

We spoke last time of our fascination with doors, which come in all shapes and sizes. There are automatic doors, folding doors, rotating doors, sliding doors, stable doors, swing doors; doors made of glass, metal, plastic, wood; decorative doors, high-security doors, fireproof doors, watertight doors; the list goes on!

A door can be defined as “the usual entrance to a house, room or passage” and so is a metaphor for “a means of approach or access” (*Chambers Dictionary*). And both literal and metaphorical doors appear throughout the Bible.

Early in Jesus’s public ministry, in Capernaum, the physical door to the house of 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 were able to 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 and “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14–16) through *the secret door of prayer*. We can open that door at any time and in any place, praise God, and find ourselves in His presence before the “throne of grace”.

Today we travel to Antioch, a city – then in Syria, now just within Turkey – lying about 200 miles north of Beirut. It is probably the year AD 48, and Barnabas and Saul, later referred to as Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2,7 cf 13:13,46), have just returned from what often we call the first missionary journey. That trip had taken them to Cyprus, where Barnabas came from (Acts 4:36), and then to half a dozen cities connected by a Roman road, the Via Sebaste, running through the southern part of central Asia Minor. The details of the trip are recorded in Acts 13 and 14, which end with this brief summary: “And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and *how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.*” (Acts 14:27). So let us consider...

the open door of faith

Paul, Barnabas – and John Mark, who was Barnabas’s young cousin (Colossians 4:10) and was with them for the first part of the missionary journey – were, of course, Jews. Barnabas, whose given name was Joseph, was a Levite (Acts 4:36); Paul later described himself as “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5).

To start with, these Jewish missionaries spoke largely to Jewish people. When they reached Cyprus, “at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” (Act 13:5). When later they returned to the mainland, at Antioch in Pisidia, “on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue” to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 13:14ff) and, as a result of Paul’s preaching, “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 13:43). A week later, however, it was not only the Jews in the city who wanted to hear Paul’s message or who responded to it, and there was a sharp division of opinion. The Jews, no doubt particularly their leaders, could not attract the crowds that came to hear the two missionaries and so were jealous of them and sought both to criticise them and to contradict their message. The Gentiles, by contrast, embraced the gospel with great enthusiasm. Listen to how Luke records the incident:

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “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.

⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:44–48

These events proved to be a turning point in the ministry of the apostle Paul. When arriving at a new place, he continued to start work by proclaiming the gospel to his own people. But he learned from his first visit to Antioch in Pisidia the glorious truth that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” Paul never forgot that and, some years later, writing to the Romans, declared: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16) Here the word ‘Greek’, meaning anyone influenced by the Greek culture of the time, is virtually synonymous with the word ‘Gentile’.

It is a wonderful fact still that the gospel – the good news about Jesus, the Son of God and Saviour of the world – is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, whatever their ethnic origin, national identity, religious background or philosophical outlook. That there is a thriving Church across the world today, that there are Bible-believing churches up and down our country, that we are considering the Bible together now, proves that God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. But what does the Bible have to teach us about this open door of faith?

1. It is a door that was planned

There are, surely, very few buildings which remain exactly the same as they were when they were built. Quite apart from the cosmetic changes brought about by redecoration and repair, almost every building is altered from time to time to satisfy the changing needs or tastes of its owners, or to make it suitable for a different purpose from the one for which originally it was designed. Old doors may be replaced with new ones in a different style; doors may be rehung to open or swing in a different direction; old doorways are widened or bricked in; new doorways are cut and opened up. Even in your own home, you may have evidence of some or all of these things.

It would be quite wrong to suppose, however, that what happened in Pisidian Antioch, or in other places where the gospel was first proclaimed, precipitated the need for any kind of change in God's master plan. His design for the spiritual building we call the Church – that it, the body of believers who are the children of God by faith in Christ – did not have to be modified in any way to accommodate the interest shown in the gospel by Gentiles. The door of faith to the Gentiles was planned by God from the very beginning.

It's perfectly true that God's chosen people in Old Testament days had unique privileges (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:32–34; Psalm 147:19,20). But they would not be the only people to know His blessing; in fact, they were to be the people through whom others would know His blessing. Listen to God speaking to Abram, as then he was called:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”
Genesis 12:1–3

The prospect of God's blessings being extended far beyond the confines of the physical descendants of Abraham, as later he was called, is a theme taken up often in the words of prophecy, as in:

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ² It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and *all the nations* shall flow to it, ³ and *many peoples* shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”
Isaiah 2:2,3 // Micah 4:1,2

It was just such a word of prophecy that Paul, who was so well taught (Acts 22:3) and so well versed in the Scriptures, repeated in Pisidian Antioch. Did you notice it? Quoting from Isaiah 49:6, Paul said to his hearers, “the Lord has commanded us [that is, us Jews], saying, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”” (Acts 13:47) That message thrilled the Gentiles who were listening to Paul ... and it should thrill us as well.

We who are Gentile believers are not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. The door of faith through which we must pass to gain entrance to God's kingdom was not made by man; it was not added as an afterthought; it was not opened with reluctance. This door of faith was, from before the foundation of the world, in God's mind: He planned it carefully; He constructed it intentionally; He opened it deliberately. So we can pass through it confidently and joyfully. Truly, as the apostle Paul said later in Rome, “this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles” (Acts 28:28). How we should praise God for that!

2. It is a door that is narrow

About a year before His death, Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51) He knew what He would face there and so “began to teach them [His disciples] that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly.” (Mark 8:31,32a; cf 9:30–32, 10:32–34). Though He concentrated more on His disciples than on the crowds in this period of His ministry, Jesus took His time over the trip – it lasted some months – so that He could speak in towns and villages along the way. One incident that Luke records is particularly revealing:

He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying towards Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us’, then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”
Luke 13:22–30

It was a widely-held opinion, endorsed by the rabbis, that Israel as a whole would be saved. But Jesus taught clearly that spirituality rather than ethnicity lay at the heart of salvation. So, unsurprisingly, He was asked the

question: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” It’s an obvious question and, you may think, an interesting question, a good question, perhaps a controversial question. I wonder how you would answer it?

It would be easy to fall into the trap of arguing about numbers. Jesus did not do that and, in fact, did not give a direct answer to the question at all. Much more tellingly, He urged His questioner to “Strive to enter through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24). That challenge surely comes still with the same force: the question is not how many *people in general* are going to be saved, but whether *you in particular* are going to be saved. And to make sure that you are, says Jesus, you must strive to enter through the narrow door. Hendriksen notes that “The verb *to strive*, as it occurs in the original, has given rise to our English verb *to agonize*. It places us not on the battlefield but in the *arena* or in the *wrestling-ring*. The struggle is fierce. Our opponents are Satan, sin [and] self”.

This teaching is not novel, for remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Matthew 7:13,14

But why is the door, or the gate, described as ‘narrow’. If you have been through an airport recently, you will know that, as part of the security procedures, you must walk through what looks like an empty door frame but is actually a metal detector. You must go through it and you must go through it alone, without even such small encumbrances as your wallet or watch. And so it is with the kingdom of God. You cannot be swept in as part of a crowd – those born in a certain country, brought up in a Christian home, worshipping in a Bible-believing church. You must enter a door so narrow that you can only do so alone, relying on none of the things – your abilities and achievements, for example – for which you are recognised in human society. You can enter God’s kingdom only through the narrow door of faith in Christ. And that is what you must strive to do if you would know salvation.

3. It is a door that will close

We did not finish looking at what Jesus said in reply to the question, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” He said, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” because there will come the time when “the master of the house has risen and shut the door”. (Luke 13:24,25)

It is a glorious fact that God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. It is a challenging fact that the door is narrow, and we must strive to enter in. And it is a sobering fact that one day the door will be closed by God – and, of course, what God has closed no man can open (Isaiah 22:22). But, you may ask, when will it close?

- it will close when you die

Death is part of the awful consequence of the coming of sin into the world. None of us can escape it and all of us know that, one day, we shall die. Speaking of life and death, Shakespeare suggested that the

Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history

Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

That comes from *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII). But whether you like it or not, the popular idea that our life ends in ‘mere oblivion’ is wholly mistaken. The Bible makes it clear that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement” (Hebrews 9:27) – not oblivion; not reincarnation; and certainly not a fresh opportunity to walk through the door of faith into the kingdom of God. That is the reason why the apostle Paul insisted that “now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 6:2). The provision we make for eternity must be made in time, and that time is now – yes, precisely now! We dare not put it off until tomorrow, for we do not know what a day may bring (Proverbs 27:1) Remember Jesus’s story of the rich fool who thought that he had many years ahead of him in which to “relax, eat, drink, be merry” whereas, in fact, God required his soul that very night. (Luke 12:13–2; cf Psalm 39:4,51).

- it will close when Christ returns

Actually, we cannot say for certain that all of us will die in the usual way, for some of us may still be alive on that glorious day when Christ returns. Whenever that is, He will not come to offer people further opportunities to enter through the door of faith into the kingdom of God. In fact, the opposite will be the case: His return will mark the end of the gospel age in which now we live. And, said Jesus, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out”. (Luke 13:28) The once-open door of faith will have been closed, by God, for ever. In Jesus’s parable of the ten virgins, the foolish five who had no brought no oil for their lamps turned up too late for the marriage feast “and the door was shut.” (Matthew 25:10) In just the same way, those who make no provision for the great and awesome day when the Lord shall return – whenever that may be – will find that when He comes, the narrow door will close for ever with them on the outside of it. If you would not run that awful risk, you must strive to enter through the narrow door of faith even now, whilst – by the grace of God – it remains open.

4. It is a door that is Jesus

Shepherds and the work of shepherding were as familiar to most of those living in the rural economies of the ancient world as they are unfamiliar to most of us living in the urban economies of the modern world. Certainly for the Old Testament people of God, pastoral life lay at the very heart of their national identity: they had kept sheep from the days of Abel (Genesis 4:2), and were happy to describe themselves as shepherds (Genesis 47:3)

Unsurprisingly, therefore, sheep and shepherding metaphors appear time and again in Scripture. Psalm 23, one of the best-known passages in the Bible, is a case in point. And it speaks to us of Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20), the One who described Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11–15). And this is what He said on one occasion:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”
John 10:7–10

There’s lots here that we could say, but just one thing will suffice this time. It is simply this: the door of faith that God opened to the Gentiles is a door with the name *Jesus* written on it. The gospel, the good news that was at the heart of the apostles’ teaching and remains a central tenet of our preaching, is 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 4:12). Those are words the apostle Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:8), proclaimed in his defence on the day after he and John had been arrested in Jerusalem. They were not words that the rulers, elders, scribes and high-priestly family wanted to hear, though they were amazed at the boldness of Peter and John and quite astonished to hear so powerful a message from such “uneducated, common men” (Acts 4:13).

That same message is equally unpopular today in our pluralistic society. We pride ourselves that we respect the beliefs of ‘those with all faiths and none’. Yet many people draw the line here: how dare evangelical Christians claim that the teaching of Jesus is unique, that there is salvation in no one else, that He was telling the absolute truth for all time when He declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) But that is the clear and unequivocal message of the Bible, which is the authoritative word of God. People say that there are other doors, some of which are much wider and easier to negotiate; they say that the doors of other religions open on to different visions of God and lead more or less directly to Him; they say that opening the doors of intuition, natural history, poetry, philosophy, science or a host of other things satisfy those who have more mature tastes than the naïve people who seek after God.

But they are wrong. There is a God and, whether we acknowledge it or not, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:26) And there is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin, but only one way – and that one way leads through a narrow door with the name *Jesus* written on it. If you will not strive to go through that door, if you will not seek to meet Jesus, if you will not put your trust in Him, you will not know peace with God and receive His wonderful gift of salvation. The only question is, are you striving to enter in to that planned door, that narrow door, that door which for now remains open, that door that is Jesus? If you are nervous of knocking on that door, remember the tremendously encouraging words of Jesus:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

Matthew 7:7,8

You are the Way, to you alone / from sin and death we flee;
And he who would the Father seek / must seek Him, Lord, by Thee,

You are the Truth, your word alone / true wisdom can impart;
You only can inform the mind / and purify the heart.

You are the Life, the rending tomb / proclaims your conquering arm:
And those who put their trust in you, / nor death nor hell shall harm.

You are the Way, the Truth, the Life: / grant us that Way to see,
That Truth to keep, that life to know / through all eternity.

(George Washington Doane, 1799–1859)

*Thank you, Lord, that you opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.
Please help us as we strive to enter in, and as we seek to point others in the same direction.*
