

“CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR”
REVELATION 3:7-13

We’ve been studying Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus’ messages to seven churches in Asia. We’ve looked at five of them so far, but the one we’re going to be exploring this morning, in my opinion, bears the most resemblance to Emmanuel Bible Church.

The ancient city of Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities in Asia, built in about 150 BC. It was founded by the king of Pergamum, who had such a passion for Greek culture that he wanted to spread it as far as he could. So, he built this city because it bordered three nations. He hoped the “uncivilized and uneducated” people of these nations would be attracted to its advanced ideas and culture and forsake their barbaric ways.

In that sense, Philadelphia was a missionary city for Greek culture, and it was appropriately designated “Gateway to the East.”

We will see how this feature contributed to the content of Jesus’ message. But first, let’s see how he identifies Himself, **verse 7b**. ⁷ *“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one...’* Jesus is the *Holy One*. He is the embodiment of absolute moral perfection. In His being there is not the slightest hint of sin. He has never had an evil thought or an impure motive. Even while living in a human body on earth, He never even slightly deviated from the moral perfection that is intrinsic in His nature, though He was tempted in every way that we are.

But Jesus is also *the true one*. He is not just another guru with a winsome personality and a way with words. His teachings are not cleverly articulated opinions giving insecure and gullible people the psychological assurance of an afterlife. He is the embodiment of truth. All truth has its source and origin in Him. Therefore, He is *the Authority* on everything. What He says is absolute truth, and anything that contradicts what He says is false.

How do these attributes relate to the situation at Philadelphia? The following phrase sheds light on this: **Verse 7c**. 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.*

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 22, a prophecy about the anticipated Messiah. It declares that Messiah is the Doorkeeper of the kingdom. He alone has the key and only He can open the door. The authority to grant admission belongs to Him and no one can enter unless they come *to Him and through Him*.

This is an assertion about the sovereignty of the Messiah. He alone decides who gets into the kingdom and who doesn’t. Of course, that assertion is troubling to some, who think it smacks of partiality, discrimination, and injustice. To which the Apostle Paul would have answered, ²⁰ *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to Him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”*²¹ *Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Rom. 9:20-21).*

This is an especially difficult doctrine for Americans who cherish our “right to choose” and our belief that we determine our own destiny. We bristle at the idea of someone else deciding our fate - even Jesus. That’s because we forget that our personal stories are only minor subplots in God’s grand, eternal story. And whether we get to be part of the happy ending in His story is purely the result of Jesus’ sovereign grace.

But something else is troubling to the modern mind about Jesus holding the key and opening and shutting the door to eternal life. Many will grant that Jesus holds the key to a door, but it is certainly not the *only* door. “There are many paths to God,” they say. “You just

have to select one that suits your particular desires and inclinations. I *might* choose Jesus, but I might choose Buddha or Krishna or someone else. But since they all lead to the same destination it doesn't really matter."

Once again, people say this as though they themselves are the authors of the big story, and, as such, can create their own reality and determine their own destiny. But that's not true.

Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth, the life; no man comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). Jesus is the only way. He is the Doorkeeper of the kingdom.

There is something very practical about this principle that ought to govern the way we think about evangelism and church growth. Some think that the progress of the gospel and the growth of the church is based upon our performance and presentation. "People will respond to the gospel and the church will grow if we use certain marketing techniques, or if we say the right words in the right way. In other words, results are based upon the effectiveness of the appeal.

Not so. Results are based on the sovereignty of Jesus - specifically, whether or not He has opened or shut the door. God can communicate truth and accomplish results in whatever way and through whatever means He chooses. Once, He used a donkey to speak the words He wanted to communicate.

Jesus is sovereign. Jesus opens and shuts the door, and He will use whatever means, methods, or men to draw people through that door. That is evident in the next verse. **Verse 8.** *"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."*

We already learned that this door is the door to the kingdom. But what is an *open* door? In this context it is likely that an open door refers to people's receptivity to the gospel. Paul tells us that the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they, in their natural state, cannot comprehend the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). It is foolishness to them. And in order for them to understand it God must remove the blindfold so that they can "see" the truth.

In His message to Philadelphia, I believe Jesus is saying that God had removed the blindfold from the minds of the city's residents. Instead of being resistant or impervious to the gospel, the gospel was able to penetrate their minds so that they could comprehend and embrace what Jesus had done for them. Instead of hostility towards God and Christ - a hostility to which we are pre-disposed by nature, there was an openness to the truth and an ability to comprehend the truth.

And this was God's doing, done solely by His power and grace. It wasn't because the church at Philadelphia was exceptionally impressive or skilled. Notice, Jesus said they had little power. Apparently, they did not have a lot of status or influence. They were probably poor and uneducated. They did not possess the resources that some of the other churches had, like Sardis or Laodicea.

But what they *did* possess was faithfulness to Jesus. He says, *"...You have kept my word and have not denied my name."* This church took Jesus' words seriously and steadfastly obeyed them, no matter what the cost. And when push came to shove and they were forced to make a choice between loyalty to Jesus and loyalty to Caesar, they chose Jesus. And that impressed Jesus. That proved to Jesus that they were trustworthy enough to be used by Him. And so, He opened a door of opportunity for them, so that He could advance His kingdom through them.

Many church leaders today are looking for foolproof methods. Jesus is looking for faithful people. Many church leaders are looking for techniques by which we can draw people to Jesus; Jesus is looking for trustworthy servants through whom He can draw people to Himself.

We don't have to market the gospel or the church or Jesus in order to make people receptive. Jesus is the One who makes people receptive. He is the One who opens the doors. And He had opened a door in Philadelphia so that this faithful church, in spite of their weakness, could usher people from their community into the kingdom.

So, how do we know when Jesus opens the door? And has Jesus opened a door for EBC?

I will address these questions in a few minutes. But first, let's look at the rest of Jesus' message to Philadelphia. **Verse 9.** ***⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.*** Jesus, here, is referring to Jews of natural descent who had rejected Jesus as Messiah, and who had been hostile to these Christians. This is a promise of vindication.

No doubt Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 60 which said that the oppressors of God's people would come and bow at their feet (60:14). Jews had claimed this promise for themselves, but now the tables had turned. The church is the true Israel, the true offspring of Abraham, the people of the Promise. These Jews who rejected Jesus and oppressed His people, had actually become a cult of Satan. And Jesus is saying that a day would come, presumably in their lifetime, when these Jews would acknowledge the truth, and repent of their abusive ways.

Verse 10 gives another promise. **Verse 10.** ***¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.*** It's interesting that this is just the opposite of what He said to the church at Smyrna. Smyrna had been told that they would experience a season of persecution and intense tribulation.

Both churches were pleasing to Jesus. Both were spiritually healthy. Why the difference? I believe it had to do with the "open door." God had different plans and purposes for each city. And in Philadelphia God thought it best to keep them from being persecuted, perhaps so they would be free to devote all their energies to bringing in the harvest. It was winter in Smyrna; it was harvest time in Philadelphia.

There are some other things we could say about verse 10, but time does not permit.

Verse 11. ***¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.***

Philadelphia was located on a major fault. An earthquake had leveled the city some seventy five years prior to this message so that it had to be completely rebuilt. Tremors were commonplace, and when they occurred it was customary for the residents of the city to drop what they were doing and run to the open fields in order to escape flying debris. However, when they did so they had to cope with yet another danger. During these tremors thievery thrived. While frightened folks fled to the fields, thieves stayed behind and pilfered the valuables they left unattended.

Jesus says, "Hold fast what you have! Don't let go of it! Don't leave it unattended! For you possess something that is priceless - a crown - and you must never let anyone take it from you!"

Crown is used in the New Testament as a symbol for victory - primarily victory over

the powers of darkness. That victory took place on the cross, when Jesus conquered sin and Satan and provided the means by which mankind could be delivered from their control. Jesus' victory on the cross is our crown. It is our most treasured possession. And Jesus is saying, "Hold on to that victory I have given you."

Jesus' reference to the danger of someone "seizing our crown" does not mean that our victory or salvation can be taken from us, but that we can be prevented from using that victory to advance the kingdom of Christ. Jesus is saying, "Don't be like those panicked residents of Philadelphia during a tremor. When your circumstances are shaky, when people are hostile toward you, don't retreat from the world and isolate yourself from it. Instead, hold on to your crown. Let Christ's victory embolden you to keep progressing and advancing."

Verse 12. *¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him 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, and my own new name.*

In Philadelphia it was customary to honor those who had served the city well with a pillar, erected in a temple with that person's name inscribed on it. It provided a lasting memory of that person. That is, until another major earthquake leveled the city.

It is not difficult to appreciate Jesus' words here. Those who faithfully serve Him will be made pillars in the temple of God - which is heaven. And on that pillar will be His name, and the name of the city - which is the new Jerusalem.

Here's what this means: A pillar is a symbol of support, strength, stability, and security. I don't have those qualities in and of myself. Certainly, the people of Philadelphia didn't, for Jesus said they had little strength. But that didn't matter. In fact, that was to their advantage. Because when we are weak, then He is strong. It is only in His name that we have the power, and it is in His name that we shall stand firm, immovable, and unshakable for all eternity.

Verse 13. *¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

What is the Spirit saying to us? I want to come back to those two questions I asked earlier: How do we know when Jesus has opened the door? And has Jesus opened a door for Emmanuel Bible Church?

Remember, an open door is a figure of speech for people's receptivity and responsiveness to the gospel and the Word of God. It is comparable to another of Jesus' metaphors - the fertile soil in the parable of the soils where seed is sown and then germinates, sprouts, and flourishes, ultimately producing an abundant harvest.

So, you know when Jesus has opened the door when you observe a season of acute receptivity and responsiveness to the Gospel and the Word of God, and when you observe real, lasting, and widespread spiritual and social transformation. To say it another way, you know there is an open door when Jesus becomes prominent and even preeminent in a place, when His name is cherished, His values are adopted, His character is imitated, His love is expressed, His word is obeyed.

So, has Jesus opened a door for Emmanuel Bible Church? I would like to give a general answer to that question, and then I would like to give a specific illustration of what (I believe) one open door looks like at EBC.

I certainly do not see or hear about everything that is going on in the hearts and minds of people at EBC or the people we interact with outside of this church (in fact, I don't see or hear about most things). But I have seen and heard about *some* things, and I've seen and heard enough to know that God is working mightily in our midst. I have seen a number of people put their faith in Christ in the last few months. I have seen hard hearts become soft. I

have seen genuine repentance and reconciliation. I have seen a growing hunger for God and His Word in various ones. I have seen specific answers to prayer. I have seen authentic expressions of the love of Christ.

Not a week goes by when I don't get to witness God at work. Now, this does not mean, necessarily, that God has placed an open door before us, because God is always at work, even in times of spiritual dryness and drought.

But let me give you one example of what, I believe, an "open door" looks like at EBC. In 1998, we began a two-year training program here at EBC that we called ELLS (Equipping Leaders for a Lifetime of Service). In the last 24 years we have had more than 200 people go through this program, and a number of our graduates have gone out from our church to the uttermost parts of the earth.

In 2011 we began to revise and adapt our ELLS material to train and equip pastors and Bible teachers in remote areas of the developing world who have never had any formal training. And ELLS International was birthed, which today is its own 501c3 (non-profit organization) with its own board, its own constitution and by-laws, and its own sources of revenue. But ELLS International was the result of an open door that God placed before us as a church. Yes, it was primarily a vision that God gave to me, and, yes, I have been the primary trainer, for a variety of reasons. But please don't think of ELLS Int'l. as a ministry that is separate from EBC. Legally, it is. But practically and, more importantly, from God's perspective ELLS Int'l. is an extension of EBC's ministry. It was started by the same church leaders that began the ELLS program here at EBC, and it was birthed by the Holy Spirit in response to the same need - the need for people to be equipped to do the work of the ministry.

Most of you know that, beginning in October, I am going to be dividing my time working as a pastor at EBC and working as the Executive Director of ELLS Int'l. A well-meaning friend said to Mindy last week, "You know, Stan just needs to make up his mind who he is going to work for - EBC or ELLS International."

That sounds like a reasonable assertion when you are thinking from a business perspective. But I don't view it that way. If ELLS Int'l. is an extension of EBC; indeed, if it is God's open door for EBC, then as you consider my role - whether I will be a pastor at EBC or the Executive Director of ELLS Int'l - please don't think of it as either/or. It is both/and. Lord willing, I will always have a pastoral role at EBC, whether I am officially on staff or not. But currently I am being released by EBC to spend more time tending the "open door" that God has placed before *us* as a church, which happens to be on the other side of the world.

By the way, I am not the only one from EBC who is tending that open door. Josh Purington, George Durance, Tom Avinelis, and Grant Clay are board members, many of you are financial supporters, and I envision a number of other people from EBC getting involved in specific areas of ministry in the future, including going to Africa. In other words, this is not Stan's ministry. This is our ministry.

I told you at the beginning of this message that, in my opinion, EBC bears the most resemblance to the Philadelphia church than any of the seven. Just as the city of Philadelphia was not particularly impressive, neither is Pratum. Just as the members of the Philadelphia church did not have much strength, the same could be said of us. But, like Philadelphia, EBC, by the grace of God, has held fast to the word of Jesus. And like Philadelphia, the Lord has placed before us an open door. Let us be faithful to tend that door, and may the Lord continue to advance His kingdom through us!

Church of the Open Door
Revelation 3:7-13

Main Idea: Jesus is extraordinarily generous with His churches that are faithful to Him and His Word, and may use them to accomplish great things.

Jesus identifies Himself (7)

Holy and true

The key of David

Jesus' provision for the church (8-11a)

An open door (8)

Vindication (9)

Protection from tribulation (10)

His soon return (11a)

Jesus' exhortation to "hold fast" (11b)

Jesus' promise to be "pillars" (12)

How do you know when Jesus has opened a door?

- when you observe a _____ of acute _____ and _____ to the Gospel and the Word of God
- when you observe real, lasting, and widespread spiritual and social _____

Has Jesus opened a door for Emmanuel Bible Church?