

## The 'Open Door' Of Philadelphia

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The church of God gives scant attention to Isaiah 22 these days, which is surprising because it not only contains a Messianic prophecy, but it also holds the key to understanding one of the church's most hotly contested verses in Scripture, at least in recent decades. If Isaiah 22 were better and more widely understood, we might not still be witnessing the competition and one-upmanship in the greater church of God.

The first half of Isaiah 22 (verses 1-14) contains a prophecy against Jerusalem. The prophet foretells the captivity of his countrymen due to their unfaithfulness to God and the covenant they made with Him. Even though God had "called for weeping and for mourning, for baldness and for girding with sackcloth" (verse 12), the unconcerned Jews carried on with "joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating meat and drinking wine: [saying] 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!'" (verse 13).

Isaiah continues with a proclamation concerning two government officials:

Thus says the Lord God of hosts: "Go, proceed to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the house, and say: 'What have you here, and whom have you here, that you have hewn a sepulcher here, as he who hews himself a sepulcher on high, who carves a tomb for himself in a rock? Indeed, the Lord will throw you away violently, O mighty man, and will surely seize you. He will surely turn violently and toss you like a ball into a large country; there you shall die, and there your glorious chariots shall be the shame of your master's house. So I will drive you out of your office, and from your position he will pull you down. Then it shall be in that day, that I will call My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah; I will clothe him with your robe and strengthen him with your belt; I will commit your responsibility into his hand. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open. I will fasten him as a peg in a secure place, and he will become a glorious throne to his father's house. They will hang on him all the glory of his father's house, the offspring and the posterity, all vessels of small quantity, from the cups to all the pitchers. In that day,' says the Lord of hosts, 'the peg that is fastened in the secure place will be removed and be cut down and fall, and the burden that was on it will be cut off; for the Lord has spoken.'" (Isaiah 22:15-25)

Verse 15 introduces us to a man named Shebna, called the "steward" who was "over the house," that is, the royal household. The word for "steward" can also indicate the treasurer or the prefect of the palace, both pivotal positions. All indications point to Shebna being the man in highest authority under Hezekiah. He was essentially the king's right hand, not unlike Joseph in Egypt under the Pharaoh.

God gave Isaiah the task of delivering His judgment to Shebna, which began with removing him from office. After this, Scripture refers to him as "Shebna the scribe" instead of "Shebna the steward" (II Kings 18:18-37; 19:2; Isaiah 36:3-22; 37:2), having been given a position of lesser authority. The

remainder of God's judgment was that he would be deported to another country—likely Assyria—where he would die.

God's charge against Shebna deals with his ostentation and presumption. He was not the king, yet he presumed to have a burial place among the royal dead, who were interred in sepulchers of prominence on a mountain. He tried to give himself greater honor than had been bestowed upon him—a bold move that indicates his mind's tendency. He was more interested in his own affairs and his place in history than he was in simply doing his job.

His “glorious chariots” of verse 18 illustrate a focus on image and reputation rather than on substance. He was more concerned about his own glory than in the well-being of the nation, which was crumbling around him. Because of his focus on himself instead of God's will, God took away his authority and later removed him from the land altogether.

### **Eliakim**

God then fills his office with His servant, Eliakim. *Eliakim* means “whom God will raise up” or “the resurrection of God,” both of which apply to Jesus Christ. God gives Eliakim the substantial authority and responsibility that Shebna had. Verse 21 says he “shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah,” much as Joseph said, God “has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:8). For both Eliakim and Joseph, their authority was exceeded by only one other person.

Take note of Isaiah 22:22, as Christ quotes it in the letter to the church at Philadelphia: “The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open.” Eliakim's authority to “open . . . and shut” is a result of “the key of the house of David” being put “on his shoulder.” We can compare this with Isaiah 9:6-7, another Messianic prophecy:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and *the government will be upon His shoulder*. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, *Everlasting Father*, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *His government* and peace there will be no end, *upon the throne of David and over His kingdom*, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

The key of the house of David, then, represents God's governance, specifically His governance over Israel. The Bible even names the royal throne—the throne on which David and Solomon sat—as “the throne of the Lord” (I Chronicles 29:23; see II Chronicles 9:8)! God has sworn that David would always have an heir to sit on that throne (Jeremiah 33:17).

Thus, the key on Eliakim's shoulder represents the power of the government that would ultimately rest on the Messiah's shoulder. It involves the royal line of David and all the authority that resulted from God's covenant and promises to him. The Messiah would come from that same line, and He will sit on that throne when He returns and establishes His Kingdom (Isaiah 9:7).

In his position as second-in-command, Eliakim served as the ultimate gatekeeper, granting or denying access to the house of David at his discretion. He could open the door, and no one could shut it. Having the door opened meant access to the king's presence, and thus to the God-given authority

and blessings of the royal line, as well as to all the resources of the treasury and storehouse. But if the steward shut the door, all of that access was blocked, and no one could overrule his decision.

It was a significant position. It is no wonder that God would not tolerate the likes of Shebna in it, who was more interested in his legacy and earthly pomp than fulfilling his office with gravity and faithfulness.

### **A Peg in a Secure Place**

Verses 23-24 continue with God's elucidation of Eliakim's role:

I will fasten him as a peg in a secure place, and he will become a glorious throne to his father's house. They will hang on him all the glory of his father's house, the offspring and the posterity, all vessels of small quantity, from the cups to all the pitchers.

God likens the role of a steward to a securely fastened peg or nail. At the time, houses and other buildings commonly had durable spikes or large pins affixed to the walls during the building process. They were attached in places strong enough to bear the weight of whatever would be hung on them: usually, all sorts of utensils and vessels. In contrast, God compares unfaithful Israel to a peg made of a flimsy vine branch—utterly unfit for the service He required (Ezekiel 15:3).

Both the Tabernacle and Temple featured such pegs (Exodus 27:19; 38:20), and Ezra, reflecting on God's graciousness, refers to being given “a peg in His holy place” (Ezra 9:8). However, unless Eliakim was a priest—and there is no indication that he was—he would not have been serving in the Temple, so the “secure place” probably refers to something else.

The word translated as “secure” (“sure,” KJV) is used to describe something that is well-supported, stable, assured, certain, and trustworthy—a thing in which a person can put his faith. Specifically, it is used to describe the house or dynasty of David (I Samuel 25:28; II Samuel 7:16; I Kings 11:38), a house that is assured because God continues to support it. Thus, the meaning is that God fastened Eliakim like a nail into the “secure place” of the house of David, and he would serve as a trustworthy implement in supporting the many “vessels”—people—who were part of that house.

The NKJV reads that Eliakim would be “a glorious throne to his father's house.” The *New English Translation*<sup>1</sup> renders this, “he will bring honor and respect to his father's family.” This detail, too, is reminiscent of Joseph, who brought great honor to his father, Jacob, through the glory given to him by God in Egypt (Genesis 45:9-13).

Both ideas of being “fastened in a secure place” and bringing glory to the house of one's father are, however, even more applicable to Jesus Christ, who is so steadfast and certain that He does not merely support “vessels” but is now “*upholding all things* by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3). All of the members of His Father's house—all His brothers and sisters—can confidently look to Him for stability and support, yet one of His main purposes has been to glorify His—our—Father.

The last part of God's declaration through Isaiah is ambiguous in its reference: “In that day,” says the Lord of hosts, “the peg that is fastened in the secure place will be removed and be cut down and fall, and the burden that was on it will be cut off; for the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 22:25). Scholars offer differing opinions as to whom God is referring.

Because this prophecy follows His calling Eliakim “a peg in a secure place,” it seems to imply that Eliakim, too, would become unfaithful and eventually be cut off. However, notice that it is prefaced with “in that day,” just as Shebna’s demotion and Eliakim’s promotion would happen “in that day” (Isaiah 22:20). This linking of the events to “that day” suggests that the “peg” that is removed and cut off in verse 25 represents Shebna, who would be replaced with a peg that would become glorious, Eliakim.

## **An Open Door**

As mentioned previously, Christ quotes Isaiah 22:22 in the preamble of His letter to the church at Philadelphia: “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’” (Revelation 3:7).

In identifying Himself to the church, He quotes what He said through Isaiah concerning Eliakim. If we want to understand the letter to Philadelphia, we must begin with this reference. Jesus clarifies that Eliakim’s role was a type of the stewardship role that He Himself now fills. In other words, in quoting Isaiah, Jesus declares that He is the ultimate fulfillment of Eliakim’s position as steward of the house.

Now consider verse 8: “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.” Christ announces that He has set an open door before this church and tells them *why*.

It is imperative to catch the way Jesus says this. The reason they have an open door is *because* they have a little strength, have kept His Word, and have not denied His name. Thus, the open door is mentioned in response to their condition coupled with their faithfulness. We need to grasp this to recognize what the open door is. The *Holman Christian Standard Bible*<sup>2</sup> captures this aspect well: “I know your works. Because you have limited strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name, look, I have placed before you an open door that no one is able to close.”

What is this open door? The conventional interpretation among those who have come out of the Worldwide Church of God is that Christ has given the Philadelphians an open door *to preach the gospel*, an idea that is not without merit. In three of Paul’s epistles, he uses an open door as a metaphor for an opportunity to preach (I Corinthians 16:9; II Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). This metaphor has no connection at all to Christ’s quotation of Isaiah 22:22, but we will follow the rabbit hole to see where this typically leads us.

Christ promises to keep the Philadelphians from the hour of trial, boosting the importance of being a Philadelphian because it involves protection during the Tribulation. Consequently, it then becomes imperative to determine which church group appears to have *the* open door to preach the gospel, because—the reasoning goes—God will protect that group.

Suddenly, a tremendous interest then arises in accumulating “proof” of an open door, since it will apparently establish that a group is Philadelphian and guaranteed protection. The “proof” is then held up as the reason all church members should join that group instead of another. But when this is the primary approach, what people usually focus on are not the things that truly matter but numbers—like how many radio or television stations the group is on, how many new people are attending services, how many subscribers or website hits it receives, or what percentage of its income a group spends on preaching the gospel.

We can add to this heady mix the incongruity of boasting about preaching the gospel with great strength. Remember, Christ identifies the Philadelphians as having only “a little strength”! It cannot be both ways.

The idea has been that, if we want to be protected and to “escape all these things which will come to pass” (Luke 21:36), we have to be with the group whose door to preach the gospel is open just a little wider than the rest. Yet, if our motivation is nothing more than self-preservation, something is dreadfully wrong. Christ specifically warns of this approach when He says that he who seeks to save his life will lose it (Luke 9:24; 17:33).

When the open door is interpreted to mean an opportunity to preach the gospel, the fruit has been exclusivity, comparing ourselves among ourselves (II Corinthians 10:12), division, competition, and a pitiful supply of love—works of the flesh rather than fruit of the Spirit. This occurs largely because people keep pushing God and all He is doing out of the picture. It is easy to focus on the works of men—which harkens back to God’s controversy with Shebna.

### **Other Interpretations**

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins contains another open door, one that allows the wise to enter the wedding yet keeps the foolish out. However, a problem with this interpretation is that it is tantamount to Jesus giving an unconditional guarantee of inheriting the Kingdom.

Scripture consistently teaches faithfulness until the end rather than a promise of success before it is over. In His letter to Smyrna, for example, Jesus says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” A crown awaits them only if they remain faithful until death. All the other promises in His letters are conditioned on overcoming, so it is unlikely that Philadelphia’s open door is an unconditional guarantee of an entrance to the wedding.

Another common usage of the door metaphor is that of the grave. Graves are opened, and they have doors or gates at the entrance. An open door with regard to the grave could refer to the resurrection, as Jesus also says He holds the keys to Death and Hades (see Revelation 1:18). But this is also not a good fit, since the reference to Eliakim is about granting or withholding access, specifically access to greater authority and abundance. If we suppose that Jesus promises an open door from the grave into the first resurrection, we run into the same problem of Jesus guaranteeing eternal life before the end. It is unscriptural and would corrode Christian character.

Scripture also uses doors as metaphors for physical deliverance. This usage shows up in a few places in the book of Acts, where God provides the apostles with literal open doors to escape imprisonment. This interpretation could coincide with the promise to keep the Philadelphians from the hour of trial. However, it is difficult to draw any cogent connection between this idea and the example of Eliakim, which Jesus purposefully used.

When we understand Christ’s reference to Eliakim, that He is now the fulfillment of that role, we can understand the open door without having to force anything. Consider the access He grants, saying in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through Me.*” Through Christ’s blood, we have access to the Almighty, the Most High God.

After the seven letters, in Revelation 4:1, John is shown an open door in heaven. To see what is behind the open door, we must read and meditate on the rest of the chapter. It is profound, describing

where we approach in spirit when we pray. Far from suggesting that the Philadelphians are going to heaven, the chapter reiterates the fact of their access to the One in heaven. Through Christ, we have entrance into the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of the Great God, which we may enter with boldness (Hebrews 10:19).

Notice what Jesus says in Luke 11:9-10, 13:

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. . . . If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

If we knock and keep knocking (as the Greek indicates), God opens the door. The Philadelphians have had to knock because they have only a little strength, and they know it. But they also know that the only way to courageously endure (Revelation 3:10) is to seek the strength of God. Thus, the One they seek responds, giving more of His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the means by which the Father and the Son dwell within the adopted sons of God. By giving the Spirit, He gives more of Himself. No one can shut that open door, though we can certainly ignore it and “neglect so great a salvation” (Hebrews 2:3).

The letter to Philadelphia is not about the mighty works of powerful men. It begins with the tremendous help that is available to those who are weak, but who keep God’s Word, who do not deny His name, and who persevere in faith. Because they consistently knock, Christ reminds them of His pivotal position as second-in-command to the Absolute Deity and that through Him as Steward, they have access to the throne of God.

The Philadelphians’ strength is small, but God’s is without limit. They are not those who seek after earthly glory, like Shebna, but they are faithful in their responsibilities to the Most High God, like Eliakim—and like Jesus Christ.