What He Opens No One Can Shut

In 1962 I was 12 years old. I distinctly remember my father and mother listening to the President of the United States speak on the radio one night. They explained to my brother and me that the Soviet Union had installed nuclear missiles in Cuba and our President had demanded that they be removed. This, of course, was what we now call, ‘The Cuban Missile Crisis.’ The President set up a total quarantine of the island until the missiles were removed but there were two weeks where the possibility of nuclear war between the two superpowers was absolutely real. My parents gave me and my brother detailed instructions of what we were to do if the missiles began to fall while we were in school.

In the tapes recently released by the Kennedy family, Jackie tells Arthur Schlesinger what she said to her husband, the President, when the missile crisis began. She begged her husband not to send her away to safety. She said:

“If anything happens, we’re all going to stay right here with you. I just want to be with you, and I want to die with you, and the children do, too – than live without you.” (Jacqueline Kennedy)

This is a remarkable expression of loyalty and faithfulness by a wife who at this point also knew of her husband’s unfaithfulness to her.

Jesus’ sixth letter in The Revelation went to the church in Philadelphia.

[Show Map] Philadelphia is also an inland city, over 120 miles from the coast. It was known as the ‘Gateway to the East’ because it was the furthest Roman city on the Imperial Post road heading east. What we will see in this letter is how fiercely loyal these Christians were. Because of that, Jesus has mostly praise and very little caution to give them. First, let’s notice how Jesus explains...

I. Who He Is and What He Does.

First, in verse 7 Jesus says:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. (Rev. 3:7a)

Jesus declares that he is holy and true. To use the title holy is to say that He is without fault. He is holy in His words, His actions, His purposes, His entire character. Unfortunately, with human leaders we can’t say this. They may be without fault in parts of their lives, but not in “all” their lives. Jesus is entirely holy.

Secondly, He says that He is “true.” This means that He is genuine, He’s authentic. There’s nothing false, fake or half-way about Him. In Philadelphia, like the other seven churches of Asia Minor, there were temples to “other gods and goddesses.” But none of those other “gods” could deliver on all that was claimed of them whether it be healing or wisdom or prophecy. But Jesus was 100% genuine; He was 100% accurate in all His prophecies, 100% able to heal, 100% right in His wisdom. It’s interesting to note in Rev. 6:10, that we hear the martyrs in heaven call out to Jesus. And what name do they call Him by? They call Him, “holy and true.”
These are the ones who were faithful to Jesus to death. They should know who He really is.

Secondly, Jesus says that He holds the key of David. In Rev. 1:18 He said He holds “the keys of death and Hades.” These are different keys. Holding the keys of death and Hades means He has authority over the domain of all sinners. Holding the key of David, means He has authority over the domain of all saints. Once again, Jesus is simply stating that He holds all authority.

Next, Jesus makes this statement about Himself: (Rev. 3:7b)

**What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.**

What's this talking about? Well, strangely enough, this reminds me of a story about Bronko Nagurski. If you know your NFL history, you know that Bronko was an amazing fullback for the Chicago Bears back in the 30’s, leading them to several championships. When he played at the University of Minnesota, he was named all-American at both the fullback and defensive tackle positions. (I’d like to see someone try that today!)

Well, he retired to International Falls, MN where he opened a gas station. As the story goes, his station quickly became the most popular in town. When a reporter asked some folks why, they said, “It’s simple really. Bronko fills all the cars himself and when Bronko puts your gas cap on, no one but Bronko can get it back off!” ii In like manner, what Jesus opens, no one can shut and what Jesus shuts, no one can open. So, what exactly does Jesus shut and open? This leads us to your second teaching point, which is...

**II. Who the Faithful Church Is and What It Does.**

Jesus really likes these Philadelphian Christians and we see that in what He says to them immediately after stating that what He opens, stays open and what He shuts, stays shut. Jesus says:

> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. (Rev. 3:8, 9)

This paragraph has three very interesting components. Do you see them?

First, Jesus presents a golden opportunity to the Christians in Philadelphia. So, the first component is an opportunity.

Secondly, Jesus describes ‘the reason why’ He commends these Christians. The second component is the magnet of Christ’s blessings.

Thirdly, Jesus warns them of the obstacles to receiving His blessings. That’s the third component, the obstacles to blessings. Let’s consider these individually.

First, the opportunities. What does Jesus mean by the ‘open door’? The phrase ‘open door’ in the New Testament, usually speaks of opportunities for expanded ministry. There are at least four ‘open door’ passages in the New Testament, here’s one. Paul is speaking:

> But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me... (1 Cor. 16: 8b, 9a)
So, Jesus tells the Philadelphian Christians that He is opening a door of opportunity for expanded ministry to them. Why? He tells us why:

**I know that you have little strength, yet (watch this!) you have kept my word and have not denied my name.** *(Rev. 3:8b)*

There are apparently two things that attract like a magnet the blessing of Jesus; faithfulness to His Word and embracing His name. Of all the things Jesus could have commended them for, of all the things that could attract the attention and blessing of Christ, are these the two you would have expected – keeping His Word and not denying His name? What about:

- feeding the poor?
- Being a peacemaker?
- Turning the other cheek?
- Worship, missions or self-discipline?

No, it doesn’t start with doing good, it starts with knowing what is true. Why? Because if we “keep His Word” then we will also “do what is good.” It all starts with acknowledging that His Word, this book, is completely true. It means that we do NOT consider the slightest phrase irrelevant to our lives. We do not use the Thomas Jefferson method of Bible reading. He took a scissors and cut out the passages he didn’t like. No! We “keep His Word” intact! Even those passages we don’t understand, we pray and say, “Jesus, help me! I want to honor your Word. Please show me what this means!” Keeping His Word as our “only rule for truth.” That’s step one.

And step two is never denying His name. What does that mean? Well, what does His name mean – Jesus Christ? That name literally means, “Jesus, the Savior, is the Anointed One, the Messiah.”

The third component of this paragraph speaks of the obstacles to receiving Christ’s blessing. The Philadelphian Christians faced two obstacles – lack of strength and open opposition, what we might call ‘political opposition.’ Unlike the church in Sardis, the Philadelphians did not have a long reputation of faithful service. They weren’t a large church. Unlike the church at Laodicea (which we’ll look at next week) they did not have great wealth. So, how could Jesus use little, weak Philadelphia to do “expanded ministry”?

Let me tell about a Philadelphia church today. It’s the Hidden Valley Church in Dodgeville, WI. Has anyone here ever heard of Dodgeville? Dodgeville has a total population of 4,200 people. In 2007, Hidden Valley had a total attendance of 280 people and a budget of $270,000. Their budget for one year is a bit less than our budget for one month. The pastor at Hidden Valley felt that God was “opening a door” for expanded ministry in their area. He sensed God telling him to plant a church in the nearby town of Richland Center, total population of 5,200. But they obviously had no money or extra staff to send there, so, the whole church prayed and they came up with a unique way of “expanding ministry.” They video taped the service at Dodgeville to show it in Richland Center the next week. They didn’t have any extra musicians for Richland Center so they decided to worship to CD’s. They called a retired teacher from Richland Center to be the “Site Director” and started. Last year, 2010, they averaged 200 in worship and had 100 conversions. They now
have a second “video church” in Platteville, WI and are just waiting for God to tell them which town is next after that.

How could this happen? The church in Dodgeville, like the church in Philadelphia, has kept His Word and it does not deny His name and because of that Jesus DID open new opportunities for expanded ministry and helped them overcome the obstacles that were put in their way.

What’s God calling us to? If we will “keep His Word,” if we do not compromise it’s meaning with the twisted interpretation of today AND if we do not deny who He really is, then we too will attract the blessing and power of God. He will open for us great opportunities for expanded ministry and “what He opens no one can shut.” And there will be great success, not measured by the world’s standards of buildings, budgets or bake sales. No, measured by the standards of heaven – eternal souls won for Christ! This is what the faithful church is, this is what the faithful church does! There are NO obstacles for the faithful church! In the decades to come, will we be called by Christ, a Faithful Church? Lastly we must see...

III. What the Future Holds for the Faithful Christian of a Faithful Church.

Next, Jesus gets personal. First, He promises escape from judgment for faithful, individual Christians.

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. (Rev. 3:10)

Remember the context, this is Jesus speaking to His church. When we get to chapters 4 through 22 in January and February and March, we’ll study the Tribulation period that will come upon this earth just before Christ returns in Power to forcefully defeat evil and set up His kingdom. But this verse is enormously significant because I believe it proves that Christians alive today will NOT go through that intense Tribulation. Jesus’ words here are NOT just to the Christians in Philadelphia but to all Christians of all generations. He promises here to “keep you from the hour of trial.” He’s NOT speaking of some local trial, those will come. No, he’s speaking of the trial “…that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” There’s only one Tribulation of that magnitude and it is the tribulation described in Rev. 6 through 19.

On top of that, through the whole detailed description of the Tribulation in Rev. 6-19, the church is never mentioned once! Not once! So, what happens to all the Christians? According to the apostle Paul in I Thess. 4:17:

...we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

This is what is known as the “rapture” which simply means “to be caught up” and according to Rev. 3:10, it happens BEFORE the Tribulation. If we are faithful, if we overcome, we will escape the terrible Tribulation period.

But Jesus gives us another promise for the future. He says: (Rev. 3:12)

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.
How do we interpret this promise? Well, it’s clear that we aren’t to interpret it literally (Jesus isn’t going to turn us into stone pillars!). Scripture tell us that we will have bodies in heaven like His resurrected body. So, what does this mean?

In Gal. 2:9, James, Peter and John are called “pillars” of the early church. This is what Christ is saying - overcomers are His faithful people who will bear His name and remain in His presence forever. Let me tell you about a more current “overcomer.”

His name was William Borden. Yes, he was related to the Borden milk family. Upon graduating from High School, he was an instant millionaire. For his graduation present he was given a trip around the world by his family. As he traveled, he felt a growing burden for hurting people in the world. As a Christian, he wrote home to his family, “I’m going to give my life to prepare for the mission field.” In the back of his Bible he wrote two words, “No reserves.”

He began Yale University in 1907 and became a pillar in the Christian community there. During his first semester at Yale, he started a small prayer group. That group gave birth to other groups and by the end of his freshman year, 150 classmates were meeting in weekly Bible study and prayer. By the time he was a senior, 1,000 of Yale’s 1,300 students were meeting in such groups.

Borden came up with a strategy to be sure that every student on Yale’s campus received at least one invitation to receive Christ during their time at Yale. But his heart was still fixed on going to China as a missionary.

After graduating from Yale, Borden wrote two more words in the back of his Bible. Next to “no reserves,” he wrote, “No retreats.” He turned down several high-paying job offers and enrolled in seminary. After graduating from seminary, he moved to Egypt to learn Arabic because he was intent on working with Muslims in China. While in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis. Within a month, 25-year-old William Borden was dead.

How could this happen? How could this be God’s will? All that work, all that preparation seemingly wasted! How could this be God’s perfect will? Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in the back of his Bible next to “no reserves,” and “no retreats.” He wrote, “no regrets.”

Just because we are following God’s call doesn’t mean we know the final destination. Borden started down his path with the conviction that he wanted to ease the pain of the world’s hurting people. If he had lived, he would have been one man serving God. But by his influence, by his years of preparation, thousands of men and women who knew Borden or knew of him, now, at his death, volunteered to take his place. Financed through his inheritance which he gave to mission groups like China Inland Missions, an army of missionaries flooded China and laid the foundation for the greatest conversion story of our generation – tens of millions of Chinese who have come to Christ in the last several decades.

So, what door of opportunity has Jesus opened for us here at Valley, for you as an individual? With the eyes of flesh, we see obstacles. With the eyes of faith, we see only opportunities. Don’t let anybody “take your crown,” Jesus says. Let’s follow Borden who followed Christ and start living with “no reserves, no retreats, no regrets.” The door is open. Let’s go! Amen.
i Janny Scott, “In Tapes, Candid Talk by Young Kennedy Widow,” N.Y. Times (9-11-11)
ii Duluth News Tribune, “Remembering Bronko Nagurski,” Jan. 12, 2010
iii Preaching Today, “William Borden: Living with No Regrets”