



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins  
Senior Pastor

The Lord's Day  
October 25, 2009

[www.jhbc.org](http://www.jhbc.org)

© 2009

---

**What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches:  
An Open Door  
Revelation 3:7-13**

There are some symbols that work in almost any culture. Jesus uses one of those in the text we're looking at together this morning.

As we continue our journey through the risen Lord Jesus' letters to the seven churches of the ancient province of Asia—the area we know today as western Turkey—we come to the letter to the church at Philadelphia. This letter is a bit different than the others. Like the letter to the church at Smyrna, there is no condemnation or reproof from Jesus. It's all commendation. The letter to the church at Smyrna was a call to faithfulness in the face of persecution and the threat of martyrdom. This letter to the church at Philadelphia is a call to opportunity. Listen to what the risen, glorified Lord Jesus says to the church at Philadelphia through his servant John.

<sup>7</sup> "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

<sup>8</sup> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup> I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-- I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup> Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

<sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. <sup>12</sup> Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. <sup>13</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

***The church at Philadelphia*** <sup>1</sup>

Philadelphia was located about 30 miles southeast of Sardis. It was established in the second century B.C. because of the ruler's desire to spread the Greek language and civilization to the region of Phrygia—as sort of a missionary outpost for Greek culture. To honor his brother whom he loved dearly, he named it *Philadelphia*, the Greek word for “brotherly love.”

Philadelphia was strong commercially due to the abundance of grapes grown in the surrounding area. The ground was rich volcanic soil. And since grapes were the backbone of the economy, the chief deity of the area was Dionysius, the god of wine.

Along with volcanoes often come earthquakes. And Philadelphia had experienced them frequently. There was a particularly devastating earthquake in A.D. 17 that pretty much destroyed the city. It was rebuilt with funding from Tiberius Caesar, and given a new name—Neocaesarea. Still, from then on, many people in the area chose to live in small villages outside the city, apparently in hopes of lessening the threat to property and lives when the earthquakes came. So Philadelphia wasn't as large as some of the other cities.

### ***The letter from Jesus***

In his letter to the church there, Jesus identified himself as “the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (3:7).<sup>2</sup>

This phrase, “the key of David” comes from Isaiah 22:22, where God says that he will appoint Eliakim the son of Hilkiah as steward of the king’s household, replacing the unfaithful steward Shebna. The Lord asserts that he will place on Eliakim’s shoulder “the key of David,” so that no one can shut what he opens or open what he shuts. In other words, he would control access to the king’s household, “the house of David.” So for Jesus to claim this image for himself was to affirm his messianic authority as the Son of David to either admit or exclude people from his messianic kingdom.

Jesus told this church, “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut . . .” (3:8). Though this church had only had “little strength,” they had been faithful to Jesus’ word and had not denied his name. So now he was placing this door before them.

From what Jesus said here, it appears that the Jewish synagogue in Philadelphia was giving the church a hard time, claiming that the Jews of the synagogue were the real people of God, and that the church, made up mostly of Gentiles, was not. These Jews refused to accept Jesus as their promised Messiah, and accused those who did of being unfaithful to God or worse. But Jesus was saying he was the one who controlled access to his kingdom, who determined who was in or out. He had opened the door to them, and they were in (3:8)!

Then Jesus turned things on their heads as far as what the Jews were expecting. Isaiah 45:14, 49:23, and 60:14, as well as other Old Testament passages, prophesy a time when all the Gentiles would bow down before the Jews and acknowledge that they are God’s people. But Jesus told the church at Philadelphia, made up mostly of Gentiles, that those Jews who had rejected him and were persecuting them were really “the synagogue of Satan” (3:9) and were lying when they called themselves Jews! Then he said, “I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you” (3:9).

Then Jesus went on to promise them that because they had been faithful to him, when the “hour of trial” that was coming on the whole world to test those living on the earth (sinful humanity in rebellion against God and his Messiah) came, he would keep them from it.

Many Jews in New Testament times believed that just before the shift of the ages, when God would bring this present evil age to an end and bring in the new age of the messianic kingdom, there would be a time of intense suffering as God poured out his wrath on the world. Early Christians believed that the new age had begun in Jesus, but that this present evil age would continue until Jesus returns in glory. Then this age will come to an end and Christ will bring his

kingdom in its fullness. Many early Christians believed that this time of great tribulation would happen just before Jesus returns.

Jesus promised the church at Philadelphia that though they would be in the world, they would not be under God's wrath against the unbelieving world, just as the Hebrews were in Egypt but didn't suffer from the plagues God sent on the Egyptians. He was promising them his protection (3:10).

He promised them that he would come quickly, so they were to hold on to what they had so no one could seize their crown—an image Jesus used for eternal life in these letters (3:11). Sort of like the popular song—“Hold on, I'm coming!”

Then Jesus made another promise to the one who overcomes—really the same promise expressed in a different way. In Philadelphia as in other ancient cities, a faithful citizen who served the state well might be memorialized by the placement of a pillar with his name inscribed on it in one of the various temples. So Christ would make the one who overcomes a permanent pillar in God's temple, and would write three names on him: the name of God, the name of God's city, the new Jerusalem, and Jesus' own new name. He would clearly claim the overcomer as his own (3:12)!

So Jesus told the church at Philadelphia that because they were faithful, he had placed an open door before them.

And then he said, “Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:29).<sup>3</sup>

### ***The church at Jonesboro Heights***

So what is the Spirit saying to the churches through this letter? What is he saying to us here at the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church in Sanford in the twenty-first century through this first century letter?

I think the key is found in this image of an open door that speaks so powerfully across time and culture. While Jesus was talking to the church at Philadelphia primarily about access to the kingdom, given the use of this idea in other passages, he was probably also telling them he was placing an opportunity for mission before them. And today, *God is placing an open door before us*. That tells us some things that I talked about in a sermon back in July that I want to remind you of this morning—some things about open doors.

We need to understand, first of all, that *it is God who opens the doors* for us. We can't force that; he has to do it. And he opens doors in his own time according to his eternal purpose. It all seems so time- and space-bound to us. But remember that God sees and works from his 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*. In Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, 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!

And we need to remember that *God 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. And he’s still opening doors for us.

A few weeks ago at a meeting of our Baptist Men and wives, our pastor emeritus Gilbert McDowell reminded us of how the community right around us has changed over the past 20 years. Very few of our active membership live near our church facilities now, whereas in an earlier time, there were 50 or more of our *families* within a mile radius. There was a tremendous opportunity to reach out to people who were “like us.” In more recent years, more people from a much wider area—all of Lee County, western Harnett County, and even some from Moore County have become a part of our church.

Now 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. The residents of the community right around our church are now primarily Hispanic and African-American. Things are a lot different than they were even 10 or 15 years ago.

But you know, 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! What if the door that God is opening is for us to reach this changed and changing community and region?

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of this past week, I was at a gathering of Baptist pastors in Oklahoma City that was convened to have a conversation about how churches can collaborate in new and more effective ways for the purpose of fulfilling the mission Christ has given his church.

Bill O’Brien, a former vice-president of the Foreign Mission Board and of the Baptist World Alliance, and husband of former WMU executive director Dellana O’Brien, was the facilitator for the meeting. At one point he was talking about a meeting some years ago where he asked the leaders of several different missionary organizations three questions:

1. If your agency closed tonight, would anybody miss it?
2. Would it have to be restarted?
3. If it was restarted, how would it have to be different?

Those are tough questions. I think they’re important questions for a church to ask of itself as well.

If for some reason the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church had to close down tonight—not just the buildings, but the congregation—*would anybody other than those of us who are actively involved miss it?* How would the community around us be affected if this congregation ceased to be?

*Would this church have to be restarted or another church started in this community?* Is the need right around us great enough and are there enough lost people right here in Jonesboro Heights that there should be a church here?

If the need were clearly here, *how would such a church have to be different* from what we’re like now? How different would our emphases need to be? How differently would we need to do

things? How would our worship and our outreach and our ministries need to be different in order to be on mission with Christ in this community and the communities surrounding us and throughout the world?

I can't help but wonder . . .

What would happen if our greatest concern was *not* the survival and perpetuation of the institution of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church, but rather that this 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 really 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?

What if instead of focusing so inwardly on our survival as a church we focused outwardly toward God and reaching those outside the church?

"I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." But will we go through it? "Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

†MEG

---

<sup>1</sup> These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, "Revelation" in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, "Revelation" in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

<sup>2</sup> From the *English Standard Version*; unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

<sup>3</sup> My translation.