

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 28, Number 15

April 8, 2012



## God's Message to Seven Churches: Philadelphia: Keys and Doors

*And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. (Revelation 3:7-8, KJV 1900)*

Our broken human nature seems inclined to extremes in most areas of thought and behavior that we experience. We see this broken inclination in churches and preachers as well as in our culture at large. When someone fails at something, it is not uncommon to hear them say, "Well, for some reason the Lord just didn't want me to succeed at this thing." The Lord may at times either assist or hinder our efforts, but the response seems inclined to think that God operates in almost random and wholly unpredictable ways based on some unknown factor that we can't explain. In over fifty-five years of Bible study, I have yet to find a single verse of Scripture to support such a fickle disposition in the Lord, and I find many passages that describe Him in the opposite way.

The Lord's message to the Philadelphia Church begins with a reminder, fully expressed and developed for such a brief letter, that He in fact does at times set before His churches and people both open doors and closed doors. But Scripture clearly identifies the reasons for both open and closed doors; it is never a mystery. No man can shut a door that the Lord opens for one of His faithful children to walk through, and no man can open a door that He has closed.

Through more decisions than I can recall over the years, both in my ministry and in my secular employment, I have experienced both open doors and closed doors. More than once I applied for a job that a professional career counselor would have not considered for me, and I was hired. And at times I was offered opportunities that I felt strongly were not in the best interest of either my family or the church that I served. Even though the job was offered, I felt that the Lord was convicting me to realize that the job would not be a wise choice for me, for my family, or for my ministry. I turned them down and, in most cases, later observed reasons that validated my decisions quite clearly.

*I have set before thee an open door....* In this setting, the passage does not tell us that the Lord in any way forces us to walk through the open door. He sets it before us and convicts us to do so, but He does not force or coerce us. If we follow the consistent pattern of Scripture's teachings, the Lord is pleased only with willing, joyful obedience in His

children. He shows us the way, He convicts us through the indwelling Holy Spirit, giving us all the indicators that this is the way we should go, but he does not force our walk.

During my youth in ministry, I heard more than my share of preachers telling their experiences and reactions when they either felt the conviction to be baptized or to preach. It seemed that the dominant idea was to see if you could outdo the last person in fighting God's direction and giving up to follow Him only when brought to the mat. The more a man described rebellion and resistance the more his experience was praised. Even as a naïve youth in my Christian experience, this whole idea seemed sadly out of touch with Scripture. If the Lord so strongly emphasizes a willing, joyful obedience, He cannot be pleased when someone whom He has directed to follow Him in a given path or ministry fights to the bitter end to avoid obedience.

When I first met Elder Gene Thomas and heard him describe his convictions and response when he felt that the Lord had called him to preach, it was a breath of fresh air to me. He felt as much fear at the grave responsibility as anyone, but he also believed it was his obligation to obey, so he promptly started speaking in the church when first asked by his pastor.

I struggled with my convictions regarding baptism for a few years, though I was only fourteen years old when baptized. Literally a few days after my baptism, I started feeling strong convictions about preaching. At first, I tried to dismiss or to ignore the convictions. After all, I was a mere fourteen years old. I was too young to even think about such a thing. My rationalizing didn't make the burden go away. It grew stronger. I reasoned that I'd keep my thoughts to myself till I reached age eighteen. If at that time I still felt this conviction about preaching, I'd talk with my uncle and another preacher whom I'd known all my life and whom I deeply respected. That resolution didn't give me any more relief than my other thoughts. The conviction continued to intensify. A mere two months after my baptism, my pastor shocked me one day by telling me that he felt that I was struggling with this burden, followed by a specific question, "If I ask you to introduce the preaching

service tomorrow, will you do so?" The conviction prevailed. I looked up at him and quietly agreed. Despite my youth, I had briefly tasted the bitter pill of unbelief and rebellion against my conscience, and I could not understand preachers in the pulpit boasting about how much they had followed that same course for many years. When I met Elder Thomas and learned that he simply obeyed when he realized his calling, the experience was refreshing. When the Lord sets an open door before us, He shows it to us and directs us to walk through it. At that tender age, I could not imagine how I would be able to speak to men and women who were my seniors by decades, who were my seniors by godly life experiences. I had one option that alone answered my strong conviction, and that was to study my Bible intensely and to do everything I could with the Lord's guiding help to share what I found there with the people.

*...for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.* The door is open, and the Lord commands us to enter, but He also guards the door and restricts entrance into its blessings. Only those who use the "...little strength..." that they have, who keep His "word" and refuse to deny His "name" enter. The true power of ministry lies with the Lord who calls men into that work, not in the men themselves. Given the frailty of our broken disposition, it is no surprise that occasionally a preacher will forget the power of his calling and reduce his ministerial power to his own strength. When this happens, you will see a ministry that focuses on pulpit-bullying or other pretenses, not on the Lord's leading. The sinful tactic may succeed for a time, but it will eventually confront the Lord's angry face and fall. The Lord who opens doors can just as effectively shut them.

*If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.* (2 Timothy 2:21, KJV 1900)

In this context, Paul confronted and rejected the errant teaching of those who taught that the resurrection had already occurred, overthrowing the faith of some. Those false teachers are the "...these..." of this verse. A godly, faithful minister of the gospel will not ignore or condone false teaching. He will confront it and expose it. Paul makes the point clearly. Only the man who purges himself from and rejects those who teach error, receives the Lord's promotion. The Lord blesses only these godly men as honorable, sanctified (set apart for God's use, not for his own or for the promotion of error), acceptable for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work.

The Lord uses the analogy of keys in this lesson to teach a vital truth to the Philadelphia Church and to us. Keys open locked doors, and keys lock doors to secure what is behind the door from loss. Based on Scripture's use of this analogy, we may

conclude that the Lord reserves some "Keys" for His exclusive use, such as the key mentioned in our study verse. He gives other keys to godly servants for use in His kingdom.

*And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* (Matthew 16:19, KJV 1900)

Here we find an example of keys that the Lord promised to give to Peter. Perhaps the most logical application of this verse appears in Peter's preaching at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). The Lord guided Peter to use the keys of the Kingdom to preach the gospel to Gentiles, and to show them that God's kingdom blessings were no longer confined to one race or culture, but that "...in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10:35, KJV 1900) The conversion of the house of Cornelius did not occur by Peter's design or planning, but the Lord directed Peter to use one of those "Kingdom keys" that Matthew 16:19 describes in analogy to open the door of the gospel to Gentiles.

*...for thou hast a little strength....* Regardless the man's training or natural abilities, when the Lord calls us to serve Him, whether in ministry or in any other way, all of our personal abilities and resources together are no more than "...a little strength." The more we realize the weakness of our little the more we will be receptive to the Lord's empowering grace.

*...hast kept my word....* Keeping the Lord's "...word..." not corrupting it, is the second filter over His doors of blessed opportunity. While many in Paul's day corrupted the word of God, Paul refused to join their evil ways. In the face of those who wrested (twist out of joint) Scripture, Paul steadfastly, "...as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ." (2 Corinthians 2:17 KJV) False teachers effectively persuade people of error, but they cannot persuade God; He alone guards the doors of blessing.

*...hast not denied my name.* In Scripture, reference to the Lord's "Name" often refers to His authority, as we might think of the term, "Open up in the name of the law." We honor the Lord's "Name" when we accept His exclusive authority over our lives, our minds, and our conduct. Whenever we evade the teachings of Scripture, we deny His name. We reject His authority. Whenever we appeal to other authority for our faith, however highly regarded, we deny His name.

The Lord has given us rich access to His blessings. He has opened the door, and no mortal can close it. Are we willing to submit to Him and to His conditions to walk through that door and to discover the blessings that lie in wait for us through the door?

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor