

Place: Lurgan Baptist: 11:11:2003
Reading: Revelation 3:7-13

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

8. A LITTLE CHURCH WITH A BIG GOD

Certain men seem to rise above the landscape of their day and make a mark for Jesus Christ on their generation. Donald Gray Barnhouse was one of those spiritual giants. As the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dr. Barnhouse towered above his times and left an impact for eternity. Soon after graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, Barnhouse was invited back to campus to preach. For a young pastor this was quite and intimidating experience. As Barnhouse stepped into the pulpit to address the student body and faculty, he was suddenly quite nervous. In attendance that day was one of the most brilliant men on the face of the earth an Old Testament professor named Dr. Robert Wilson.

Professor Wilson was a genius who reportedly spoke twenty seven languages and was highly respected for his proven scholarship in the Scriptures. As Barnhouse stood to speak, Dr. Wilson sat with arms folded on the front row, peering stoically over the top of his glasses. The young pastor preached the best he could, but he found it difficult not to be preoccupied with his famous professor seated so prominently at his feet. *'What is Dr. Wilson thinking ?'* Barnhouse wondered. *'Does he approve ?'* Then suddenly, a disturbing thing happened. Midway through Barnhouse's message, Professor Wilson shuffled his papers together. He stood to his feet and walked out of the church building while Barnhouse was still preaching. Barnhouse was crushed. What had he said to offend Dr. Wilson ? Where had he failed ? Was his theology wrong ? What about his use of the original languages ? Barnhouse could barely gather the strength to finish his message.

After the ordeal was over, the young preacher exchanged a few pleasantries with well-wishers and then went straight to the professors office. He knocked on the door and with a trembling voice asked, *'Where did I fail ?'* Dr. Wilson stopped his reading and looked up. *'Fail ? Oh, you didn't fail,'* Wilson explained. *'I always come to hear my former students speak one time. I simply want to know if they believe and preach in a big God or a small God. I am very pleased that you are one of our few graduates who believe and preach a big God. I didn't need to hear anymore.'* What a lesson for Barnhouse. What a lesson for us.

Those who believe in a great God are those who do great things for God. He delights in taking ordinary people and doing extraordinary things through them. That way, the

greatness belongs to Him. The size of our God will determine the impact of our lives. Churches with a big God conduct extraordinary ministry. Those who believe and serve a great God shake this world for Jesus Christ ! Now this is what makes the Lord's letter to the church at Philadelphia so important. They ministered in one of the smallest of the seven cities, and yet the believers there had the greatest opportunity for ministry before them. Why ? Because their eyes were upon a great God. Now there are several things about this city that we need to note for undoubtedly they have a bearing on the Lord's remarks here.

1. Consider ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

It was founded by Attalus the second in 140 BC and Attalus was called Philadelphos which means brotherly love, it was after him that Philadelphia was named. Now Attalus had built this city for one main reason, that it might become a missionary city. It was intended that the function of Philadelphia might be to spread the Greek culture, language and civilisation. What the city had been for Greek Culture, the church was to be for the Christian Gospel.

2. Consider ITS GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION:

The location of this city was significant. There are three important considerations in the sale of property, location, location, location. Philadelphia had all three. Because of its location 25 miles southeast of Sardis, this city was a major hub of communication, disseminating information throughout this part of the known world. Ancient travellers would pass through Philadelphia on their way to important destinations. As the "*Gateway to the East*," it was ideally situated to touch the lives of many people. Beyond this small settlement lay the kingdoms of Lydia, Missia, and Phrygia. No doubt it was that Christ was thinking about when He said "*I have set before an open door.*" (3:8) However, Philadelphia also set on a geological fault that made the city vulnerable to volcanoes and earthquakes.

In AD 17 this city was devastated. In the following years the city continued to be jolted by aftershocks. So much so that many of the residents moved out permanently to live in the surrounding fields for fear of being buried alive. The Risen Lord's promise to the over-comer was "*He shall go no more out.*" (3:12)

3. Consider ITS SPIRITUAL CHURCH:

This church was weak but it was wonderful. Like Smyrna there's no rebuke here nothing but praise is given. It was a Revival Church. It had experienced an *Evangelical Revival*, it

had a world vision. It had experienced an *Ecclesiastical* Revival, the deadening influence of Judaism had been overcome. It had experienced an *Eschatological* Revival. The truth of the Lord's Return was its beacon light. Thus the Risen Lord stands before this fellowship not to ***offer blame but blessing, not the threat of a fearful vengeance but the thrill of a fresh vision.***

In this letter there are three symbols, " a key,"

(3:7) " a door," (3:8) " a pillar," (3:12) We want to examine the relationship between the *Church's open door, the Lord's master key and the over-comers heavenly pillar.*

(1) THE OPPORTUNITY THAT LAY BEFORE THEM

" I have set before thee an open door," (3:8) This is the first of 4 special doors in the Book of Revelation. There is: (1) The Door of the Human Heart, (3:20) (2) The Door of the Rapture, (4:1) (3) The Door of the Second Coming, (19:11) (4) The Door of Service, (3:8) An Open Door in Scripture is a door of *Opportunity*. Opportunity for service and ministry. An " open door," is a

God-given opportunity for expanded ministry. Open doors lead to unlimited ministry potential for Christ. Open doors lead to vast new horizons.

(a) AN OPEN DOOR IS DIRECTED BY THE LORD:

" I have set open door." (3:8) Paul was aware of open doors divinely placed before him. The apostle writes, " For a great door and effectual is opened unto me." (1 Cor 16:9) Later he wrote,

" When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord." (2 Cor 2:12) Paul requested prayer " that God would open to us a door of utterance."

(Col 4:3) Now remember Philadelphia was strategically placed. It was " The gateway to the East," ideally situated to touch the lives of many people and the Risen Lord says to this church, " I have open door." The opportunity to spread the good news of the gospel. You see, God in His sovereignty opens doors for His people. What open door has the Lord placed before you ? Sometimes we are blind and fail to see the open doors. Sometimes we are looking for ways to serve the Lord when He has already opened a door right before us. My what strategic opportunity has the Lord opened for you ? Have you stepped out by faith and gone through it ?

(b) AN OPEN DOOR IS EFFECTED BY THE CHURCH:

There is a cause and effect principle at work here. Another rendering of (3:8) reads " I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut Because you have a little power and have kept My Word and not denied My name." The Lord opened a door for this church Because this church had fulfilled certain conditions. They were faithful in

little. So God gave them opportunity to be faithful in much.

(1) OUTWARDLY THEY WERE WEAK:

" *Thou hast a little strength.*" (3:8) That may sound like a rebuke but its not. Its merely a statement of fact. Compared to the other churches, they have only a little power limited resources, small numbers, and little clout. This is not a high-powered church. This is no well-oiled, high profile, hotly wired mega-church. They have no respected community leaders as their office-bearers. They live from hand to mouth Gods hand to their mouth. But it was in their weakness they learned a great lesson, faithfulness to God opens great doors. Even for the smallest churches.

(2) INWARDLY THEY WERE STRONG:

" *Thou hast kept My Word.*" (3:8) They were fiercely committed to Gods Word. They preached it, taught it, believed it, obeyed it, lived it and shared it. They wouldn't budge from the Word. Do we not need more churches like this today ? For too many have fallen victims to the latest gimmicks of some church growth guru. But what we need instead is a return to the Centrality of the Word of God. Just keep the Word. " *And hast not denied My name.*" (3:8) Apparently many in Philadelphia, especially unbelieving Jews were persecuting the church. But this little band of believers would not buckle under worldly pressure. They remained true to the Lord who redeemed them. Boldly, they witnessed for Him in every opportunity. No wonder Christ opened doors for this church. They were faithful in little so God gave them opportunity to be faithful in much.

Sometimes people reason, " *if the Lord would only make me a successful businessman, than I'd gave the church a lot of money.*" But the real issue is this. " *What are you doing with the money you have now ?*" Our faithfulness with the little God gives us determines how we handle greater opportunities. My do you recognise that faithfulness in little things is God's appointed way to bigger things ? (Matt 25:21) It was to this little church that Christ said, " *I have set before thee an open door.*"

(c) AN OPEN DOOR IS REJECTED BY THE WORLD:

Whenever, a church moves forward by faith it is sure to meet the devil head-on. That's precisely what happened in Philadelphia. Do you see what the Lord notes, in (3:9-10) ?

(1) THE FOE WAS POWERFULLY STRONG:

Do you it was Jews who were causing trouble at Smyrna. (2:9) Well, they were at again in Philadelphia. In this city there was a group of Jews who met locally in a

synagogue. They claimed to be true sons of Abraham, but they weren't. They professed faith in God, but they lied. They were unbelieving Jews, Satan was their father. Now what was happening was this. These Jews were persecuting the church, slandering them and spreading vicious lies. And the Risen Lord says, "*I know*" (3:8) The Saviour Himself had been the target of Satan's synagogue during the days of His earthly ministry. Do you recall it was the religious Pharisees who levelled the greatest hatred against the Lord Jesus. Despite their claims to be true sons of Abraham, Christ told them, "*Ye are of your father the devil.*" (Jn 8:44) Here He says, "*You're the synagogue of Satan.*" Same message. Different group. Yet despite this attack upon the church, Christ promises to make these unbelievers bow down before them and acknowledge their true relationship to God. Paul discovered that, "*a great and effectual door is open unto me and there are many adversaries.*" (1 Cor 16:9) *Opportunities and Obstacles.* Unbelief says, "*the obstacles are too great. It costs too much. It'll never work. We've never done it that way before.*" But faith says, "*here's an open door let's go through it.*" The Chinese word for Crisis is a combination of symbols for "*danger,*" plus "*opportunity.*" That's the way it is in Gods kingdom. Opportunity usually comes in the face of crisis and danger.

(2) THE FUTURE WAS PARTICULARLY GRIM:

"*Because thou hast kept earth.*" (3:10) The *Immediate* reference here would be to the official Roman persecutions that would come at any time. You see, the storm might break upon this little church at any time. Surely, this is not a time for evangelism. Was this not a time for consolidation rather than advance ? But Christ had set before them "*An open door,*" and they were to go through it. The *Immediate Reference is to Local Persecution, but the Ultimate reference is to Universal Tribulation.* My there is coming a time of worldwide upheaval the like of which has never been known in human history. The Bible calls this period, **The day of the Lord:** (Joel 2:1) **The Indignation:** (Is 26:20) **The time of Jacob's trouble:** (Jer 30:7) **The seventieth week:** (Dan 9:24-27) **The great day of His wrath:** (Rev 6:17) **The Tribulation:** (Matt 24:21-29) John describes this time in (Ch's 6-18) of this book. The question is often asked: "*Will the church go through the tribulation ?*" Are we looking for Tribulation or Translation ? Are we looking for Antichrist or Jesus Christ ? In this connection (3:10) is interesting. The Greek phrase translated "*keep from,*" does not mean "*to preserve through something.*" Rather it means "*To preserve outside the sphere of something.*" The Risen Lord is saying that He will *Protect* the Church by keeping them away from it. In fact as (3:11) reminds us the Lord will remove us from the earth before this period begins. My we are not going through but we are going up. We are not looking for tribulation we are looking for glorification. Paul says, " For the Lord Himself shall descend," (1 Thes 4:16-17)

(d) AN OPEN DOOR IS PROJECTED BY THE BOOK:

You see, "*Prophetically,*" (1:3) the Philadelphia church represents the period from

1700-1900. It suggests the era of revival and missions. The great champions of this period were Jonathan Edwards, (1703- 1758) one of America's greatest preachers and theologians. John Wesley, (1703-1791) The founder of the Methodist Church and one of England's greatest sons. George Whitefield, (1714- 1770) William Carey, (1761-1834) David Livingstone, (1813-1873) D.L.Moody, (1837-1899) George Mueller, and C.H.Spurgeon. (1834- 1892) My it was during this era that God brought the church back to Himself and thrust it forth to reach a lost world. Spirit filled servants of Christ went forth through the countries like firebrands of the Lord calling upon sinners to repent and saints to awaken. This was Revival in the church and for this church the Risen Lord has nothing but praise.

(2) THE AUTHORITY THAT LAY BEHIND THEM

In (3:7) the Risen Lord says, "*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.*" Now in this self-description the Lord Jesus does something unique. This is the only church to whom Christ identifies Himself in a way not previously revealed in John's vision of (Ch 1) This is because the vision of Christ was predominantly a vision of judgment. But as Christ speaks to this church, He has no complaint or criticism. Only commendation. So, an encouraging picture of Christ is revealed here instead. Behind this little fellowship was all the *Authority of the Risen Lord*. And who is this Risen Lord ?

(a) THE RISEN LORD IS GOD:

" *He that is Holy.*" (3:7) This is tantamount to declaring that He is God which of course He is.

" *The Holy One,*" is a title which Jehovah gave Himself in the Old Testament. (Is 40:25) So that the Lord Jesus is one with the God of the Old Testament. The concept of holiness comes from a Semitic root meaning, "*to cut.*" To be holy is to be a cut above. Separate. Set apart. My everything about the Lord Jesus is *Holy*. He was *Holy at His Birth*, "*That holy thing the Son of God.*" (Lk 1:35) *Holy in His Life*, "*The Holy One of God.*" (Mk 1:24) *Holy at His Death*, "*Neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.*"

(Acts 2:27) *Holy in His Present Priestly Office*,

" *For such an high priest became us who is Holy.*"

(Heb 7:26) Majestic in His glory. Radiant in His splendour. Nothing can be compared to Him. He is the incomparable Christ. (a)

(b) THE RISEN LORD IS GENUINE:

" *He that is true.*" (3:7) That is genuine.

(alethinous) It means He is authentic or genuine. Jesus Christ is no cheap imitation. No counterfeit Christ. No mimic Messiah. He is the real God who is true to His Word. He can be completely trusted because He is genuine Deity. He is not an imitation idol, but the authentic Almighty of heaven and earth.

(c) *THE RISEN LORD IS GREAT:*

He is *Sovereign*: " *He that hath the key of David* " (3:8) That means He is the Keeper of the Keys who alone opens and shuts the door leading to God's blessings. Oh, think of the authority of the Risen Lord. Christ has the,

(1) AUTHORITY TO REMIT SIN:

The scribes and Pharisees did not think so but the Lord said, " *Son thy sins be forgiven thee.*"
(Mk 2:5)

(2) AUTHORITY TO ADMIT SAINTS:

" *He that hath the key of David.*" (3:8) The Scripture referred to here is (Is 22:22) King Hezekiah was king over the Davidic Kingdom and was served by a man called Eliakim as the royal treasurer. Eliakim was the guardian of the kings treasures. He alone possessed the keys to open the royal treasure vault. He controlled all access to the kings vast treasures. In just the same way the Lord Jesus has been handed the keys of heavens treasury by God the Father. These keys open the doors leading into the riches of God. Through Christ we have access into the Presence of God, the Riches of God, the Resources of God. Now why would the Lord Jesus reveal Himself this way to this church ? Because they had little strength and few resources. We need to be reminded that any church's strength does not lie in its size but in its God. Those of you who have been to U.S.A. or Canada have seen the mega-church. For those of us who worship in smaller churches that can be discouraging, but we need to be reminded that spiritual success is not dictated by the size of the church's buildings, budgets, or buses, its determined by having great faith in a big God. My its does not matter how big or small the church is, what matters is how big is your God. (a) (b)

(3) AUTHORITY TO PERMIT SERVICE:

" *He that openeth* " (3:8) Now the *Messengers* of the Church need to hear this. So many preachers are prepared to " *pull wires,*" " *slap backs,*" " *make the right contacts.*" My we must spend less time recommending ourselves to others and more time showing ourselves approved to God the Lord of the Open Door would open doors no man can shut. But do the *Members* of the Church not need to hear this. If Christ is the " *One who opens* " then don't your barge your way through doors that are still closed. Be patient and wait till Christ takes out the Key and opens the door for you for

He is still in control. (1) (2)

(3) THE SECURITY THAT LAY BEYOND THEM

Christ says in (3:11) " Behold I come quickly " This is the Christians hope. Is that not our hope ? The Coming of the Lord, but the Risen Lord gives a warning. " *Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.*" (3:10) Now it is not that " *No man take thy salvation,*" that's eternally secure. I cannot lose my salvation but if I am not a faithful servant I can lose my crown. Look at the promise to the over-comer. " *Him Overcometh,*"

(a) THE LORD WILL MAKE THE OVERCOMER:

What ? A pillar. You who have little strength. Where ? " *In the temple of my God.*" (3:12) You who were persecuted by the synagogue of Satan. Could anything be more appropriate ? Do you recall that Philadelphia, was set on a fault line near the epicentre of the massive earthquake of A.D.17. The slightest tremor in that city sent the citizens scurrying out of town. But in heaven, " *they shall go out no more,*" (3:12) but will stand as pillars, secure, immovable, stable and safe. Eternally secure, never to leave the presence of God.

(b) THE LORD WILL MARK THE OVERCOMER:

Christ promises, " *And I will write upon Him the name of My God.*" (3:12) In that day writing your name on something was a mark of ownership. A master would write his name upon his servants and that meant that the servant belonged to Him. My we are His for how long ? Forever. Christ adds, " *I will write upon him the name of the city.*"

(3:12) Over-comers will receive all the rights of citizenship in the new Jerusalem. (Rev 21-22) Finally, Christ promises, " *I will write upon him My new name.*" This symbolises the full revelation of His Divine Person. There are mysteries of beauty, of brilliance, and of blessing in Jesus not yet revealed to a wondering universe. What the Queen of Sheba said to Solomon we will say to the Lord, " *Behold the half was not told me.*"

(1 Kings 10:7) *For " eye hath not seen, nor ear heard neither hath entered into the heart of*

man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." (1 Cor 2:9) (1) (2)

(3) My do you what the 6th mark of a living church is ? Opportunity ! Opportunity for service ! Yet in stark contrast to the Philadelphian Believers, how easily do we modern Christians give up. How many are the excuses we give for avoiding the challenge of evangelism. Our forces are small and feeble we say. The opposition is great, the danger of further unpleasantness real. Lets not do anything rash or foolish. Lets wait until the circumstances become more favourable. My let me ask you, how big is

your God ? On May 31st 1792 William Carey preached his famous message in Nottingham, England. His text was (Is 54:2) " *Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.*" He packed his message into two great headings, " **Expect great things from God attempt great things for God.**" Carey said, " *The Divine way out of failure and disgrace is a wider vision and bolder programme.* He pleaded for action. His message so touched the hearts of those listening that a Missionary Society was formed which awoke the church from the lethargy of a 1000 years. William Carey became its first missionary.

Do you recall what I said about Philadelphia ? It was " *The Gateway to the East.*" My is this church not ideally placed as the gateway not only to the east but to the west ? The Risen Lord said, " *I have set before thee an open door.*" (3:8) Will you go through it ? " Expect attempt great things for God. Carey did. Will you ?