

In an occasional series, we have been looking together at some of the doors – the metaphorical doors – in Scripture.

In the first message, we noted that the physical door to the house in Capernaum belonging to Simon and his family proved to be the crowded door of blessing where all who were sick or oppressed by demons received the Lord's healing and deliverance. Needy people in those days could approach Jesus in the flesh. We cannot do that these days, for this same Jesus is now in heaven (Acts 1:11). But we can still approach Him, to "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14–16) We do that through the secret door of prayer – a door that we can open at any time and in any place, praise God, to find ourselves in His presence before the "throne of grace".

In our second message, we went to Antioch in Syria. We arrived, in about the year AD 48, to hear Paul and Barnabas reporting back after their trip that now we call the first missionary journey. They had been to Cyprus, which is where Barnabas came from (Acts 4:36), and then to half a dozen cities connected by a Roman road running through the southern part of central Asia Minor. The missionaries reported that, in one place after another, God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." (Acts 14:27) This, the open door of faith, was planned and provided by God; it is a narrow door and, one day, it will close. This door is none other than Jesus Himself. He declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) He is the only door to heaven, the only way to God, the only Saviour of the world.

Today, we start by looking at a few verses we find near the end of Paul's first canonical letter to the church that he had founded at Corinth. Writing in the spring, probably in the year AD 55, the apostle told the Corinthians of his draft travel plans: "I will visit you after passing through Macedonia", he wrote. "I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." (1 Corinthians 16:5, 7b–9). So we consider this time

the wide door of opportunity

Paul was writing to the Corinthians as he neared the end of a prolonged stay in Ephesus. That stay took up the majority of his third missionary journey, lasted for well over two years and comprised his longest settled ministry in any one place. As usual, Paul focussed first on the Jews. We read that "he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia [that is, the Roman province in which Ephesus was situated] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." (Acts 19:8–10)

the wide door of opportunity is a door opened by God

The modern entrepreneur would be happy to boast, "I took chances; I made opportunities; I opened doors." The apostle Paul was not so foolish, and not for a moment did he claim that he himself had opened the "wide door for effective work" in Ephesus. No doubt he had wanted it to be open; no doubt he had prayed for it to be open; certainly he rejoiced that it was open. But, he said, it "has opened *to me*" – in other words, it was opened by someone else, and clearly that 'someone else' was none other than God Himself.

"Now," you may be thinking, "that's a lot to argue on the basis of a single preposition!" But the argument does not depend on a short word – in fact, it is the other way round: that short word reflects teaching found throughout the Scriptures. Last time, we noted the 'executive summary' of the report that Paul and Barnabas gave to the church at Antioch at the end of the first missionary journey: "they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." (Acts 14:27) There it is again, you see: "all that *God* had done ... and how *he* had opened a door of faith". The principle is this: the true work of God is always done on His terms. His is the initiative, His is the plan, His is the timing, His is the power, His is the fruit, His is the glory. And Paul knew that. He knew that everything that had happened over the course of his years in Ephesus had been the work of God. Every opportunity that he had had to speak in the synagogue and elsewhere; every person who had responded in saving faith to the gospel message; every extraordinary miracle that he had been able to perform (Acts 19:11,12); every indication of godly fear and grace in and around Ephesus (Acts 19:13–20) – all of it, every part of it, was the work of God. And so Paul wrote, "a wide door for effective work has opened to me".

The same principle obtains to this day in relation to Christian work. We can not make the gospel of Christ, but we can take the gospel of Christ; we can not make opportunities that count, but we can take opportunities that come; we can not make people into Christians, but we can take people to Christ – as Philip did when he spoke to his sceptical brother Nathanael about Jesus and said, "Come and see" (John 1:43–46), and, much later, when he explained to the Ethiopian eunuch "the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

It can be a difficult lesson to learn, and we may have to learn it repeatedly, but the fact is that in all aspects of Christian work, *we are utterly dependent on God*. As Jesus told His disciples, “Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) How, in our pride, we rebel against this! “Lord,” we say, “surely there are things that we can do? At least we can make a start!” And He says, lovingly but firmly, “you can do nothing.” The branch can do nothing on its own to produce fruit: it is utterly dependent on the life that flows to it and through it from the vine. But when that life flows, fruit will appear. To revert to our door metaphor, there are times when God closes the door and we do not have the opportunities that we may long for and seek. That is exactly what happened to Paul and Barnabas on the second missionary journey, when they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” and then, soon afterwards, when “they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:6,7) It was true for them, as it is true for us, that the wide door of opportunity is a door that we cannot force: it is opened by God and by Him alone.

the wide door of opportunity is a door beset by enemies

Listen again to what Paul said to the Corinthians: “a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” God truly did great things in Ephesus and its hinterland through the apostle Paul. But, we read, as “the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20), so did the most strident opposition to it. Ultimately, as Paul was making arrangements to leave Ephesus for Greece, “there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way” and there was a riot fomented by Demetrius and others (Acts 19:21–41).

The juxtaposition of opportunity and opposition is not as strange as it may seem. Actually, the one follows from the other, since true gospel work is always opposed. As Paul noted, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) It is when God opens the door of opportunity for gospel proclamation that the devil is most active in gospel denunciation! Jesus warned His disciples that this would happen:

“they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. ¹³This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” Luke 21:12–17

Did you notice here the word ‘opportunity’ (verse 13, ESV)? Far from choking off gospel proclamation, times of persecution and trial can provide God’s people with unique opportunities “to bear witness” or, as the NIV puts it, of “being witnesses”. And we know that this is precisely what took place. In Acts 4, we read of the arrest of Peter and John and their appearance the next day before “their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem”. And it was to that important company that “Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit”, was able to speak of Jesus and declare that “there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:5–12) Then we read of Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), who was enabled by God to give a wonderful speech of gospel proclamation before his martyrdom (see Acts 7). Later still, the apostle Paul – who, as a young Pharisee, had stood by in approval at the execution of Stephen – had many opportunities further to proclaim the gospel message *precisely because he had been arrested in the first place for doing so!* We read of his defence in Jerusalem before the crowd and then the Jewish ruling council (Acts 22–23); we read of his speeches at Caesarea before Felix (Acts 24), Festus (Acts 25) and Agrippa (Acts 26). And we know that he continued to do effective work during his imprisonment. In fact, as he declared to his beloved Philippians, “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (Philippians 1:12–14)

How counter-intuitive this is! In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says, “pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” (Colossians 4:3,4) In his position, most of us might be tempted to pray that we would be released from prison, thinking that we could better serve the Lord if we had our freedom. Paul’s prayer was quite different: he did not pray for theoretical future opportunities to proclaim the gospel, but for actual present opportunities; he had lost his physical freedom, but wanted to make the most of his new freedom to proclaim the gospel.

What a challenge this is! We fancy opportunity, but not opposition; we see so clearly the opportunities which other people have and where other people are, but not those which we have and where we are; we see possible opportunities in the future, but not actual opportunities in the present. To be honest, we do not much like being where God has placed us to serve Him; it would be so much easier – and, we think, there would be so many more opportunities – if we were in a different emotional, geographical, physical, professional or other context! Thinking like this, we deny the important principle that the wide door of opportunity is a door that is always beset by the enemies of God!

the wide door of opportunity is a door affected by prayer

Not a great heading, perhaps, but it does convey a most important truth. We have just quoted from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae – a church that was most probably started by Epaphras, who may have heard Paul speaking in Ephesus, and certainly became a Christian and took the gospel message home with him (Colossians 1:7). Writing to the Colossians, probably from Rome in about the year AD 62, Paul said,

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” Colossians 4:2–4

Here again we are confronted with the mystery that is prayer. We know that God has His plans, which He will effect in every detail at His appointed time. As the Old Testament declared, and Joshua confirmed, “Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.” (Joshua 21:45, 23:14–15) We know that we cannot in any sense alter God's plans or force Him to do so. We know that we can not presume to be His counsellor (Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16). Yet time and again, both by exhortation and example, we are encouraged to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10)

Jesus urged His disciples to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:38), and Paul – one of those labourers – did not hesitate to ask Christian people to pray for him, not least in relation to his work for God. He urged the Colossians to pray “that God may open to us a door for the word”; near the end of his letter to the church at Ephesus, he exhorted the saints there to

“keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.” Ephesians 6:18–20

Once again we note the fact that Paul did not ask for prayer that he would be released *from* prison, but rather that that he would make good use of the time he had *in* prison. Paul saw it as an honour to serve God as he did, and he asked God's people to pray that, to make best use of the unique opportunities that his imprisonment afforded, he would be able to speak boldly and clearly; even he, the esteemed apostle Paul, after his many years of Christian service, still needed from God the words to say and the courage to speak. Truly “the mystery of the gospel” is a wonderful message to proclaim – the message of “truth which would have remained a secret had not God revealed it ... that in Christ there is salvation full and free for *everyone* who embraces him by faith, even for both Jew and Gentile on a basis of perfect equality” (Hendriksen). But the proclamation of that message needs to be the focus of prayer, as much now as it was in the days of the early Church.

In his commentary on Paul's letter to the Colossians, written forty years ago, Dick Lucas – who, for thirty-seven years, served as rector of St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, London – noted this: “It is of great interest that the first duty of the Christians in Colossae was to open their mouths in prayer for the preachers of the gospel whom God had evidently called to this work. It was not, by inference, their first duty themselves to preach. The fresh and necessary awakening of the churches today to the concept of ‘every-member ministry’, and the mobilization of all Christians to take the gospel to all the world, should not be allowed to tone down this truth. Those who preach among the churches without a gift or call from God will not greatly advance the cause of truth: even more certainly, those believers who mistakenly feel called to ‘preach’ in the home and at work ... will hardly win a hearing for their Lord. They are likely to face closing doors rather than opening ones”.

This does not mean that you should refuse those opportunities for simple and responsive evangelism that are bound to come your way: you might refer to Christian things in your conversations and letters; you might slip a tract in with the Christmas cards that you send; you might invite people to a service or lend them a book; and always you must be “prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). But above all you must pray that God will open a door of opportunity for the proclamation of the gospel, that you will spot the opportunities that arise where you are – even as you are in a difficult environment – and that you will make the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:16, NIV).

The Lord once said to the church in Philadelphia, about seventy-five miles NNE of Ephesus, “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.” (Revelation 3:8) The Christians there had and would continue to have a wide door of opportunity that had been opened by God, that was beset by enemies and – no doubt – was affected by prayer. And it is just the same for us.

Lord, thank you that you opened a wide door for effective work to the apostle Paul, and that we benefit still from his example and his epistles. We pray that you will continue to open a door of opportunity for the word, and that you would help all of us called to your service, as you lead us, to declare boldly and clearly the mystery of Christ.
