number, or they didn’t have great financial resources, or the members of that church were fragile in their faith, overwhelmed by the challenges and pressures that they were facing.

It is great to know that Jesus understands our weaknesses and limitations. He knows what we are like. He doesn’t over-estimate our capabilities. He doesn’t have unreasonable expectations of us. He deals gently with us in our weakness: **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.”** Isaiah 42:3

b) Jesus Provides Opportunities for our Witness

But Jesus doesn’t want our weakness to prevent us from accomplishing his purpose for us. The city of Philadelphia was founded where the borders of the 3 ancient countries of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia all met. The reason for this was that it was built as a base from which the Greek language and civilisation could be spread to the barbarian tribes around. It was a city with a mission! And the church in that city also had a mission.

Jesus said, **“I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.”** v8. In the New Testament, this open door is also a picture of opportunity for mission. For example, Paul wrote **“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

Paul knew that it was Christ who opens the door for the mission of the church and it is he who keeps these doors of opportunity open, despite the opposition from outside, or the weakness inside the church. By the Spirit, Jesus works through the circumstances of life, he creates the desire in people for God, and he opens their eyes to the truth. So despite all the issues that this church in Philadelphia faced, Jesus wanted them to know that he had opened a door of opportunity for them to reach out to others in their community with the gospel!

And in the same way, we don’t need to think that our weaknesses, limitations or struggles prevents us from reaching out to others. We need to realise that Jesus has opened up opportunities in our lives to take the gospel to others. He has placed us in different families, workplaces, communities and he wants to use this as an opportunity to shine the light of his love and grace into this dark world.

We just need to recognise these open doors and take these opportunities as Paul told the Colossians: **“Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”** Colossians 4:5

c) Jesus Empowers us for our Work

And we can believe that Jesus will empower us to do this work. Even though this church was weak, they had remained faithful to him. “Yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” v8

Our weaknesses are not a problem to Jesus, because he has all the strength that we need. God taught Paul this lesson in response to his prayer to be relieved of his thorn in the flesh: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:8–9

The Lord has all the strength we need to take the opportunities that he opens up for us. In fact, it is in weakness, when we realise our strength is gone and our resources are used up, that we learn best to depend on God’s power to live for him and that God’s power is most clearly seen in our lives. “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” 2 Corinthians 4:7

This morning, do we see obstacles to effectiveness in our lives – or do we see opportunities for mission? Let’s take the opportunities that he gives us each day to fulfill the mission to make disciples that he has called us to. Jesus is the one who holds the keys, so we can believe that nobody can close the doors as long as he keeps them open. And we can trust in Jesus for the strength to do more than we could ask or imagine!

3. Recognise our Security in Christ

And as we do this, we can go out into the world with the confidence that comes from recognising that our security is in Christ. Jesus makes a series of amazing promises to this church.

a) Jesus will Protect his People

“I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world.” v10 Some people think that this is a promise that Jesus will keep the church from experiencing the time of Tribulation on the world that Jesus talked about in Matthew 24:21: “There will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equalled again.”

Others see this rather as a promise of Christ’s protection in the middle of a severe time of testing. But however we understand it, it is a clear promise of Christ’s protection of his people as others experience a trial that will test the whole world.

b) Jesus will Come for his People

Jesus also reminds this church that he will come for his people: “I am coming soon.”

v11 Although this promise is now 2000 years old, from God’s perspective it is as true today as ever. As Christians we can live with the living expectation that Christ is coming soon!

c) Jesus will Reward his People

Jesus also calls them to faithfulness “so that no-one will take your crown.” v11 This refers to the prize of victory for the athletes in the stadiums of the time. It tells us again how Jesus will reward his people for their faithful service. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.” Colossians 3:23–24

d) Jesus will Dwell with his People

Jesus also says “I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.” v12

In Psalm 84, the writers long to be in the temple because it is the place where he can experience the presence of God: “How lovely is your dwelling-place,

O Lord Almighty!

² My soul yearns, even faints,

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and my flesh cry out

for the living God.” Psalm 84:1-2

But those who overcome will be like a pillar in God’s temple, which is the most stable and permanent part of a building. In an area of frequent earthquakes and instability, the Christians can know that they will be given a permanent and secure place in the presence of God. They will never be excluded from God’s house, they will never be ejected.

e) Jesus will Write his name on his People

The city of Philadelphia had been given a new name after the Emperor Tiberius rebuilt it after the earthquake of AD17. For about two decades it was called Neocaesarea, the new city of Caesar. Then when Flavius Vespasian became the new emperor, the city was called Philadelphia Flavia. So on two occasions, this city had taken the name of its emperor.

But here Jesus says: “I will write on him the name of my God.” v12 This will declare that these believers belong not to the Emperor or any other leader, but to God. It reminds me of the film Toy Story. In it, Andy writes his name on the foot of Woody and Buzz. It shows that these toys belong to him and they can be secure in his ownership of them.

Jesus says that he will also “write on him... the name of the city of my God.” v12 He will state that they are true citizens of heaven. That is their home!

And he says, “I will also write on him my new name.” v12 They belong to Jesus and one day they will see the full glory of Christ’s character, revealed in his new name!

Conclusion

What an amazing list of promises given to this faithful but oppressed and weak fellowship of believers. Yes, they faced opposition from others. Yes they were limited in their own strength. But they were God’s people. They belonged to him. He would protect them through the difficult times. And one day he would come for them, to take them home, where they will be rewarded by a permanent place in his house and experience the fullness of their salvation in Christ!

So no matter what other people said, they could be faithful in keeping his word and trusting in his name because through his death and resurrection, Jesus had opened up the way to eternal life with God!

And no matter how they felt, they could be faithful in holding out his word and proclaiming his name as Christ had opened up the opportunity to share the gospel with this world and would give them the power, protection and provision that they needed.

I pray that each one of us will recognise that the door is open – that we will enter through Christ into a relationship with God, and then take every opportunity to share this good news with all those God brings into our lives.

[The above notes are those used by Andrew for his bible teaching at Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship on Sunday 19th February 2012 and can be downloaded at www.EnniscorthyChristianFellowship.ie/teachings12.html. If anyone would like to discuss any matters concerning this teaching please speak to Andrew.]