

THE CHURCH WITH AN OPEN DOOR

Revelation 3:7-13

Christ's letter to the church in Philadelphia affords us a very interesting and highly suggestive study. He looked down from heaven on the church in Philadelphia and saw its condition and sent it His message. In His message are various significant things which He would have us to observe.

I. The Christ. Rev. 3:7.

"These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." This beautiful description of our Lord is certainly rich in spiritual application.

1. His Character.

He mentioned two striking details of His character. They are: —

(1) Essential Deity.

Christ wanted the church in Philadelphia to seek Him in His essential deity. "These things saith He that is holy. Holiness is a predicate which belongs in its absolute sense to God alone. Only as God could Christ claim holiness. He is holy in character. There was never any taint of evil in Him, or any defilement on His name. While he was here on earth, none of His closest observers or worst critics could detect any flaw in Him.

(2) Expressed Deity.

"These things saith He that is true." The holiness of God is expressed in the truth of God. The holy God in Christ is shown in the true God in Christ. He is the true One. What a warning this title conveys to every skeptic, atheist, apostate teacher, and unbeliever of every age! What encouragement it conveys to the saved who stand against error, unbelief, and apostate teaching! All unbelief revolves about the person of Christ. If one believes He is what the Bible sets Him forth to be, and that which He claimed to be, it is easy to believe in His miraculous works and in His glorious promises. His offers of salvation, deliverance, help, blessing, and victory are dependable. His promises as to His second coming and victorious earthly reign are as reliable as Christ Himself.

2. His Position.

"These things saith He that hath the key of David." Christ here represents himself as having the same authority in His kingdom that David had in His. David had all authority in his kingdom. From the prophecy of Isaiah the Lord quotes the words, "He that hath the key of David," and thus claims its fulfillment in His own person. He it is to whom God committed His government, of which fact the key is the symbol and the sign. This is the way in which Christ announced to the church in Philadelphia that His position was official.

Our blessed Lord is the sole possessor of the key to the divine treasure house, and entrance to the marvelous blessings of God can be secured only through Him who said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). We have no merit of our own by which we can claim even the least of God's mercies and yet every divine blessing is ours because "He hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:6).

"The key of David" is Christ's prerogative to unlock the door of opportunity before a church. It is a door of service and testimony. The opportunities a church enjoys come from Christ. The doors must be opened by Him, and they are likewise shut by Him. If we are yielded to His will, He will surely guide us to the place where He would have us to serve Him, and the utmost efforts of human beings to keep us out of that place will be of no avail. On the other hand, He can close the door before us even as He did with Paul (Acts 16:6-7), and if He does, it is useless to attempt to press forward though the prospects seem ever so inviting.

3. His Administration.

"He that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth, and no man openeth." This is not just a declaration of ability, but one of activity. It does not mean that Christ merely held an executive position, but that He was executing the work. Christ opened the way from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from sorrow to comfort, from the grave to resurrection, and then into heaven. It is certainly comforting to God's own, and especially to those who are remaining true to Christ, to be reminded of His ability to open and to close. It is His right and privilege to open the door of opportunity before a church. In fact, all the doors to dignity, happiness, and usefulness are at the disposal of Christ.

II. The City.

Philadelphia was founded and fostered by King Attalus Philadelphus, from whom it took its name, in the second century before Christ. It was located twenty-five miles southeast of Sardis on the great highway which connected Rome with the east. It was a commercial city of commanding position and considerable importance. It was well fortified. Its population was principally heathen, but there were also many Jews in the city. It reached considerable prosperity as the center of a large wine trade, for which the surrounding area in the adjoining valley made it eminently suitable.

III. The Church.

The church in Philadelphia to which this message from heaven was sent, was a weak church in man's judgment, but a church which pleased Christ. This church, while rejected by mankind, was a delightful sight to Christ, and thus praised by Him.

IV. The Commendation.

Let us note some of the things for which this church was praised.

1. For Works in Weakness .

"I know thy works; for thou hast a little strength." The church did not have any worldly standing. Men did not sing its praise. The world took little note of what it was doing. But, it was doing much with little. Its weakness did not keep it from working at the Lord's business. What strength it did have was used in the Lord's service. Small in numbers but genuine in life, this church of fine quality and meager quantity was strong in character. It rang true every time it was sounded. They were devoted and diligent in a restricted sphere. They were probably but a little flock, poor in worldly goods, of small account in the eyes of men, but they proved themselves faithful to Him. While

there was nothing sensational about them, there was a quiet faithfulness that plodded steadily forward to accomplish real things for the Lord. Rest assured that He sees and appreciates such faithfulness whether in a church or in an individual Christian.

2. For Loyalty to Christ's Word.

"Thou hast kept My Word". The Word of God was known and obeyed in the church in Philadelphia. They received the Word of God. They studied the Word of God in order to learn His will. They believed the Word of God. They took great delight in reading His Word. They obeyed His Word. There were many false beliefs current in that day, but the Christians in Philadelphia were not affected by them. They kept God's Word in doctrine and in practice. Today we see churches that do not even accept God's Word. Then, we see other churches which accept it, but pay no attention to what it says. Oh, for more Philadelphias where God's Word is so precious that it is received, believed, honored, and obeyed.

3. For Loyalty to Christ's Name.

"Thou has not denied My Name." These words are pregnant with a deep significance. Christ's name, person, and work are inseparable. The Christians in Philadelphia had many opportunities to deny His name. When they were brought before the heathen magistrates in those days of fiery trial, they were required to deny the name of Christ, and to disown Him publicly. So far as we know, not a single member of this ancient church was guilty of thus denying Him. Their convictions of the value of Christ and His teachings were so strong and positive that they were willing, if need be, to die as martyrs. Some of those who opposed and persecuted the members of this church were so bitter and satanic that the Master referred to them as belonging to "the synagogue of Satan". But even such sordid folk could not shake the convictions of the Christians in Philadelphia. A church that is true to Christ's name will witness to His miraculous incarnation, blood-wrought atonement, bodily resurrection, heavenly intercession, and earthly return. The honor of Christ's name is entrusted to the churches today. They should be faithful to it by professing it, proclaiming it, and being loyal to it.

The members of this church manifested real loyalty to Christ's Word, Name, and Person, and that in spite of the fact that they had "a little strength." "This expression is probably to be regarded as referring to her members as but few in number, to her wealth as but very small, to her wisdom and gifts as being but slender, to her great and distinguished in her membership as being very rare, and to her social position as being quite humble. While the strength of this church was small, it was strength of the right kind. The strength of a church does not consist in wealth, or wisdom, or power, but in its fidelity to the Word and to the Name of Christ.

V. The Challenge.

"Behold I have set before thee an opened door, and no man can shut it." An opened door was something that the Lord alone could give. It was something no man could make. Doors of evangelism and missionary opportunities are opened by the Lord only.

Plenty of people in that ancient city tried to shut this door of service but without avail. The members of that church were in dead earnest; they entered the door of opportunity their Master opened for them; they caught a vision of the spiritual needs of their city; they did not allow opposition and persecution to close that

door; they had a definite, constructive program in view and adhered to it. Access to the knowledge of the Scriptures, growth in grace, intimate association with the Lord and missionary activity were their privileges.

Faithful employment of powers, however limited, is the path to promotion. Fidelity to duty means larger opportunities for usefulness. Christ shows appreciation of work done for Him by opening doors to do yet larger work.

It is important for us to see clearly that there are two sides to our lives. One side is at the mercy of man and circumstance; its opportunities, its privileges, and its happiness can be shut out from us. But there is another side. There are doors which no man can shut. There are areas of our lives which are not at the mercy of man and circumstance. And the sources of our spiritual richness lie in our uses of these inner doors that God had opened and which no man can shut.

The more one reads biography, or learns about human life, the more it is evident that here lies one of the chief differences between men. Set over against each other, for example, two powerful personalities like Paul and Napoleon. Outward circumstances treated them somewhat alike. They both came from obscure beginnings, they both rose to tremendous influence, and they both ended in prison. But there the similarity stops. When Napoleon was on the island of St. Helena, all the doors that man and circumstance could shut were closed around him. There was not a door through which he could go out or come in. It was a sad story indeed. When Paul was in prison all the doors that man and circumstance could shut were closed around him. Nero had a long arm, but there were doors in Paul's life that Nero could not get his fingers on.

We do not want to be slaves of circumstance. We do not want to be at the mercy of man. We want inward resources that man and circumstance cannot touch. There are difficult times for all classes of people. There are many difficult problems to be solved. Difficulties affect people differently. Some become panicky, some give up and do nothing, and some go on even more enthusiastically because of them. Doubtless the "door" referred to in this text is the door of opportunity opened for the Philadelphian Christians to benefit others by the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. This church had granted to it some special opportunity for aiding in the spread of the truth. The church was especially honored in having such opportunities. No greater sign of divine approval can come to a church than the opening before it of larger and wider possibilities of usefulness. Useful employment in the Lord's service is the highest honor. Usefulness is to character what fragrance is to the flower.

What we call chances are not chances. The opportunities that come to us are God-given. The doors that open before us, He flings wide open. With faith and courage we must be ready to enter the door when the Lord opens it. We must learn to see the door that He opens, to enter that door, and to take charge of that which He puts before us. To do this we must have two qualities:--First, power to perceive the opportunity, and second, the courage to avail ourselves of it. These two qualities are the very foundation of the great successes of life. The token of approbation of past service is always found in the call to greater opportunities for service.

God has flung wide open to us the door of opportunity. May we have the faith, vision, and courage necessary to respond to this great challenge.