

FGBC: The Son and His Churches: Opportunity Knocks

Revelation 3:7-13

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I was 19 and studying at Trinity Western University when I started reading through the Bible for the first time. And halfway through the Old Testament I came across an interesting practice – the use of the Urim and the Thummim.¹ And I thought “brilliant.”

So the idea was that the High Priest had a couple of rocks in his pocket that had a black side and a white side. And when he came across a particularly difficult situation where he couldn’t decide what God wanted the nation to do he would roll the dice and God would give the answer.

And thus began a very interesting, and not very theologically wise, segment of my faith journey. I didn’t have an Urim or Thummim so me and my roommate Steve started flipping coins and drawing lots for pretty much everything.

So when World Vision called and wanted us to sponsor a kid, we flipped a coin and boom, no guilt ridden excuses why now didn’t work, just “Sorry, Jesus says we should use our money for tuition.” Other times it was more complicated. We had a can in our house with a bunch of little papers with time quantities written on them and we would pick one every day to determine how long we would pray. Sometimes you got off easy, and other times Jesus said “I don’t care you have a Hebrew exam, I’m looking for 2 and a half hours today boys.”

And once some Mormon missionaries came to our door. And they told us that they knew they were right because they had a burning in their bosom. In my immaturity I responded “I’ll show you a burning bosom. Let’s flip a coin. If it comes up ‘heads’ we will read the book of Mormon with an open mind, but if it comes up tails you have to reconsider the burning in your bosom and join one of our Bible studies. The Mormons looked at each other in a panic, begged us not to flip and never came back.

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Now a little later I’m going to tell you this isn’t the recommended way to learn God’s will, but since some of you may stop listening now I figured I’d better say this up front too.

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Alright, go ahead and grab your Bible. We are in Revelation 3 starting in verse 7 today and looking at the letter Jesus wrote to the city of Philadelphia at the end of the first century.

Now this is a special letter because unlike Ephesus where Jesus said “you have lost your first love” And Pergamum and Thyatira who had compromised with the world, Philadelphia was a faithful church like Sardis. They were nailing it and Jesus was proud. So would you stand with me as we read Jesus’ words?

¹ Exodus 28:30

[Read Revelation 3:7-13]

A bit of context as we start. Philadelphia was a city built near a fault line which meant it was prone to earthquakes. One of the worst happened in 17AD when the whole area was decimated. But while other cities rebuilt quickly, Philadelphia had the misfortune of experiencing multiple aftershocks that continued to cause devastation.

Keep in mind that there was no seismic retrofitting back then, so every time even a quake occurred there were casualties and parts of the city needed to be rebuilt.

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And during this period people got nervous and so history records that many of them would actually exit the city every night to sleep. So Philadelphia was a place where people were constantly going out and coming back as they attempted to rebuild.²

And of course it wasn't just houses that needed to be rebuilt, Philadelphia was full of temples that needed repairs. And this cost a lot of money and took a lot of work. And so, in order to honour the people who contributed the pillars in the temples were inscribed with the names of benefactors. And the result was that later, when people would be in the temples praying they would look at the pillars and mention the names written on them before the gods.³

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Now occasionally an incredibly generous benefactor would come along and the whole city would be temporarily renamed. Tiberius Caesar won this privilege at one point and the city was named Neocaesarea for a time.

Alright, look again at verse 12 because Jesus alludes to these ideas. He says "The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will they leave it (the city). I will write on them the name of... the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven... and I will also write on them My new name."

Jesus says things here the church of Philadelphia would have understood and been blessed by. Jesus was honouring them by displaying their names in God's temple.

Now get this, the temple Jesus is talking about is the one in the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven – so this is a heavenly temple that currently exists and is going to come to earth one day. Don't worry about the physics, Jesus can handle it.

The point is God, right now sees names etched into His house – this is Jesus graffiti – and it's the names of the faithful from Philadelphia and from Lighthouse/Fort George that He's impressed by. How'd you like Jesus to do that with your name so that the Father would think of you and say your name everyday? That would be awesome!

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² Darrell Johnson "Discipleship on the Edge" (Vancouver: Regent Press), 2004. pg 107.

³ William Barclay "Letters to the Seven Churches" (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2001. pg 97

It goes on. Jesus says “The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. *Never again will they leave it.*” Jesus is going to take care of the seismic upgrading so Philadelphia won’t be going out and coming in anymore – they will dwell in God’s temple forever.

And Jesus says He is going to change Philadelphia’s name again. Instead of being a tribute to Caesar, Jesus says: I will write My new name on them.” This is what Jesus does to faithful Christians and churches.

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Now this doesn’t mean Philadelphia was a perfect church. There are no perfect churches or people. But that’s okay. Jesus isn’t looking for faultless followers, He’s looking for faithful ones who, in spite of their little strength – verse 8 – keep His words and patiently seek to do His will. And you can do this.

So how do we do what Jesus wills? He tells us in verse 8. He says “Look, an open door.”

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Now this might not sound like a command, but it is. Jesus isn’t a tourist noting interesting architecture. “Hey check out that open door.” This is a command, and it is the central idea of this passage – we aren’t just supposed to notice the open door, we are supposed to go through it.

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Now the “open door” is an idea that we talk about a fair bit in Christian circles. When people look for a new job they say “I’m just hoping God will open the right door for me.” Or when making business deals we pray “God, if this isn’t supposed to happen then close the door.” Or when things go badly, like we lose our job we say “I made a mistake, I thought God opened this door but I was obviously mistaken.”

Have you ever done stuff like that? I have. The problem is this isn’t New Testament Christianity. When we do this we are essentially using opportunity, an “open door”, to be an Urim and a Thummim. If the opportunity is there then God must want us to take it. The problem is this is not what the Bible teaches.

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Now let me be clear, opportunities do open and close, but that’s not how God leads. If you get an opportunity to steal a car you aren’t supposed to take it. So how do we know what God wills?

Well, throughout the New Testament God leads through wisdom and conviction that come from the Holy Spirit who lives inside us. Our job is to follow that leading and do what is right regardless of whether the opportunity is easily “open” or not. And we do this because we want to please God.

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Now this works itself out in two kinds of situations. So first, you might wonder “Is God giving me this car that someone left running on the side of the road?” Or “Should I let my sexuality control me and run rampant essentially making it god in my life so that I do whatever it wants, or should I make Jesus my God and use my sexuality the way He says” – there is an answer for questions like these in the Bible and they aren’t hard to find. Sin is never God’s will.

But what if you are wondering “Should I study English or Psychology, or should I be a missionary or an engineer? There is nothing in the Bible that will give you an answer. Nor is there a promise that God will close the door to the English department because His will is that you study psychology. That’s not how it works. Instead, in situations like these God leads us through our passions and convictions that His Spirit puts in our hearts.

Here’s an example: In Acts 19 Paul has been praying and he feels he needs to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome. He didn’t come to this by flipping a coin. The text implies that this was an idea that had grown in Paul’s mind as he sought to live his life for Jesus’ glory. And so he says:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. (Acts 20:22)

Now here’s the important part. Paul isn’t looking for a sign to prove this is God’s secret will. So he doesn’t say “I’ll go to Jerusalem if Travelocity offers a cheap flight.” No, he prays, he considered, and he feels that this is what he must do. And then something interesting happens. People actually start to prophesy that things are going to go badly for him in Jerusalem.

So a man named Ababus prophesied that Paul was going to be captured and bound in Jerusalem. Now many people would take this as a sign that he shouldn’t go – of something bad is going to happen that can’t be God’s will can it? If I lost my job it couldn’t have been God’s will to take the position in the first place could it? But look at how Paul responds. He says:

I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 21:13)

So Paul’s not lead by signs, he’s lead by conviction. And this is the New Testament way. In the Old Testament God did direct Israel by things like drawing lots, but in the New Testament we get something better. God’s Spirit lives in us now. He has written His law on our hearts. And so faithful people follow their conviction rather than looking for signs.

So what’s God’s will for your life? Well Paul sums it up nicely when he says:

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
(1 Corinthians 10:31)

That's God's will for your life. Aside from areas of sin where it is always God's will that you put those things behind you, stop worrying about getting God's will wrong.

You see God's not up in heaven saying "I wonder if Dan can figure this out. I want him to be a missionary. But oh no! He's studying pastoral theology not missional theology. Come on Dan, it starts with "L". Oh no, it's supposed to be Lithuania not Lighthouse! Well, I guess you get My second best from now on."

Friends, there is nothing in scripture that describes this kind of situation. What we get instead is the command to live all of our lives for His glory.

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So what's the open door then? Jesus tells us in verse 7.

[Read Revelation 3:7b-8a)

Now this might seem mysterious, but there are two scriptures that Jesus is pointing to with these words. And both these scriptures shine light on what He says. The first is back in chapter 1. There Jesus says:

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Revelation 1:18)

So Jesus holds keys which open doors to life or death. When Jesus suffered the cross and rose from the dead He won the keys that can lock death out for good. And He uses those keys to open the door of life for us.

So Jesus says: "Philadelphia and Lighthouse/Fort George, I own the door to everything you are seeking. In fact I am the door. Enter to experience salvation in every aspect of the word." This is what Jesus says to His faithful.

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But there is more. There is a second textual connection that expands this. Jesus says I hold the "key of David."

Now the Philadelphian Christians, many of whom were Jews, would have recognized this as coming from Isaiah 22 – the Jews knew their Old Testament. So let me set the context for you.

King David was a godly man – a man after God's own heart.⁴ Now he wasn't anything close to perfect, but he got this title because he used his power to lead Israel towards God. As a result, Israel expanded and enjoyed the Lord's favor under his leadership.

⁴ Acts 13:22; 1 Samuel 13:14

And so throughout the Old Testament David is a picture of the coming Messiah – Messiah was to be a king like David.⁵ And the term “house of David” became a way of referring to the kingdom of God.⁶ Now the Kingdom of God includes everything God wants to give us, both now and forever.

But by the time Isaiah was writing David was long dead and Hezekiah was king. And in his kingdom there was a man named Eliakim who was given the honour of holding the keys to David’s house. And one day God said:

In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. I will clothe him with your [King Hezekiah’s] robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the people of Judah. I will place on his shoulder **the key** to the **house of David**; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. (Isaiah 22:20-22)

So Eliakim was given authority to open or close the kingdom to whomever he wanted. And Jesus tells Philadelphia I’m the new Eliakim. I hold, not **a** key, but **the** key to the kingdom because I am the King.

And so Jesus says “See, I’m opening a door for you that no one can shut. When I died I took everything that excluded you from the kingdom. And when I rose I won abundant life that I want to give you! So come and enter. Jesus offers salvation to the righteous in Philadelphia and here at Lighthouse/Fort George. That’s good news!

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But this doesn’t mean that if we do what God wills it’s going to be easy. So the church in Philadelphia had experienced many doors being shut in their faces. In verse 9 we read about some Jews who rejected Jesus as God’s Messiah and opposed the Christians by kicking them out of the synagogue. These Jesus followers were essentially excommunicated from their families – that’s hard. And living for Jesus is going to be hard for us too.

But then Jesus says these Jews are going to come and fall down at the Christians feet; they are going to acknowledge that God loves them. In other words they are going to come to Christ through the Christians they opposed.

So Jesus says don’t worry about these other doors. I’ve got the only door that matters. So come in and be saved, come in and become a pillar in God’s temple.

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That’s the first meaning of the open door that Jesus commands us to go through. It is the door to the house of David; it is the door to the kingdom of God. And this is Jesus’ gift to the faithful. But this isn’t the only gift of this passage. While God does offer us His open door of salvation, the main thing He gives us is the opportunity to offer His open door to those around us.

⁵ Jeremiah 23:5

⁶ Zechariah 12:8 see also Johnson, pg 109

And this is actually the way the term “open door” is used throughout the New Testament. I’ll give you just one example. In Corinthians Paul described his work saying:

I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me (2 Corinthians 2:12)

In fact, every time Paul speaks of an open door it is always in the context of sharing his faith with those God has lead him to. And the door is open when people respond and closed when they don’t. And Paul, like the Philadelphians, wanted his life to bring Jesus glory, so he was constantly looking for open doors where God had prepared a person to receive the abundant life he was enjoying.

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So what about you? Are you enjoying the abundant life He offers or are you mostly dead like we covered last week? If you’re alive then you don’t need to flip coins to find God’s will; you don’t need to draw lots. And that’s because you’re already in it. You know He wants you to live all your life for His glory. You may not do it perfectly, but you’re growing here, and you know that when you do this it goes good for you.

So what about those areas where it isn’t about sin, you just want to know what God wants you to do? Well the good news is that God’s will is open so you are free to follow the passion He has put in your heart. If you want to study English then study English to the glory of God. If you feel gifted to be an engineer, then by all means be one because I’m not going to do it. Don’t worry about missing God’s will for your life. If you want to please God and are seeking to do this with everything you do, then you’re already in it.

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The only condition is don’t keep abundant life to yourself. So yes, keep going through the door of salvation Jesus has opened for you – keep pursuing abundant life. And yes, keep looking for an open door to share this life with the people He’s surrounded you with. It’s no accident you where you are. He’s going to draw some of these people to Himself through you. And this also is an incredible gift. Very little is better than getting to watch the miracle of abundant life take root in someone beside you.

So friends, this is God’s will for you, and it’s also His reward. He wants to let you participate with Him in the expanse of His kingdom. So be faithful; enjoy His will, and lead the people around you into this as well.