

This morning we will give our attention to Jesus' message to the church in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia in question is not the city by that name in modern day United States, but the ancient city that existed when the book of Revelation was written, sometime near the end of the first century AD. This is one of the seven churches that the exalted Lord Jesus Christ addressed through the apostle John and while it was a specific church that Jesus was addressing, the message is meant to be considered by all churches. We are not exactly like the ancient church in Philadelphia, but what the Lord says to that church is nevertheless important for us to consider and learn from.

One of the reasons that the Bible is relevant to us even though it was written so long ago in a world that was very different from the world in which we live is that some things do not change. The most important things do not change, such as God and the fact that human beings are created by God, for God, the reality of sin and salvation and the fundamentals of the calling of the church in the world. The fundamental things about the meaning of life do not change and therefore the words that the risen and exalted Lord Jesus spoke to a little church in the ancient world continue to be relevant for us living in the modern world.

One of the great comforts of the Bible is that Jesus does not change. Jesus was and is a human being as well as God. As God he exists eternally, but as a human being he exists in his resurrected body forever just as we will live as resurrected people forever. So the Jesus who is described in these verses and who speaks in these verses is the same Jesus who lived one earth, died and rose from the dead. He has ascended into heaven. He is sitting at God's right hand which means that he rules over the whole universe. And this part of the book of Revelation pictures him as standing as the exalted Lord in the midst of his churches.

One of the interesting things about the book of Revelation is that there is no need to harmonize the different images that are described. This kind of literature, which is full of images and symbols, is meant to teach us something by each of the pictures that it presents and there is no attempt for the different pictures and images to be consistent with one another. Therefore there is no problem with saying that Jesus is sitting at God's right hand and standing in the midst of his churches. Each of these images conveys a different truth, and there is no need to ask how Jesus can be sitting and standing at the same time. He is ruling over the whole universe bringing God's kingdom and he is present among his churches knowing their strengths and their weakness and addressing them appropriately.

So the glorified Lord Jesus tells John to write these words to the church in Philadelphia. "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 the holy one. This is the kind of language that God uses to refer to himself in the OT. In the book of Isaiah for instance, God refers to himself many times as "the Holy One of Israel." So Jesus by referring to himself as "the holy one" is claiming to be God. The idea of holiness when it refers to God includes both transcendence and purity. Transcendence has to do with being above and beyond the whole creation. And this transcendent one is perfectly righteous – there is no hint of sin. And this, Jesus is claiming for himself.

Jesus also refers to himself as “the true one.” This is also a claim to deity. God is true in an absolute way. He is the true God over against false gods. He is the source of all truth. And he is truthful in that he is faithful. He can be counted upon. He is true to his word. This Jesus is claiming for himself as he refers to himself as the true one in his words to the church at Philadelphia. The one who speaks to them is the holy and true God.

Jesus also claims to have “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.” This language comes from Isaiah 22:22 where God promises to a faithful servant named Eliakim “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open.” Clearly, Jesus is the fulfillment of this verse in Isaiah and the idea is that Jesus opens and closes doors. If Jesus opens a door, no one will be able to shut it and if Jesus closes a door no one will be able to open it.

Now what that means in this context is indicated by what Jesus goes on to say in verse 8 to the church in Philadelphia. “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.”

So the idea is that even though this was a church with little power, Jesus had set an open door before them and no one would be able to shut that door. Now you may remember that the apostle Paul often used this idea of an open door to refer to an opportunity to preach the gospel. For instance in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 Paul tells the Corinthians that he was planning to come to them soon, but for the time being he was going to stay in Ephesus “for a wide door for effective work has opened for me, and there are many adversaries.” So Paul was going to stay in Ephesus a little longer because his preaching at Ephesus was bearing fruit or at least there was some kind of interest so that Paul felt that he should take advantage of the opportunities for the gospel that were being presented to him in Ephesus.

That is how we are to understand what Jesus is saying to the church in Philadelphia. Jesus had set before them an open door for gospel ministry. There were opportunities for them to bring the gospel. Perhaps there were people in their circle of contacts who were interested and willing to listen. It seems that Jesus was intending to save some from among the Jewish community in that city. He says in verse 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 refers to the Jewish synagogue as the synagogue of Satan because they had not accepted Jesus as their messiah. Because of that Jesus says, they are not really Jews even though they claim to be. The true Israel are those who have accepted Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

But, Jesus says, “I will make them come and bow down before your feet...” So there was this Jewish population in Philadelphia and Jesus was going to use the witness of the church at Philadelphia to bring them to faith in Jesus. That is the open door that Jesus had set before them.

Now it is likely that the church of Philadelphia was tiny and that the Jewish population was much larger. And it is likely that the Jewish population had a hand in persecuting the tiny group of Christians at Philadelphia. We read of the Jewish persecution of Christians many times in the NT. Jesus says of the Philadelphian church that they had but little power. The picture is that of a small group of Christians surrounded by a large and hostile Jewish community.

But that little church had been faithful. Jesus says to them, “[Y]ou have kept my word and have not denied my name.” They had been faithful to the apostolic word. Jesus’ word had been conveyed to the churches through the inspired apostles. And the little church at Philadelphia had been faithful to that word. We have seen in some of the other letters that some of the other churches had allowed false teachers to bring their teachings into the church. We also see this concern with false teaching in many other places in the NT. One of the key ways that churches must be faithful to the Lord is by keeping his word – by resisting any teaching that contradicts that word. The church in Philadelphia had been kept Jesus’ word and Jesus commends them for that. He also commends them for not denying his name. That means that they had continued to confess Jesus publicly in spite of the cost of doing so.

This expression is rooted in the saying of Jesus recorded in Matthew 10:32-33 among other places. “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” So the small group of believers in Philadelphia had not denied Jesus’ name in spite of the hostility of the Jews and the Romans in the midst of which they lived. And Jesus commends them for that.

Now I want to reflect with you one what we have covered so far might mean for us. We can say that what Jesus says about the church in Philadelphia is true of us. We have but little power. We are small church in a large hostile world. We are not persecuted to the extent that many other churches are persecuted and perhaps not even to the extent that the Philadelphian church was persecuted, but we certainly are increasingly reviled and there are many who utter all kinds of evil against us falsely on Jesus’ account. Many of the convictions that we hold because of our allegiance to Christ are considered to be harmful and hateful in our society. We are weak in a way that it is similar to the way that the church in Philadelphia were weak.

We are seeking to keep Jesus’ word. We confess the whole Bible to be the word of God and we seek to live according to it. We do not do that perfectly, but we do treat all of it as Jesus’ authoritative word. And we have not denied Jesus’ name. We do not know every situation in which all of us have been in. There no doubt have been instances when we have been silent when we should have spoken, but as a whole we are public about our allegiance to Christ. Many of us speak for Christ as situations present themselves and we seek to live before men in a way that reflects well on Christ. We all realize that we are far from what we should be, but it is not arrogant or presumptuous to believe that we are a genuine church of Jesus Christ by his grace and mercy. Just as we can and must believe that we are faithful Christians if we are believing in Jesus and seeking

obey Christ, we can and must believe that we are a faithful church otherwise we have better leave this church and find one that is faithful.

So then what about the relevance of this idea of an open door. Jesus said to the Philadelphian church, "Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." We saw that that means that Jesus had opened a door for gospel ministry for the church in Philadelphia and no one was able to shut that door. That meant that the opportunity for gospel ministry was there in spite of opposition. You have this weak little church in a hostile environment and yet because of the door that Jesus had opened there was the opportunity for fruitful gospel ministry.

What does that mean for us? We need to think about the idea of an open door as it is used in this way. The door was open because Jesus had opened it. Does that mean that Jesus always opens that door? We get insight into this by considering the way that Paul refers to this idea. It is significant that Paul in Colossians 4:3 asks the Colossians to pray "that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ ...." That implies that the door is not always open. There is a place for praying that God may open doors of opportunity for the gospel.

This emphasizes the sovereignty of Jesus as far as the success of the gospel is concerned. Earlier Jesus had said that he had the key of David and that meant that he has the key to the kingdom. He is the one who opens the door to the kingdom and who shuts the door to the kingdom. And then he is the one who opens doors for the ministry of the gospel. He is the one who determines where the gospel will be successful and where it will not be successful.

What this means for us is that we should pray for open doors, but it also means that at some point a lack of fruit may indicate that Jesus has not opened that particular door. At one point in their missionary activity, Paul and Barnabas were preaching to Jews and were soundly rejected by them. And this is what Paul and Barnabas said to those Jews, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." On the other hand when God was blessing the work in Ephesus, Paul decided to stay there longer, "for" he said, "a wide door for effective work has opened to me."

It seems that we are to pray that Jesus will open doors for effective ministry and that we are not to continue indefinitely if the gospel has been preached and there is nothing but rejection. In Jesus' message to the church at Philadelphia, he assured them that even though they were weak, he had set before them an open door and no amount of opposition would be able to shut that door. That is a great encouragement for us because he shows that Jesus is able to grant fruit in ministry even when there is a great deal of opposition. But it also means that there comes a time if the gospel has been proclaimed to a certain person or in a certain place and there is only rejection that a church should conclude that its time to move on.

Now much of our outreach happens through prayer and financial partnerships with various ministries or specific missionaries just as it did in NT times. And from the reports that we hear, we can discern open doors. We get reports from all the ministries and missionaries that we pray for and support financially and we hear evidence that the Lord has opened doors for the gospel to produce fruit in those places. After the service today we will hear from Redemption Prison Ministry. We regularly get reports from and about the church plants of our presbytery and from the Christian Hospital in Pakistan and from the Van Maanens in Malawi. These tell us about doors that the Lord has opened. And we can think of our Lord words in the light of these efforts. "Behold I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut."

This may also be the case in our own lives. It may be that Jesus has opened a door in our contact with a neighbor or someone at work. Perhaps a person is interested in the gospel or is asking questions. We need to think of Jesus as the one who opens doors, but who also closes them. And that means that we should be praying that the Lord will open doors for us for fruitful ministry.

Next Jesus assures the members of the church in Philadelphia that he will keep them in a great trial that is coming. Verse 10, "Because you have kept by word about patient endurance, I will keep you in the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth."

Now this hour of trial which Jesus says is coming on the whole world must be understood in the light of the rest of the book of Revelation. The rest of the book as a great deal to say about judgments of God upon the world because of human sin and rebellion. It speaks about wars and famines and pestilences and other natural disasters. All of these come about as the judgement of God against the world which refuses to submit to God. They happen throughout history. And there seems to be an intensification as history moves closer to the end.

So when Jesus refers to the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, he is referring to the judgments of God that are more fully described later on in the book of Revelation. In our text Jesus says that the purpose of these trials are to "try those who dwell on the earth." The phrase, "those who dwell on the earth" consistently refers to the unbelieving world in the book of Revelation. And here Jesus says that the purpose of the trials are to "try those who dwell on the earth."

So the judgments that God sends upon the unbelieving world are also a test. If they are a test, part of their purpose is that unbelievers might repent. They are a test in that either they result in repentance or they result in hardening of heart. God is speaking through things like wars and famines and natural disasters. He is expressing his wrath against the sin and rebellion of the human race, but the fact that they are not yet the final judgment means that there is a call to repentance implied. A number of times, later on in the book, after describing some judgment of God upon the wicked it is mentioned that the people did not repent. For instance in 9:20-21 we read, "The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and

wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

This gives us a biblical perspective on the Coronavirus. This is one of the trials that the book of Revelation speaks about. It is a judgment of God upon a wicked world. Its purpose is to “try those who dwell on the earth.” It is a call to repentance. And the majority are not repenting.

But Jesus promises the church of Philadelphia that he will keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world. He certainly does not mean that he will spare them from suffering. The whole Bible makes it abundantly clear that believers suffer along side the wicked in the trials that God rains down upon the earth. But the meaning of the suffering is different. And Jesus promises to keep his people in the trials. The meaning here is the same as the promise in Romans 8 that nothing will separate believers from the love of Christ. A huge part of the message of the book of Revelation is that the Lord will keep his people in the suffering that they will have to endure and that the ultimate expression of that is the blessedness that awaits beyond this life.

Jesus speaks of that in the last verses of his message to the church at Philadelphia – 11-13, “<sup>11</sup>I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

These words are intended to encourage Christians in their suffering. Jesus is coming soon. We are called to hold fast in spite of the trials. We are promised a crown if we do. Then Jesus promises that those who conquer will be made a pillar in the temple of God. Richard Philips writes, “The idea is that Christians who endure will be permanent fixtures and beautiful ornaments in the eternal temple, the church of Christ, in which God will dwell forever. In this way Jesus promises unshakable security to Christians whose faith is proved” (p. 149).

This has great relevance for us in the light of the whole coronavirus situation. Depending on what we think will happen in the next weeks and months, we may or may not be feeling unsettled and apprehensive. There is the possibility that we will face significant disruption and even hardship. We may lose loved ones. We might die ourselves. We do not know how we will be effected. This passage tells us that this sort of thing will happen and much worse. And what is the comfort it gives to God’s people? Hold fast and you will be made a pillar in the temple of God. We are promised stability beyond this life. In this life we are promised that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ even though we may have to suffer in all kinds of ways. But we are constantly pointed forward to the culmination of our salvation beyond this life.

The last promise of this section points to the same thing. Jesus will write the name of our God upon us and the same of the city of his God, the new Jerusalem and his own new name. Leon Morris explains these promises

clearly and succinctly, “The name of my God indicates that the overcomer belongs to God. That of the city of my God signifies that he has citizen rights in the new Jerusalem. My new name possibly refers to the new state of affairs brought about by the consummation of redemption. Then Christ appears in a character in which he could not appear until this consummation is reached” (p. 83).

The one thing that Jesus does not promise is an easy life on this earth. We can have joy and contentment and peace through faith in his name. In our case he has given us many this-worldly comforts and pleasures, but the Bible makes it clear that those are not guaranteed, and that suffering is part of this early life. We can have joy, contentment and peace in Christ because God is the ultimate source of these things. But we are constantly pointed ahead to the ultimate fullness of joy in the world to come. Let us cultivate that perspective in our lives – prioritizing our relationship with God in the here and now and looking forward to the fullness of joy and satisfaction in the time to come.