

"OPEN DOORS"
August 27, 1989

TEXT: Revelation 3:8 "Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut."

One of the past week's more dramatic stories was about a six year old boy named Bobby Pitterman. Bobby lives in San Antonio, Texas, and somehow he got himself trapped in an abandoned water main. It might have ended in tragedy, but Bobby was lucky. And he was quickly rescued by firefighters who covered him with dishwashing liquid and pulled him to safety. But can you imagine how Bobby and his family must have felt until he was actually freed?

It is my guess that many of us can. We know how they felt because, at one time or another, we, too, have felt trapped. Not physically, perhaps, but trapped nevertheless. Trapped by unhappy relationships. Trapped in unsatisfying jobs. Trapped in bodies which we do not like or which do not work the way we want them to. Trapped by expectations placed on us by others. Trapped by circumstances and pressures which seem more than we can handle.

If any of that sounds familiar, you are in good company. Recent studies have shown that most Americans feel that way. Over sixty per cent do not like their bodies. At least two thirds do not like their jobs. And, judging from the divorce statistics, nearly half do not like their marriages. So, if the word, trapped, seems a bit too strong, try one of these: frustrated, stressed, unhappy, anxious, depressed. Though they have their differences, they all mean pretty much the same. Whatever you call it, millions of people feel hemmed in by problems that are too much for them. Perhaps that helps to explain the drug problem, the abuse of alcohol, and our frantic need for entertainment at any cost.

And all that pain is all so unnecessary. I think most of us would agree that there is not much which we can not handle if we can only see an end to it. If little Bobby Pitterman and his family had realized that he would be out of that water main in only thirty minutes, I am sure they would have been much less concerned. But unless we see some light at the end of the tunnel, our fears can lead us to think the worst. To suppose there is no end to our problems. And that is why we feel trapped.

But this morning's scripture provides an antidote to such false thinking. We read in the book of Revelation, chapter three, verse eight, "Behold I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut." It is that open door which makes the difference.

John Henry Jowett, one of the great Christian preachers at the turn of the century, used to speak of a small seaside town where there was a little cobbler's shop. One day he went into the shop and was amazed by what he saw. There sat the cobbler, surrounded by his tools, but with hardly any room for him to move about, and very little light for him to work by.

"Don't you ever get depressed," asked Jowett, "cooped up all day in this gloomy little room?"

"Not at all," answered the cobbler, "because when I begin to feel like that, I just open the door." And, as he spoke, he reached out his hand, swung back the door, and revealed the most marvelous view of earth and sky and sand and rolling hills. The open door made all the difference. And God has given us not one door, but several.

The first open door is faith. "Which no one is able to shut," says the text. Not that people have not tried. In my former church, a university church, there was a biologist who told me that his colleagues often asked him how he, a scientist, could possibly believe in God. Nor is it only at universities where such things happen. I suspect most of us know someone who sneers at faith. And all of us have heard how the Communists do their very best --or should I say their worst-- to stamp out faith wherever they can.

Yet none of that changes anything. Faith is real just the same. It has been given to us by God as a door to open up our lives, to make them more abundant. We do not need more faith. We only need to use the faith we have. It is there whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not. The great Austrian psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, writes, "There is, in fact, a religious sense, deeply rooted in each and every man's unconscious depths." It is, he says, "inherent to man." It is an open door which no one is able to shut. We can ignore it. Or deny it. But we do so at our peril.

Suppose, for example, Jowett's cobbler had chosen to ignore the door which led from his dark and cramped little shop to the incredible beauty outside. Would that have made the beauty any less real? Of course not. But what would it have done to the cobbler. We can well imagine that, in time, his life would have become as dark and cramped as his shop. Frankl writes, "Clinical evidence suggests that the atrophy of the religious sense in man results in a distortion of his religious concepts. Or, to put it in a less clinical vein, once the angel in us is repressed, he turns into a demon." What a haunting thought. "Once the angel in us is repressed, he turns into a demon." Perhaps that

explains some of the things we see on TV or read in the newspaper.

Another door which God has opened is prayer. Through it we can find our way, not only to God, but to a whole new and more abundant way of living. St. Paul wrote, "In nothing be anxious, but in everything by prayer and supplication and thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God!" God has promised that He will hear when we call upon Him and that we shall surely find Him if we seek Him with all our hearts.

That, of course, is the purpose of prayer. Not that we should always get what we ask for, but that we might find a better understanding of God, of ourselves, and of life. And like faith, the door of prayer is always open. We do not have to cajole God or bribe Him with outlandish promises before He is willing to hear us. Scripture says, "Before they call I will answer and while they are yet speaking I will hear. (Isaiah 65:24). All God needs is access to our hearts. He enters in wherever He is not denied an entrance.

You see, God has designed prayer as a means for intimate and joyous fellowship with His children. As air quietly enters our lungs when we breathe, and there accomplishes its purpose, so God enters into our hearts and souls in prayer. And the more His light and love come into our lives the greater our lives become, the less trapped we feel. "Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut."

And a third door is service. If you really want to broaden your life, forget about your own troubles for a while and look around for someone else to help. That door, too, is always open. There is never any shortage of those who need us. And we also need them. Albert Schweitzer wrote, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know. The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Why is it, I wonder, that so many people look upon service to others as some sort of painful duty? When St. Paul wrote, "We, then, that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves (Romans 15:1), he was thinking of our needs, too, not just the needs of the weak. He knew that only as we forget ourselves in giving to others can our own lives take on new dimensions of joy and beauty.

Christ offers us the glorious liberty of the sons of God. He calls us to a service that is perfect freedom and the only true happiness. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life", and it is only through his way, his life of faith, and prayer, and service that the prisons we have built for ourselves, or have allowed others to build around us, can be opened so that you and I can be freed.

That is the choice we all have to make in life. A choice between the bondage of self and the freedom of Christ. God has set before us an open door which no one is able to shut. But each of us must decide whether to go through that door or not. We can go on being trapped and unhappy for the rest of our lives. Or we can accept the freedom wherewith Christ has set us free. It is up to us. "Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut" --except we, ourselves.