

AN OPEN DOOR

"Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." Revelation 3:8.

These words were addressed by the Lord Jesus, first of all, to the church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor. The open door referred to the strategic position of that church. Philadelphia was located almost in the center of Asia. Important highways passed through the city, carrying traffic to the Aegean Sea. The meetings of the Council of the Roman Province of Asia were held there. It was the gateway to the whole Eastern country.

Into that city, with its highly advanced civilization, came, one day in the first century of the Christian era, a few followers of Jesus Christ. They established a church. It was pitifully small in comparison with the splendor of the heathen temple. From the very beginning its ability had been small. It had never been what outsiders would have called a strong church. In numbers, in wealth, in rank, in influence, and in every other constituent which is popularly regarded as contributing to power in the world, it had been lacking from the beginning. Yet, weak as its strength was, its members had stood firm in the face of cruel threatenings and alluring promises. And lo! as a reward of their steadfastness, the Lord declares that He has set before them "an open door" which no man could shut. That is to say, through the gateway of their fidelity, feeble as they were, they went under the leadership of Christ to a sphere of usefulness which was pre-eminently their own, and which no mortal could prevent them from filling. To this body of Christian people, conscious of their insufficiency, came an inspiring challenge: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

John was on Patmos when he wrote the book of Revelation. Patmos is an island ten miles long and six miles wide off the coast of Asia Minor. In the first century it was one of the main places to which Rome banished her exiles. Prisoners were marooned there for many causes, all the way from high misdemeanors to an open confession of Christian discipleship. For the latter cause John was sent there. Save for the bare mention of the fact, John says nothing about his imprisonment, but more than one verse reveals his hidden feeling.

This text represents John's reaction to his imprisonment. That imprisonment had shut doors all around his life. Doors of opportunity, happiness, and privilege had been closed, and there in exile he heard the divine voice saying, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

All the doors which man and circumstance could get their hands upon had been closed for him, but there still were doors, inner doors, that no man could shut. No circumstance could reach them; no man could get his hand upon them. They were not under the control of this world. They were his doors which opened on broad vistas though he was compelled to look down from Patmos upon the encompassing sea.

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 happiness, its opportunities, and its privileges can be shut out from us. But there is another side to us. 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 and resources lie in our uses of these inner doors that God has 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 circumstance treated them somewhat alike. That is, they both came from obscure beginnings which were not likely to issue in such resounding consequences; they both rose to tremendous influence; and they both ended in prison. But there the similarity stops. Go to Napoleon on 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 and come in, not one. It was a sad story indeed. But step from that to Paul's imprisonment. All the doors that man and circumstance could shut were closed around him. But as you observe him, you observe doors which no man could shut. Nero had a long arm, but there were doors in Paul's life that Nero could not get his fingers on. Paul, too, had heard that voice say, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

Few passages of scripture are more admirably fitted to give encouragement and direction to those who are distressed than this one. We do not want to be the slaves of circumstance. We do not want to be at the mercy of man. We want inward resources that man and circumstance cannot touch. For us this text has a message of special significance and inspiration. These are difficult times for all classes of people. There are many difficult problems to be solved. Difficulties affect people differently. Some become panicky, like automobile drivers encountering the unusual. Some give up and do nothing. Some go on in spite of, or more enthusiastically, because of, the difficulties. At any rate, God has flung wide-open to us the door of opportunity. Have we faith, vision, and courage sufficient to respond to this challenge? Let us consider, in a practical way, some of the doors which the Lord has set before us that no man can shut.

I. The Door of Salvation.

Jesus said, "I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved." This is the door of escape from the wrath of God, from the guilt and pollution of sin, from the fear of man, and from the tyranny of self. The door of mercy is never locked against earnest souls. If you come with an honest heart to find out how to get freedom from your sins, seeking peace with God, you will find no locks or bolts, but a door wide-open. An open door is what we all desire. This open door is just before us; we do not have to go about to find it, neither do we have to search for keys to open it, nor for instruments to break it down. Jesus says that He has set before us a door opened, and no enemy of our souls, man, woman, or devil, has the power to shut it. Nothing can do that except our wills.

II. The Door of Spiritual Growth.

It is suggested that the having of only a little strength is not a matter about which we need to be ashamed. Never suppose that weakness is always a result of wickedness. If one has brought weakness upon himself by his own iniquity, then it may be a matter of disgrace; but if it comes in the allotment of God's providence there is no moral reproach to be associated with it. Having only a little strength does not disqualify us for serving the Lord. The Philadelphians kept Christ's word and glorified Him where they were, and in the manner appropriate to their circumstances. They were loyal to Him in spite of their weakness, and it is possible for everyone of us to do the same. He expects us to be faithful where we are.

Present fidelity is the door through which we pass into greater opportunity and future eminence. In face, fidelity is irrepressible. When Christ says, "come up higher" no one can keep us down.

The privilege of being "taught of God" is open to all. "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not." Spiritual growth is impossible without prayer. Others have won great victories through prayer. Moses, Elijah, David, Daniel, Paul, Luther, Knox, Mueller and hosts of other mighty ones owed almost everything to this open door. The same door by which they entered into fulness of blessing and triumph is open to you.

Faith in and fellowship with God are possible for each one. Nobody can shut that door against you. Before us stands the open door to a life of fellowship with Christ, so intimate and real that death is powerless to end it.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you outwardly, you can use it for the development of a finer character inwardly. That door of spiritual growth stands open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. The Roman Government could put John on Patmos and ring him round with cramping circumstance, but it could not prevent John from being more patient, more high-minded, more inwardly strong, and more courageous. It often happens that blindness closes in on a man's life. He has been active and energetic. Suddenly the doors shut on every side. Avenues of action and vistas of vision close. And then comes an open door. Sight is dimmed, but insight is deepened, and he becomes more radiant.

There are many things in our lives that depend upon commodious and comfortable circumstance. But there is one thing that does not depend upon fortunate environment, and that is development of character. Hardship can pass over you and leave you a better person. Bereavement can come upon you and leave you a gentler and more sympathetic spirit. Enemies can rise against you until all your friends are sorry for you, when all the time you are growing a more gracious soul, freer from the folly of bitterness and fuller of the wisdom of magnanimity. The door of spiritual growth stands open. Whether or not we take advantage of it depends on whether our main objective is to make a living or to make a life. If it is the latter, then we have an open door that no man can shut.

No one can prevent you from living in the companionship of high thoughts. We all live in the world of the thoughts we think. Stand on some busy street corner and look at the faces of those who pass by. The fact that most of them live in the same city makes little difference. You will observe disillusioned faces, flippant faces, cynical faces, vicious faces, anxious faces, and calm faces over which the dove of peace has brooded. Be sure to keep the privilege of high thoughts. Let the books of the master spirits nourish your meditations. Phillips Brooks struck a true note when he said, "Sad will be the day for any man when he becomes contented with the thoughts he is thinking and the deeds he is doing; when there is not beating at the doors of his soul some great desire to do something larger which he knows he was meant and made to do."

III. The Door Of Service.

Into what does He open the door? Into a larger and nobler sphere of activity. If we will exert what strength we have for the Lord, He will give us a larger place.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you, nothing can prevent you from living in undisturbed good-will. Jesus said, "If thine eye be generous, thy whole body shall be full of light." That is the way the Master lived. An unnoticed woman, with shame-faced modesty, put her slender mite into the treasury, and appreciatively He looked upon her with generous eyes. Little children were held back from Him by officious followers, and affectionately He looked on them with generous eyes. At last His enemies looked on Him with hatred and crowned Him with thorns and nailed Him to the cross, and praying for their pardon, magnanimously He looked on them with generous eyes. We certainly need to look on the world with generous eyes in these embittered days. This world is full of hatred, vindictiveness, vituperation, envy and jealousy, but thank God! we do not have to live in that world. There is an inner door through which we can step into the world of magnanimity and friendship and good-will, from which we can look upon the world with generous eyes. That is the Christian's inward triumph and victory over the world.

In George MacDonald's novel, Robert Falconer, after feeding his soul on ashes until he was in despair, went to his box and took out the Bible that his mother had given him before he left home, and said, "Now I must find standing-ground." He proceeded to read over the life and words of Jesus, having all the time a little piece of paper by his side and a pencil in his hand, intending to write down the great foundation truths which he found there. These were the three which he wrote down: "First,

that a man's business is to do the will of God; second, that God takes upon Himself the care of man; and third, therefore that a man must never be afraid of anything." I wish all of us would learn that lesson. Christ has set before you an open door; if you will go straight through that door in obedience to Him, He will take care of your future.

To the church in Philadelphia, Christ opened the door of opportunity for service by proclaiming the Gospel. This church had special opportunities for engaging in missionary work. It 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 greatest 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 opportunities. With faith and courage we must be ready to enter the door of service when God opens it for 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.

To every unsaved person the door of heaven stands open. This door is wide enough -- "Whosoever will may come." It is high enough -- "Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." It is all left with you. Come in through the door of mercy and be saved. No one can keep you out but yourself.