



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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Open Doors and Adversaries
1 Corinthians 16:5-9

Open doors and adversaries—that's what Paul was talking about in our text for this morning. An open door is a *vivid* image, isn't it? It conjures up all kinds of ideas and feelings.

When we use it the way Paul used it here, it makes us think of *opportunity*. Opportunity is a precious commodity, and we should always make the most of a good opportunity.

An open door is also an *inviting* image. There's something about it that beckons us warmly.

But there's also something a little bit *scary* about this image—while the door is open, there's an awful lot on the other side of it that we simply can't see! And that can be scary.

Have you ever heard anybody talk about God's will in terms of open doors or doors that have closed? There's some value in that, but I think we have to be careful about it. Sometimes it's God who closes the door, but I think that many times the door closes because we hesitate or refuse to go through it. Then we blame it on God, saying that he closed the door. Sometimes it's tempting to use this kind of language to shirk our responsibilities, isn't it? It's one thing to put things in God's hands in terms of trusting him to open and close the right doors. It's altogether something different to try to force a door open that God is not opening, or to know that he has opened a door, then refuse to trust him and go through it!

Paul's open door and adversaries

Well, Paul was talking here in our text about an open door of opportunity that God had put before him. And he intended to go through it! He was closing out his letter to the Corinthian believers by outlining his travel plans. After reminding them in verses 1-4 about his instructions about the offering he was taking for the poor saints in Jerusalem, he told them that he was planning to visit them again after he had visited the churches in Macedonia. Macedonia was in the northern part of Greece, while Corinth was in Achaia, the southern part of Greece. He told them that, the Lord willing, he would be staying for awhile, maybe even for the whole winter. And then he said, "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (16:8-9).¹

You only need to read Acts 19 to see what Paul was talking about—the gospel was having a great impact, and there was great opposition! Some followers of John the Baptist had become followers of Jesus Christ. Though his preaching and teaching in the Jewish synagogue had met with stubborn opposition from some to the point that he left it and started teaching on a daily basis in the hall of Tyrannus, the gospel was reaching both Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus and the

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

surrounding areas. During the two years he was there, God was doing extraordinary miracles through Paul, and “the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20). Even those who had been involved in occult practices before their conversion burned their books on the magic arts—together they were worth about 50,000 pieces of silver. With each group, Paul was faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel, and greater opportunities arose.

And so did greater opposition. About the time Paul was writing this letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, a silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis stirred up a riot in opposition to the followers of Jesus and the gospel they were proclaiming. So many people were leaving their pagan ways and turning to Christ that it was cutting in on his business, so he was trying to discredit the Christians.

So there was the open door, and there were the adversaries!

As Paul wrote, he wanted the Corinthians to know that he was planning to visit them and spend some time with them. But he also wanted them to know that it would probably be the next spring before he came. So as he told them his travel plans, *Paul told the Corinthians about this wide-open door for effective work and his adversaries in Ephesus.*

Our open doors

You know, the details may be different, but God still works in the same ways today. And so does the devil. Just as things had happened for Paul in Ephesus, *God is opening doors for effective work for us, and we will face adversaries.*

I believe God has already opened a number of doors for our church through the years. I believe that our connection with our local National Guard unit that’s now deployed in Iraq is a tremendous example of that. The way all that came about had to be orchestrated by God. The timing of the contacts, the way that things opened up for us to minister to these troops, and the response we received from them—all this was God’s doing!

I believe that God is preparing us for many more great opportunities for effective work, and that he is going to do some wonderful things *among* us and *through* us—if we will be responsive to him!

Earlier in our service today, we read together the risen Lord’s letter to the church in Philadelphia in ancient Asia Minor that he sent through John (Revelation 3:7-14). They as a church had been faithful to Christ, and now he who had the key of David was setting before them an open door that no one could shut!

Paul’s experience and that of the church in Philadelphia show us some things we need to know about open doors.

We need to understand, first of all, that *it is God who opens the doors* for us. We can’t force it; he has to do it. And he opens doors in his own time and according to his eternal purpose. It all seems so time- and space-bound to us. But remember that God sees and works from his eternal perspective. So in this realm of time and space, *his timing is always perfect!*

When God opens a door, no one can shut it. Now if we ignore it or neglect it or refuse to go through it, *he may shut it.* But what God opens, no one else can shut.

When God opens a door, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, it’s important that we respond in faith and obedience. You see, in the way God does things, *greater opportunities result from faithfulness in smaller ones.* You remember Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, don’t you? Three different servants are entrusted by their master with different sums

of money to use while the master is away. One receives five talents, and trades with them, earning five more talents. The second receives two talents, and uses them to earn two more talents. But the third receives one talent, and simply hides it rather than using it. When their master returns and asks for an accounting, he commends the first two servants and says to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:20, 23). But the master condemns and punishes the one who hid his money and didn’t use it for his master’s purposes. When we’re faithful with the opportunities God entrusts to us, he entrusts us with more!

We need to remember that when God opens a door, it’s not to let in a breeze or to make things look better. *He opens doors so we can go through them* and join him in what he’s calling us to do!

God has opened doors for us as a church in the past. We’ll soon be celebrating the 140th anniversary of our church. Throughout those 140 years, there have been so many times God has set open doors before us. We’ve had the opportunity to help start new congregations, to be directly involved in missions as well as offering prayer and financial support to missions, and to reach out to the community in so many different ways.

And God is still opening doors for us.

Sanford and Lee County and western Harnett County are all changing. We’re seeing many more military families and individuals in our area, and thanks to what’s happening at Ft. Bragg, we’ll be seeing even more in the next few years. And sometimes what *looks* like the passing of one opportunity or the *closing* of one door may actually be the *opening* of another door and the beginning of a new opportunity!

The community around us has changed dramatically. What if the door that God is opening is for us to reach this changed community?

What would happen if our greatest concern was *not* the perpetuation of the institution of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church, but rather that the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church would be God’s instrument in this community to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), both here and around the world?

What if instead of buildings, budgets, and baptisms, we focused on being the church of Christ and embodying his presence to Sanford and the world through our worship, our witness, and our way of life?

What if, instead of wondering what it will cost us to do certain things we thought in terms of what it will cost us *not* to go through the doors God sets before us, what it will cost for us *not* to reach out to those who need the Lord and show them what it means to be authentic—real people in a real relationship with the real God?

Our adversaries

Now understand this: whenever God opens doors for service, *there will be adversaries who will try to hinder us*. I’ve seen it so many times through my nearly three decades in ministry. Whenever God is at work, Satan is too!

While our adversaries are different from Paul’s, we have them nonetheless.

There are times when unbelievers try to hinder the work of the Lord. That’s not really that much of a problem for us at this point, certainly not as it was for Paul and for many Christians throughout our world today.

Some of our greatest hindrances come from those who are what we used to call *hypocrites*—those who profess to trust Christ but are merely playing the role as the term implies. Unbelievers

see them for what they are, and youth and young adults often see through them as well. That often makes these folks that much harder to reach with the gospel.

But what is even sadder is when believers become the adversary to going through the door God has opened. They may not intentionally be adversaries, but it turns out that way. They allow Satan to use them as his tools to hinder God's kingdom work.

They may have *divided loyalties*, leading to a lack of commitment and a lifestyle that is not distinctively Christian.

These divided loyalties often lead to *apathy* and *complacency*. They either don't care or they're satisfied to simply drag along, rather than being eager to follow our Lord fearlessly into the future.

Sometimes it's a matter of *being bound by the past*—whether by the “glory days” and how we did it back then or the conflicts in the past that hurt so deeply. Someone has said that the seven last words of a Baptist church are “We never did it that way before.” And sometimes people allow the bad experiences in the past to bind us as we look to the future.

Prejudice against people who are different from ourselves—whether it's race or religion or region or socio-economic class—this hinders us from reaching out to those around us.

Some of the saddest hindrances that we see are *pettiness* and *jealousy* among members. When church members are squabbling, individuals find it difficult to unite to go through doors while they're still open. It's like two kids—siblings—standing before a door that's open, fussing about who's going to go through it first, or whether to go through it at all!

And sometimes there's someone or several someones who want to have preeminence or domination or control of things. They forget that it's not *their* church; it's *the Lord's* church!

Sometimes this pettiness or jealousy or attempts to control result in members holding grudges against one another. Nothing hinders a church in doing God's will quite like *unforgiveness*. God has forgiven us for Christ's sake; he expects us to forgive one another. Jesus even included it in the prayer he taught us to pray—“forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Perhaps one of the devil's most effective tools that he uses among believers to hinder God's work is *gossip*. We may disguise it as “sharing this so you can pray more intelligently for so-and-so” or try to whitewash over it in some other way. But whenever we maliciously talk about another person, whether what we're saying is true or not, it is gossip. And gossip is of the devil! And it will tear a church apart and destroy lives! Many a godly leader has been harmed or even destroyed by gossip that was completely untrue. Believers who have committed this kind of character assassination of a brother or sister will have to give an account of it one day.

You see, sometimes the old Pogo cartoon was right when it said, “We have met the enemy, and he is us!” Sometimes, we in the church are our own worst adversaries!

Just as it was with Paul as he wrote to the Corinthians, *God is opening doors for effective work for us, and we will face adversaries*. But we need not be our own worst enemy!

Our church has been faithful with opportunities in the past, and now God may be giving us even greater ones. But remember that *opportunity is responsibility!*

So the question is, what will we do when God opens the door?

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