

THE OPEN DOORS

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

This expression is found in the Book of Revelation. John was on Patmos when he wrote this book. Patmos is an island ten miles long and six miles wide, off the coast of Asia Minor. In the first century Patmos was one of the many 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.

Our text represents John's reaction to his imprisonment. John uses these words, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.", about one of the churches to which he is writing, but they must have welled up first of all in response to his own experience. His 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 opened 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 on Patmos to look down upon the encompassing sea. I am going to speak about this inner kingdom of the soul and the doors there that God has opened and that no man can shut.

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 privileges can be shut out from us. But there is another side to us. There are doors in us that no man can shut. There are areas of our lives not at the mercy of man and circumstance. And all the sources of our spiritual richness and resources lie in our uses of these inner doors that God opened and that no man can shut.

The more one knows about human life or reads biography, 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 little likely to issue in so resounding a consequence; 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 are closed around him. Are there any other doors through which he can go out and come in? None. It is a sad story, that last, mean, tawdry, tinsel court of his. But step from that to Paul's imprisonment. Once more all the doors that man and circumstance can close are shut about him. But as you watch him you are most aware of doors no man can shut. Nero had a long arm, but there were gateways 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 opened door, and no man can shut it."

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. Therefore, I am going to talk to you in a practical way about these inward doors of the spirit that God has opened and no man can shut. Among them we find :-----

I. The Door of High Thoughts.

No matter what man and circumstance do to you outwardly, they cannot prevent you from inwardly living in the companionship of high thoughts. That door is open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. You have only to read the Book of Revelation to see that. The Roman Empire could put narrow limitations around John's body, but it could not put narrow limitations around John's mind. Marooned on Patmos, he saw a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. He lived in a high world of great thought.

In fact, 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. Practically all of them may live in the same city but that makes very little difference. Look at the faces and see the worlds they live in, as diverse as the thoughts they think. You will observe disillusioned faces, flippant faces, cynical faces, vicious faces, anxious faces, and calm faces over which the dove of peace has brooded. As you see those faces you will long for a voice that could make them all hear; what are you doing to your lives by your thoughts? Perhaps you will think of that exhortation, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Be sure to keep the door of high thoughts open in your lives. Make frequent journeyings through it into the world of great thoughts. Let the books of the master spirits nourish your meditations. All around your lives today are open doors that will not always be open. You have your happy entrances and exits through them now, yet they will close. As you grow older you will inevitably grow accustomed to the sound of those doors closing shut. Happy the one who knows how to step through a secret and familiar door and stand in a great world of high thoughts.

II. The Door of Spiritual Growth.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you outwardly, you always 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 there was one thing the Roman Government could not do. It could not prevent John from being a better man because he was there. The whole Roman Empire 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. Now the doors shut on every side. Avenues of action and vistas of vision close. And then comes that spiritual miracle before which all men with eyes must stand with reverence and awe. There is an opened door. Sight dimmed but insight deepened, he becomes inwardly beautiful so that, whereas once he was outwardly active, he becomes now radiant within, and people draw closer to him in the walk of life that they may be reassured about the reality of the spiritual life. He, too, has heard the voice: "Behold, I have set before thee an opened door, and no man can shut it."

There are many things in our lives that do depend upon commodious and comfortable circumstance. But there is one thing that does not primarily 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 always open. Whether we take advantage of it or not depends altogether on what our main objective is: whether we are making a living or making a life. If we are primarily making a living, then God pity us! for all those doors, soon or late, can shut. But if we are making a life, if we are growing a soul, if we are seeing that the most sacred entrustment God ever gave us was our personalities to be made as fine, deep, dependable, and courageous as they can be made, then we have an open door no man can shut.

III. The Door of Goodwill.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you, nothing can prevent you from living in undisturbed goodwill. You can shut that door, but nobody else can if you really want it open. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ said: "If thine eye be generous, thy whole body shall be full of light." That is to say, if you will look upon this world with generous eyes, your inward life will be illumined. 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. Peter, fighting an unruly temperament, made blundering endeavors at discipleship, and encouragingly Jesus looked on him with generous eyes. Little children were held back from Him by officious followers, and affectionately He looked on them with generous eyes. A prodigal returned, stained by the sin and bowed by the shame of the far country, and forgivingly Jesus looked on him with generous eyes. And at last His enemies crowned Him with thorns and nailed Him on the cross, and, praying for their pardon, magnanimously He looked on them with generous eyes. All through His ministry they were trying to shut doors around His life, but there were some doors they never could get their hands upon. Nothing can keep anyone from looking on this world with generous eyes if he or she wants to do it. And if anyone does it, nothing can prevent the consequence; the whole body will be full of light.

Is there anything we need much more to learn in these embittered days? This is a very bitter world. It is full of hate and vindictiveness and vituperation and envy and jealousy, but, thank God! we do not have to live in that world. There is an inner door--and no man can shut it--through which we can step into the world of magnanimity and friendship and goodwill, from which we look upon mankind with generous eyes. That is the Christian's inward triumph, his victory over the world. No man but himself can keep him from that inward kingdom of goodwill.

IV. The Door of Large Interests.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you, they cannot prevent you from living in a world of large interests and great causes. To be sure, man and circumstance can keep you from active service for some of the causes that you are interested in. They did that with John. They cooped him up on Patmos. Yet, even so, marooned on Patmos, they could not make him live in a small world. Read the Book of Revelation and you will see that all the most important movements of his time swept through his mind. Thank God for that.

We do not know what crippling of health or cramping of circumstance may come to us, but so long as we live at all and retain our faculties, we can live in a great world of large interests. If you doubt it, think of Miss Helen Keller. If there ever was a life around which all the doors seemed shut, it was the life of that extraordinary woman. But see her now as one by one those inner doors have opened so that, marooned upon a narrow Patmos though she is, she lives in a great world. All the larger interests and greater causes of this generation throng through her mind. She lives in a far larger world than most of us. We should always bear in mind that a man's life is as large as his interests and no larger. Thank God, no one of us needs live in a small world.

V. The Door of Opportunity for Service.

The 'door' referred to in this passage of Scripture is plainly not that of admission to His heavenly Kingdom, but the door of opportunity for service by proclaiming the Gospel. The Church addressed in this passage 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 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 opportunities. The doors that open before us He flings wide open. The doors that are shut He bars and bolts. God sets before us our open doors. With faith and courage, we must be willing to face odds, surmount our difficulties, and play a man's part in order to be ready to enter the door when the Lord opens it. If the schoolboy wishes to gain a high position as a man, he must be content, as long as he is at school, to go through its daily round, and perform in the best possible manner its common duties. The better he is as a scholar, the more surely will the door into eminence open for him as a man. But, if he trifle away his time, if he despise what he calls the 'drudgery' of education, and so leave school without having learned those things which he was sent there to acquire, then there will be nothing for him in after life but humiliation and failure. Doors may open to him, but he will never be ready to enter one of them.

We must learn to see the door that God opens, enter that door, and take charge of that which God puts before us. To do that 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.

VI. The Door of Faith in and Fellowship with God.

No matter what man or circumstance may do to you, the door to faith in God and fellowship with Him stands open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. That is the heart of religion---that inner door through which one steps to stand, it may be quietly, in the presence of the Unseen Friend. Is that door open in your life? Is it wide open? Are there no unforgiven sins that bar your way? No secret evil half hated and yet clung to, that trips you up when you would pass that threshold? No vindictiveness, no quarrelsome relationship that prevents you from looking into the eyes of God? Is that door wide open?