

The Open Door

Rev. 3:7-13

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First Baptist Church of Diana, Texas 01/12/2011

The city of Philadelphia was located about 30 miles southeast to Sardis. It was first established by Atlas II for the purpose of spreading Greek language and civilization into the area. Having been built in the second century BC, most structures were destroyed in a major earthquake in A. D. 17. The deadly quake caused many to live in the country out of fear of living in the cities. Tiberias financed the rebuilding of the city and give it the name Neocaesarea in his honor.

Volcanic activity was once prevalent in the area. Ash and lava from the quakes deposited rich soil on the plain around Philadelphia. The soil was good for growing grapes and a profitable industry grew up in the region. Temples were built for worship of various pagan deities including Dionysius the supposed god of vegetation and fertility. There were so many temples of various kinds in Philadelphia that it became known as Little Athens.

The message to the church easily divides into 5 sections. The first section is verse seven and refers to the picture of Jesus in Revelation 1:12-20 as the One who is holy. Further explanation is given as Jesus being the one who is true which may be pictured in Revelation 1:16 with the two-edged sword in His mouth. The second section is verse 8 showing the opportunities. Verse 9 makes up section 3 and delineates between true Israel and false Israel. Section 4 deals with the test to come in verses 10 and 11 with the final section dealing with those who overcome in verse 12.

He Who is Holy

Jesus assures the church at Philadelphia of His holiness and the reality of His truth. The proclamation is given with the backdrop of pagan gods recognized in the Greek culture on two points. First, they were not holy and second, they were really false gods. One prominent feature of pagan gods is their lack of holiness. Each god was constructed as one who held recognized faults of mankind. Some of the gods were formed out of infidelity and adultery among the gods establishing more gods. Such an understanding facilitated emperor worship where leading rulers were often seen as deity. Jesus debunks such an idea with the promise of holiness. The term holiness is strengthened with two distinct meanings. First, holy means separated. This definition reminds us that God is not human. Man is created in the image of God but he is not God. Frankly, no man can become God. He alone is God and there are very basic differences which prevent such from occurring. God is creator ex nihilo, out of nothing. God is all present, all powerful, and all knowing. Man does not and cannot measure up. God is different than man.

Christians should know of the fallacies of their pagan environment who constructed gods like men to serve.

Second, God's holiness defines his ethical or moral purity. Jesus kept the ceremonial law of the Old Testament as well as the moral law. He ate and cleansed according the ceremonial law. He was circumcised and attended the necessary meetings. He also kept the law without fail. He violated not one of the commandments of the Old Testament. Every god in the Greek pantheon had moral failings. This description of Jesus reminds us of his moral purity making him the qualified sacrifice satisfying the wrath of God for our redemption.

The other description of Christ in this picture is that he is true. In this context it seems clear that the Scripture is drawing a contrast to the false religions of the city. At every turn was evidence of pagan false gods. He is also identified here as the one having the Key of David which connects Christ to his lineage as well as the prophecies given concerning the one who would sit on the throne of David. Jesus is the one who sits upon that throne and is the ruler. Notice the present tense of the truth. It is not so much that Jesus will come and sit on David's throne; He clearly sits upon David's throne now and rules over the kingdom in the present tense. In closing the verse, he points out that this ruler is the one who opens doors and shuts doors. Most scholars agree this is a reference to the Jews in control of the local synagogue who had established their own set of rules as to who could and could not worship with them. Suspicions are high that several of those who were part of the church at Philadelphia had been excluded by the Jewish authorities.

The Open Door

Because Jesus is the one who has power and authority as holy, true, and in the seat of King David, it is He who determines the ministries of the church. His purpose will not be thwarted nor his servants excluded. He knows they have a little power, they have kept His Word, and they have not denied the name of Christ. Because they have been faithful, Jesus will keep an open door for them to serve. This verse deals with two characteristics of the Great and Mighty God. His power is unmatched and he knows us and our deeds personally.

Jesus assures this fledgling church of his intentional action of putting before them an open door. Immediately following his description of the Kingdom under Christ's rule, He turns to their involvement in Kingdom work. They are identified with Christ. They may have been removed by the Jewish leaders but they are included by Christ and necessarily involved in His work. With little power they are in humility before God. Man does not need great power to be involved in great things in God's kingdom. The song has said, "little is much, when God is in it."

Against the backdrop of the world scene, a church might come to see itself as insignificant. In this day when bigger is thought of as better, those who do not draw thousands for worship each Sunday might become discouraged and in need of an infusion of hope from above. God gives such an infusion in this passage. You may have little power but if you have not

denied His name and if you have been faithful to keep His word, let Him open the door and let Him judge the results. One of the great plagues of church ministry today is that of a comparative identity. Church staff members become disheartened and the laity becomes impatient because we do not see what we consider to be more favorable results. But our judgment is not based on a worldly standard of achievement, it is based upon two qualifications in this Scripture, keep His Word and do not deny His name. Let us be committed to relying on God to open the doors of ministry. Perhaps the adage with Henry Blackaby's Canadian eloquence fits here, "find out what God is doing and join Him in His work" or as Manly Beasley put it, "Find out what God is doing and get in on it."

The Real Battle

God not only knows their deeds and will exercise his power for opportunity; He also knows the deeds of the enemy of believers as well as their fate. It is the confrontation with Jewish authorities in verse 9 that gives status to the interpretations of verse 8 suggesting the closed door of Jewish authorities. Verse 9 becomes significant in biblical interpretation on two counts. First, it deals with the kingdom of God and the throne of David on a spiritual basis. There were those who were saying they were Jews when in reality they were not. Were they of the lineage of the Jews? Most likely. Were they believers in Christ? Not at all. This reminds us of the time Jesus challenged the status of those who were of the lineage of Abraham yet Jesus told them they were not of their father Abraham. In contrast, He actually told them they were of the household of their father, the devil. Historical premillennialism views the prophecies to the nation of Israel as past and in no need of future fulfillment. Dispensationalist disagree, saying the kingdom is the nation of Israel and Jesus will physically rule the geographical area in order to fulfill the prophecies. At least in this instance, Jesus makes a spiritual reference to the rule of King David and the one who would sit on that particular throne.

Second this verse deals with the real enemies of Christ and the future of those who reject Him. The battle, as Jesus defines it, is not with men but with Satan. The Jewish rulers are under the influence of the Satanic. One problem with people is we make enemies out of each other rather than with the real enemy. The apostle Paul described it well when he said, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. Eph 6:12-13 NASU. And even though these who were fighting against the Philadelphian Christians were under the influence of Satan, there is coming a day when they will actually bow down to the believers. The implication is yet future because there was not a time in their lives that matches the description presented in this prophecy.

Protection from the Hour

The whole world is about to be tested according the verse 10. As we have made our journey this far in our study, we have attempted to present a perspective from the dispensational interpretation as well from a historical premillennial position. This verse allows for ample distinction. You will remember that historical premillennials (HP) believe in a millennial reign of Christ on the earth. This position does not agree that the church will be taken out prior to a great

tribulation as do dispensationals. The interpretation of this verse not only illustrates the differences but adds to the conversation and interpretation.

Three phrases are the center of variations of interpretation and could be seen as questions. What is the hour of testing? What does it mean to be kept from this testing? Who is the whole world? The dispensational interpretation sees the hour of testing as the Great Tribulation, to be kept from testing means to be absent during this time, and the whole world means all that live on the earth at the time of testing. From the HP position, the hour of testing is a time when the wrath of God will be poured out on unbelievers. They point out that the command in verse 11 to hold fast indicates that they will be present during this tribulation yet protected from God's wrath. It follows that they believe the world to be those who have rejected Christ, or, in keeping with verse 8, they have denied the name of Christ. To be kept from testing means they will not experience the wrath of God even though they are present on the earth during the time of testing. They point to Revelation 6:10, 8:13, 11:10, 12:12, 13:8, 12 and 14 as instances of other times the writer speaks of worshippers of the beast as the whole world.

Regardless of your interpretation, the hope is found in verse 11 when Jesus says, "I am coming quickly." The fact that He is coming soon is not to be taken lightly as we are now almost 2000 years since the proclamation was made. He did come soon after and deal with the Jews using the Romans. They were given special grace for sustenance during the tribulations that fell upon the Jews. It is the assurance of the return of Christ that should be the center of our focus. Either God comes in person or in the power of His grace. Regardless, believers are strengthened for the task at hand.

Pillars of Testimony

If you had walked around the city of Philadelphia on a tour of the temples, you would have found pillars as support for various portions of the structures. Upon these pillars you would have seen the name of a faithful municipal servant or a distinguished priest. The symbolism of verse 12 shows the overcomer as a pillar in God's Temple not made with hands. On these pillars are the name of the Lord showing identification, ownership, and recognition. The saints of God will be recognized as being with God in reign as the new Jerusalem comes down. Perhaps this is the time for the prophecy of verse 9 to be fulfilled when these Jews under the influence of Satan bow down at the feet of God's servants and know that God has loved His faithful servants. We shall have the name of God written with the name of the city of God and the new name of God all written on us as pillars in God's temple.

Conclusion

The door is open and God is responsible to keep it that way. We are His servants and as such are heir to the greatest kingdom ever known to man. The work and even the identity sometimes seems trivial and in vain. Remember, God has the victory and to be identified with Him will bring the greatest honor and glory in the time yet to come. He is the provision, He is the power, and He is the reward. Let us keep the battle where the battle belongs, against the powers of darkness. Let us keep His Word, and let us never deny His name.

Great Quotes from Warren Weirsbach in his commentary on this section of Revelation.

"It is not the size or strength of a church that determines its ministry, but faith in the call and command of the Lord. God's commandments are His enablements."

“Unbelief sees the obstacles, but faith sees the opportunities.”

“If we take care of God’s work, He will take care of our battles.”

If He opens doors, we must work; if He shuts doors, we must wait. Above all, we must be faithful to Him and see the opportunities, not the obstacles. If we miss our opportunities, we lose our rewards (crowns), and this means being ashamed before Him when He comes (1 John 2:28).