

The Opening Door God

February 8, 2009 - Acts 14:21-28

You come to a closed door. You need to get to the other side. And you don't have a key. What do you do?

Most of us will try to turn the doorknob. Perhaps we hope that in some way our pressure will release the lock. Maybe we knock and hope someone inside will open the door. We might try to pick the lock or smash open the door. Maybe we try to figure out some other way into the room. A locked door gets in our way.

Now it's one thing to face closed physical doors. You can see the obstacle right in front of you. You know that piece of wood or metal stands between you and the other side. But facing closed doors in life is something different. We may discover closed doors when employers show no interest in us or lay us off. We may experience closed doors in relationships when we reach out and get a cold response. We come upon closed doors for our ideas. Perhaps you've experienced that phenomenon. You float your idea. . . Someone shoots it down. The door you thought might open through this idea, slams shut.

On a spiritual front we face all kinds of closed doors. We wish that person would receive God's Gospel and put their trust in Christ. But their heart remains stone-cold-closed towards God. It seems they locked the door to Him and threw away the key. Or maybe we passionately desire to minister to a specific group with needs. But the people we approached for permission say no. Or the attempts we make face serious obstacles. I want you to think for a moment about closed doors in your life right now. When we come to closed doors in our lives, is that the end of the story? Or might we be missing something?

Well, I've got Good News for you today friends. We serve a God who opens doors. Like a genius locksmith, God unlocks the most challenging doors. Our God displays His supernatural ability to open wide the toughest doors ever closed. Today, I'm going to try to prove that from Scripture and offer some ways we might live in light of this reality.

We continue in our "Looking out in prayer and ministry" series today. Last week, we looked out to the poor and asked God to open our eyes to the poor around us. We will have part two of that message

next week. Today, we look out to the world; beyond our borders into foreign missions. We have already heard today from Jack Robertson about the people of Thembe and from Bonnie Brugger regarding Missions Fest. While we look out in prayer and ministry to St. Albert, we don't want to forget the call to look out to the world. That is our mission – To glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ at home and internationally.

Yet when we think about looking out internationally it seems so impossible at first. What difference can we make from our little community in Alberta to people living half way round the world? That might have crossed the minds of 2 men about to set out on the first foreign missionary journey taken in the history of the church. These men would enter hostile pagan lands. They would encounter people who knew nothing of God and worshipped a variety of foreign gods and idols. Yet they went and saw an amazing harvest because God, the “Genius Locksmith,” went before them.

The text we'll look at today describes the end of this journey. They return to their sending church to report. We will see them testify about the “Genius Locksmith.” So I first want us to consider the

“Genius Locksmith's” work. We'll see different ways He opens doors. Then we will think about how we can respond to and join in with His work. I pray God will use His Word to give insight to us individually and as a church family concerning the closed doors before us right now. Will you join me in asking the Lord to do that?

Acts 14:21-28 (NIV)

The Return to Antioch in Syria

²¹They (Paul and Barnabas) preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ²⁴After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, ²⁵and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

²⁶From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. ²⁷On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

The church in Antioch, Syria sent Paul and Barnabas out on this first missionary journey. They travelled to modern day Turkey. Then it was known as Galatia on Asia Minor. They visit various cities and see many positive responses to their preaching.

In a place called Lystra, God heals a man crippled from birth through Paul. When the citizens see this man walking, they conclude their gods Zeus and Hermes have come down to visit them. They think Barnabas is Zeus and Paul is Hermes. In fact, the priest of Zeus comes out of the temple with some oxen to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas!

When they see this, Paul and Barnabas tear their clothes in despair and immediately rush into the crowd to stop this misdirected worship. They barely hold the people back from offering sacrifices to them. But amidst this confusion, some Jewish agitators arrive. They stir up the mob against the apostles. So they surround Paul and pelt him with large stones.

Convinced they have killed him, the mob drags Paul's body out of the city. They disperse and the Christians surround Paul. Paul is not dead but probably bears many wounds. Somehow he gets up and goes back into the city. Then the very next day he and Barnabas leave Lystra to go to a place called Derbe.

In this city, our passage begins with the news that they preached the gospel there. Then they return to the places they've

already visited to encourage the new Christians. They strengthen their souls. They encourage them to continue in "the faith," that body of teaching delivered to them by these apostles. And they appoint elders to ensure the continuation of churches in each place.

Finally, they return to their sending church. Verse 27 tells us what happened. "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.*" Here we discover the first example of the "Genius Locksmith's work."

What kind of work does God, our "Genius Locksmith" do?

God opens the door of faith for non-Christians. The Gentiles were non-Jews who knew little or nothing of God's moral law. They worshipped other gods and idols. Yet Paul and Barnabas testify that God opened the door of faith for them. Notice they don't say "our preaching saved many. Our plans succeeded." *God* opened their hearts and their ability to understand, comprehend and accept the Gospel. *God* overcome all those obstacles of unbelief and false religion to enable many to believe.

Acts 13 and 14 are filled with examples of God doing this.

Acts 13 starts with Paul and Barnabas on the island of Cyprus. They encounter a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. This prophet accompanied the proconsul or chief Roman officer named Sergius Paulus. Sergius was like our provincial premier. Paul condemns this false prophet and proclaims a temporary blindness upon him. Acts 13:11-12 tell us what happened. “Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” God opened the door of faith for this premier.

Another example occurs later in Acts 16. Paul has gone over to Greece. He lands in Philippi, the leading city of the province. It was also a Roman colony. So it was pagan central. Paul and his companions remain there for several days. On the Sabbath they go near the river to a place of prayer. Apparently the Jewish community was so small, they didn’t have a synagogue, but a few met to pray. Listen to what happened in Acts 16:14. “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple

goods, who was a worshiper of God. *The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*” (ESV) So in our passage the Lord unlocked the door of faith for the Gentiles. Here he unlocks the door of Lydia’s heart to pay attention. She responds by believing and getting baptized and inviting Paul and Barnabas to her home.

The Bible teaches us of another way the “Genius Locksmith” works. *God opens minds to understand the Scriptures.* One most comforting example comes after the resurrection. Jesus’ disciples have gone through the roller coaster of Passion Week. They saw Jesus hailed on Palm Sunday, betrayed on Thursday night, crucified Friday morning and died Friday afternoon. They endured dark Friday night and Saturday. But then they receive news Sunday morning that Jesus’ is alive. Jesus finally appears to all of them.

Some must have wondered “how we missed this. We thought Jesus was coming to restore Israel as a political power and free us from the Romans.” Luke 23:44-45 tells us what the “Genius Locksmith” offered them. “Then he (Jesus) said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and

Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” So God opens people’s minds to understand the Bible.

Another “Genius Locksmith” work is found throughout Paul’s letters. *God opens doors for effective ministry.* You know that group you long to minister to? You know that need you would like to see addressed? God opens doors for ministry in His time and way.

In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul concludes his first letter to the Corinthians written from Ephesus. He wants to come and see the Corinthians soon. But look at what he writes in 1 Corinthians 16:9.

⁸But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

Or how about 2 Corinthians 2:12?

¹²Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me.

Scripture also teaches that *God opens doors for preaching the Gospel.* It is appropriate to ask God to open those doors.

In Colossians 4:2-3

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.”

So Paul called on his brothers and sisters in Christ to pray that God would open a door for the message of the Gospel to be preached. God did that throughout the book of Acts and the New Testament. He continues to do that in our time.

A door to the Gospel was about to close in Cambodia. It was 1974. Christian author and apologist Ravi Zacharias was invited to that nation to preach. He was in his mid 20’s. Some of you know the story of Cambodia. A civil war in 1975 led to the fall of the government and the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge under dictator Pol Pot. They would murder over a million people in what are now known as “the Killing Fields.” From 1923-1968, there were only 80 known baptized Christian believers in all of Cambodia. But during this 5 week preaching mission, Ravi witnessed the floodgates of heaven open. In one evening in a place called Barum Bong, 600 people came to Christ.

We don’t know how many hearts God opened through that preaching mission. A few months later the door slammed shut. The

Khmer Rouge took over. They hunted down Christians. In fact, 2 of Ravi's closest friends from that time, a major named Chirrc and the head of the Bible Society, Lum Son, were among their victims. When he bid them goodbye at the airport in 1974, Ravi didn't know if he'd see them again. When the Khmer Rouge took over he contacted the mission agency for news of their whereabouts. The director told Ravi that they contacted Chirrc and Lum Son with news that an American helicopter was coming to the American consulate to get them out. They were wanted men. Chirrc brought his family to the consulate. He got them on the plane and his last words to them were "if I am able to lead one Khmer Rouge to Christ, I'm willing to die for it." Within hours, the Khmer Rouge took Chirrc in front of the French consulate and gunned him down. They took Son into the water and drowned him.

Yet God opened a door for the message of the Gospel to be proclaimed in Cambodia before the darkness descended. Hundreds, perhaps thousands were saved. God had opened a door for effective ministry just in time.

The Bible explains the many unusual, unexpected opportunities the witnesses had to proclaim the Word as the "Genius Locksmith's work." God opens doors. God is the "genius locksmith."

But this doesn't mean He's a genie. We can't dictate to God what doors He must open and when He has to do it. How can we respond to this truth about God in light of our looking out series? 1 Don't and 3 Do's.

Don't try to force open doors for God. We must not act as if God needs us to open doors so He can get to work. We must not think we need to take the initiative to get God's work moving. "Wait a minute Tom! We've got to grab hold of this church and get things going. We've got to go out and make a difference. We've got to take control before things fall apart." Really? We've got to take control? We've got to figure things out for God?

Perhaps we would be wise to examine how Jesus carried out His ministry. What was His approach to taking the initiative and banging down doors?

John 5:17-20 NIV

¹⁷Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." ¹⁸For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to

kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

¹⁹Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these.

Did you catch that? The Son can do nothing by Himself. He can do only what he sees his Father doing. Henry Blackaby, in his book "Experiencing God" summarizes Jesus' words this way. The Father has been working right up until now. Now God has Me working. I do nothing on my own initiative. I watch to see what the Father is doing. I do what I see the Father already is doing. You see, the Father loves me. He shows Me everything that He, himself, is doing.

Friends, you and I need to apply this in our own lives. Sometimes we face closed doors because we've gone away from where God is working. We try to bang down a door God does not intend to open or at least is not opening now. Or we just run ahead with our projects and ideas and then ask God to bless us. We must first look around to see what God is already doing.

Then we need to *Seek God's open doors*. What doors has God opened? Ask Him to reveal to you what He's up to. I'm sure it has

taken much labor, many factors and many things to come together for this opportunity with the children of Thembe. I'm sure some wished the door might open to this project sooner than it has. But the door seems to be opening now. God's timing is perfect. When God closes one door, look for the open one. (When God says no, look for the yes)- Deut. 3:23-29. A few years ago, I was look at a door that seemed to be open, went through a whole process of interview. The news came back – the door closed, another opened. Disappointed. In the last few months God graciously revealed His wisdom in closing that door.

There are times we might conclude that the closed door before us is exactly where God wants us. But we can't open it. *So, pray for open doors*. Ask God to open up opportunities. Ask God to remove that obstacle. Ask God to open the heart of faith so your loved one can believe.

Finally, *Go through open doors He provides you*.

Some of you came here today not knowing Christ. But you've heard today God opens hearts to pay attention to His Word. He opens the door of faith. Maybe God has opened your heart to respond to His call today. Apart from God you are totally dead in sin. You are like a

flat-dead-drowned person on the bottom of a pool under six feet of water. The man is so dead he can't possibly hear the "good news" that a lifesaver is on the way. He can't respond. God is the Lifesaver who must reach down, pull the unbeliever out of the water, and breathe life into his dead body. Once quickened, the man happily recognizes his Savior, reaches up and embraces him. That's the Gospel. God could be opening the door to your heart right now. Now is the favorable time—now is the day of salvation! Will you respond to His call and reach up to embrace your Savior Jesus Christ?

For Christians and our church family here today, we have met our “Genius Locksmith” God. As you think about the closed doors in your life, remember God is always at His work. God is busy opening the doors that need opening around us. So we need to remain connected to God so we can discover His work around us. Maybe it's a new opportunity. Maybe it's a softening of someone's heart. Maybe it's an opening of our heart to what He wants to do in us. Then when we see what He's doing, join Him in that work.

As a church thinking about looking out in prayer and ministry to the world we need to celebrate the doors God has already opened

for us. Celebrate the missionaries we support. Check out the Missions bulletin board in the foyer with pictures and info of many of God's projects. Then we need to seek Him for what else He is already doing that He wants us to get in on. Don't conclude a closed door is the end of the story. Instead turn to our Genius Locksmith God. Ask Him to open that door or to show you another door He's working on.

It is possible for us to be involved in God's kingdom work only because of Christ's sacrifice for us. The biggest door God unlocked was the door between us and Him constructed by our sin. But God opened that door through Jesus' death on the cross. We come now to reconnect, remember and rejoice in that gift at His table.