

“The Open Door” | Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13
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(Discussion questions on page 10)

Introduction

This week we continue our sermon series in the Book of Revelation by focusing on the letters to the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. I invite you turn to **page 1029** in your pew Bible, **chapter 3** beginning at **verse 7**.

Despite being quite far apart

- the two churches faced a similar set of social problems.
- but they also shared complementary set of gospel promises

Problems we still face today, in some measure; and promises that still apply today.

Both churches were suffering under persecution from a group referred to as **the synagogue of Satan**. Rev 3.9 says these persecutors “say that they are Jews but are not; they lie.”

In order to understand what was happening here we must realize that **Jews** constituted **4-5 million** people out of the total population of 60 million people in the Roman empire. Christians, on the other hand, numbered, at most, **fifty thousand** by the end of the first century A.D. To think of it in percentages, Jews constituted 8% to Christians 0.08%.

The strong allegiance of the Jews to Rome enticed them to report the Christians to the Roman authorities. This made it exceedingly difficult for the Christians in these communities to make a living. Though they were *spiritually* “rich,” they were materially poor, afflicted, facing imprisonment, and potentially even death.

But what of all this history? Of what importance is it to us today? Are the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, calling us merely to look backwards, in historical appreciation, or might they also be personally addressing us, as the living word of God?

We'll approach these passages in three parts. First, we'll look at what it means to **enter through the open door** and find salvation in Christ.

Second, we'll look at two issues that arise from Jesus' offer of an open door:

- an **objection** to the door
- an **obstruction** in front of the door

Lastly, we'll conclude by resting in the promises Jesus offers us on the other side of the open door of salvation. These are

- a **crown** that gives us the strength to keep going
- a **pillar** that gives us peace
- a **new name** that gives us our purpose

Salvation through a door. A crown that helps us keep going. Peace through a pillar. Purpose through a new name.

I. Salvation through the Open Door

Let's begin by looking at the image of **the open door** in Revelation 3 verses 7-8.

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 . . .** ⁸ I have set before you **an open door, which no one is able to shut.**

These verses are an exact quotation of Isaiah 22:22, which is an Old Testament passage that prophesies a future judgment and a figure from the line of David, who will lead God's people.

The Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia were facing many closed doors but Jesus presents them with an open door. But an open door to *what*?

The open door is an invitation to receive **salvation** through Christ, and an **opportunity** to share the saving truth of Christ with others.

However, the door is not universally and perpetually held ajar. Jesus explicitly states that although the Philadelphians had "little power,"

- they had been obedient to Christ's word,
- they had patiently endured, and

- they had not denied his name (Rev. 3:8)

This concept of salvation through the open door of Christ is taught throughout the entire the New Testament, often by Jesus *himself*.

- In Luke's Gospel, Jesus exhorts his hearers to "**strive to enter through the narrow door.**" He warns them that once the door is "shut," "many . . . will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lk. 13:24-25).
- In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims, "**I am the door.** If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (John 10:1-2, 7, 9)

Faith in Jesus. Trust in Jesus. This is the only way that we can enter the open door. We cannot 'enter through the open door' claiming to receive Jesus as our savior; while also attempting to promptly shut his mouth upon entrance, issuing him a partial-gospel gag order, while we curate for ourselves a customized Christ that better suits our own tastes. Rather, we must repent and exercise obedience to Christ's word.

[Transition]:

There are at least two issues that arise from the good news of the open door of salvation in Christ in our culture and in our churches.

- First, we face **objections from the outside world**, those who do not yet accept Christ as savior and Lord and find it difficult to accept this teaching.
- Second, we face **obstructions from within**, from the religious elite who sometimes block the entryways that Jesus has opened for salvation.

II. Two Issues with the Open Door: Objections and Obstructions

IIa. Objections from the outside world

When it comes to our culture, and to those on the fence about—or even hostile to—the teaching of Jesus about salvation, we find many variations.

- there are those who **deny that there is a door** (atheism)

- and those who are **indifferent about a door** (agnosticism)
- those who believe they are **disqualified from entering the door because they could never be good enough to be saved** (moralism)
- those who **infinitely diversify the number of doors and think they all lead to salvation** (religious pluralism)

This shouldn't surprise us, because this response to Jesus has **always existed**, including in ancient Philadelphia. Its streets were lined with so many pagan temples that it was known to many as '**Little Athens**,' because it reminded its inhabitants of the famous center of worship for the Greek gods.

Application

I think what I want to say here is that 95% of the people I talk to about my faith are interested in having a reasonable, respectful, even *enjoyable* conversation about faith, spirituality, and the deep things of life. Most people are not hostile, but *hopeful*.

Hopeful that there is something *more*. Hopeful that their perception of the wonder of creation, the profound moments of parenting, life, suffering, and celebration—hopeful that these realities, loaded as they are with meaning and significance, point to something beyond themselves, to some sort of a higher power, a benevolent, creative goodness, a door, somewhere, somehow, *hopefully*.

Sharing our faith is so much more than offering an impersonal sales pitch for Jesus. Instead, it should feel more like a conversation, where we listen as much, if not more, than we speak.

Where we make the decision to meet our neighbors at the shared points of profound human experience and then connect those points to their fulness in Jesus, on the other side of the open door.

We must seek to affirm rather insult or diminish every microcosm of beauty and goodness that our friends and neighbors experience under the common grace of God's good creation.

We Christians must stop attempting to **insult the culture into the kingdom of God**. We often say things like

- 'apart from Christ, life is totally meaningless' and ,
- 'apart from Christ, there is no joy.'

But that's not true. When I think of the first twenty years of my life, I don't cast them all into the rubbish bin saying, 'it was all meaningless, it was all empty.'

No! I think of climbing Mt. Washington in New Hampshire with my dad as an 11-year-old and eating hot dogs in victory at the top like we were kings of the mountain. I think of the excitement of getting the Nintendo entertainment in 1987 with the original Super Mario and Duck Hunt. Of long summers, of cold winters, of learning guitar, of weathering the storm of being a teenager, and of falling in love in my early twenties—all *before* I knew Christ.

It's a mistake to **talk up the kingdom of God by talking down about the common grace of God**. The problem of unbelief is not that life is entirely meaningless apart from Christ, but that the meaning and profundity that does exist cannot reach its *full eternal measure* apart from him.

Every beautiful thing that sin eventually kills is actually meant to live forever inside the open door of Jesus.

The height of every good gift common to all human beings is meant to be exponentially increased; *not erased*, by Jesus.

God's common grace is not a foil for the goodness of the gospel; but a *preparation* for it.

Yes. There are objections from the outside world. But when the world objects, may we be people who cease scolding them about the partiality of their experience, and instead point them to its fullness in Jesus, inside the open door.

1b. Obstructions from within

It is one of the sad realities of contemporary Christianity how often the door of salvation is slammed shut in the face of those whom Jesus died to save.

Someone might object: 'Oh, come on, man. When does that ever happen? I always hold the door, like a perfect gentleman!' But we forget that the door is not merely the glass entry with a handle and hinges at 6567 Arlington Blvd.

- It is the social media feed that exhibits an alternate, harsher, divisive version of ourselves and shuts down conversation, and that is not marked by the character of the Christ we claim to believe in.
- It is a person who would hold the door every time at church; but slams the door in your face during a personal conversation at a BBQ if you disagree with their preferred political, cultural, or ideological position
- It's the person whose Christianity has been so enmeshed, so clustered together, so inseparably fused with their cultural and political preferences, that the two have become *virtually indistinguishable*.

The word that means "to shut" in this passage can also mean "**to close one's heart against someone.**" God, forbid we purposely or inadvertently shut the open door of salvation in the face of the very ones Jesus is seeking to save!

We can beware of falling into this error by taking two precautions.

Precaution 1.

First, Deuteronomy 6 instructs us to

- "love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and might."

The passage continues, by instructing us to

- write about this gospel “on the doorposts of our house and on our gates” (Deut. 6:4-9).

We can actively avoid becoming cranky Pharisees who close the open door of Jesus, if we take care to **write the gospel—and the gospel alone—on the doorways and doorposts of our lives.**

By all means: we should form our opinions about **politics**, and **public policies**, and our **preferred secondary ideological and theological issues**. These are important! They’re integral to exercising informed, responsible citizenship as a Christian.

But we must take care **not to fuse these other things with the gospel**. Not to write them on the doorways of Deuteronomy 6.

We must be careful not to:

- **impose our personal preferences** on others
- **as if our personal preferences are *the gospel***
- as if they constitute the only healthy, biblical way to worship Christ to live out the faith,
- with everything else being heresy.

Jesus does not welcome that kind of fundamentalist Pharisaism.

He does not say to the religious Pharisee who adds human tradition to the word of God:

‘Well done good and faithful servant.’

Instead, Jesus rebukes them with righteous indignation saying,

- ‘Woe to you, Pharisees, hypocrites! For **you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces**” (Matthew 23:13).

Precaution 2.

Second, we need to take care not to practice false advertisement for the kingdom of God. **The sign on the door needs to match the reality inside.**

I recall cycling to work when I lived in downtown Phoenix. Across the street from the university where I taught. On the gate was a big sign: 'beware of dog.'

I often peddled by, wondering what kind of vicious beast lie behind those doors. Perhaps, a rottweiler, or a pit bull.

One day I got to the house and realized the gate was *open*. (Oh no!). It was located directly near the cross walk I used to get to my office. So, I had to stop and wait. The gate creaked open in the wind like a saloon door in an old spaghetti western. And then I saw it: *the dog to beware of*.

Not a rottweiler. Not a pit bull. Not even an intimidating Bullmastiff. No. There stripping his teeth, fiercely standing his ground in the hot Arizona sun, *was a Chihuahua*. I kid you not, right as a I saw him **a dust bowl flew by**, and I heard in my head **that old fashioned cowboy music** [doo dee do deee dooo, zither sound].

Beware of dog? Beware of what: how adorable he is? Beware of his woefully inflated Chihuahua ego? The sign outside didn't match the reality inside.

We need to be sure that **if we write *gospel* on the door, we live *gospel* inside.**

We live in divisive, tumultuous times. We must proceed with great care and diligence. In our small groups, our classes, and our written communications, we must not assume that because everyone shares the same Lord we share the same

brain. As if everyone in that group would hold your very same view. *As if this was the one and only gospel perspective.*

We must take care to never introduce an obstacle to the open door of Jesus.

III. Conclusion: Moving beyond the threshold to a crown, a pillar, and a new name

Yes, objections or the obstacles to the open door do exist. But I want to conclude by looking at something equally damaging but less obvious, the *temptation at the threshold to partially-commit to Christ* without truly entering into the fullness of his salvation and blessings inside the open door.

You might ask: who would do such a thing? Teeter on the threshold, with one-foot-in and one-foot-out of the kingdom of God, able to make an easy escape if things get too dicey. How about Peter?

In chapter 18 of John's gospel, it is Peter, the apostle, who watches from a distance as Jesus is questioned in Pilate's courtyard. The passage says that

- Peter "stood outside **at the door**" (v. 16).
- And when a servant girl spotted him "**at the door**," the Bible says: "the servant girl **at the door** said to Peter,
 - 'You also are one of this man's disciple's, aren't you?'"
- And, "Peter said, 'I am not.'"

Peter stood at the door. He waited at the door. He watched at the door to see how things would pan out. But when things got too intense, *Peter faced temptation at the threshold and ultimately denied Jesus.*

I wonder, sometimes, if my faith is like Peter's.

Afraid of committing to the full cost of discipleship. Waiting at the door. Not fully embracing Jesus. Peering through the open door; but not fully entering in. Holding

on to the opportunity to opt out, if necessary and expedient, like a get out of jail free card in Monopoly.

But today's Scripture beckons us

- not only to come close to the threshold, but to *walk through the door*.
- not to maintain an escape plan; but to *enter in*.
- Not to hover perpetually as potential disciples in close-proximity; *but to draw near to Jesus in true surrender and faith*.

For **only inside the door is there a crown**. The crown of life that was first a crown of thorns. The crown of "the one who died and came to life again" (Rev. 2:8). Do you long for the crown that will keep you going through life's terrible and unpredictable afflictions, hardships, pain, and disappointments knowing that while the greatest enemy of all, death is future for us; death is finished through Jesus? Do you long for the strength to keep going? *Enter through the narrow door*.

Only inside the door—not sheepishly squatting on the porch, *inside*, do we also become "pillars in the house of God" (Rev. 3:12).

Ancient Philadelphia was destroyed in 17 A.D. by an earthquake and volcano. Those who resided there lived under the constant threat of poverty, tragedy, destruction, and displacement.

To them, and to us, Jesus says 'you will be permanent pillars, in the presence of God Almighty, and **you will "certainly never go out of it."** There, as pillars in the house of God, we finally find our permanence; we finally find our peace.

Do you long for *peace*? Do you long to hear Jesus speak over the chaos in your life as he spoke over the great storm "Peace! Be still!" (Mk. 4:39). Do you long to experience "the wind cease" and "a great calm" come over your soul? Then I implore you in the name of Jesus: *enter through the open door!*

For inside the door is *Jesus himself*. And there, inside the door, he gives us a new name, a new identity, a new purpose. While most of our lives are spent trying in futility to ‘make a name for ourselves’; Jesus is eager to give us a new name, “The name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven.” We are marked with God’s “own new name.” (Rev. 3:12).

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus says, “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.” Some who do not yet believe in Christ find this to be objectionable. In this sermon, John articulated a version of what is called Aquinas’ aesthetic argument for the existence of God. In that theory, we identify common grace experiences of beauty and goodness that all human beings share, and help people trace these good gifts to their fulness and completion in Christ. How might you do this in a real life scenario?
2. In exploring the theme of the “open door” John connected Peter’s denial of Jesus ‘at the door’ of Pilate’s courtyard as a danger for Christians. Teetering on the threshold, with one-foot-in and one-foot-out of the kingdom of God, able to make an easy escape if things get too dicey. How can this serve as a model for Christian discipleship that counts the cost and fully enters in through the open door, rather than living a life of partial committal to Christ, and not full surrender?
3. Inside the open door of salvation, we find: a crown (signifying Christ’s victory and our ability to keep going with God-given resilience), a pillar (indicating our permanence and peace in the presence of God), and a new name (indicating our purpose and true eternal identity). How do these realities motivate us to draw others into the grace of God through the open door?
4. John noted that: “By all means: we should form our opinions about **politics**, and **public policies**, and our **preferred secondary ideological and theological issues**. These are important! They’re integral to exercising informed, responsible citizenship as a Christian. But we must take care **not to fuse these other things**

with the gospel. Not to write them on the doorways of Deuteronomy 6. How can we identify when other idolatries or ideologies become part of the writing on the door? What can we do to ensure gospel purity from gospel dilution by cultural accommodation?

5. The sermon said that “we need to take care not to practice false advertisement for the kingdom of God. **The sign on the door needs to match the reality inside.**” How can we ensure that our ‘open door’ not only says ‘gospel’ but our teaching, community life, and culture matches on the inside what the sign says on the outside? How can we ensure a legacy that remains faithful across generation gaps, and over long periods of time?