

THE AMERICAN PULPIT

A Volume of Sermons by Twenty-five of
the Foremost Living American Preachers,
Chosen by a Poll of All the Protestant
Ministers in the United States, Nearly
Twenty-five Thousand of Whom Cast
Their Votes

Edited by

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HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

It seems like a work of supererogation to write an introductory word concerning Dr. Fosdick, who without question is the most widely known living preacher in Christendom. Even at the moment these words are written the newspapers report his prophetic sermon delivered at St. Peter's Cathedral at Geneva, Switzerland, in connection with the assembly of the League of Nations. But he needs no sounding board of situation or circumstance to give carrying power to his words. Public interest in his utterances traces back to a little book on *The Meaning of Prayer*, which he wrote in 1915. This little book has brought light and vitality to the baffled minds of millions of men and women. It has been followed by two others, *The Meaning of Faith* and *The Meaning of Service*, making a trilogy of interpretation of the most vital aspects of practical Christian life. It was while he was pastor of the Baptist Church at Montclair, New Jersey, that the first of these books was written, with the immediate result that the already considerable local and denominational reputation of Dr. Fosdick as a preacher became nationwide fame. Called from Montclair in 1915 to be the Morris K. Jesup Professor of Practical Theology at Union Seminary, from which institution he was graduated in 1904, he resigned his pastorate to devote himself to his professorial tasks, and to a ministry-at-large in colleges, churches and religious platforms throughout the land. During the war he spent almost a year speaking in Britain and at the front under the British war office and the American Y. M. C. A. In 1919 he became special preacher at First Presbyterian Church, New York City. Being a Baptist, and having no desire to magnify denominational distinctions by formally changing his affiliations, he could not be called to the conventional relationship of pastor; yet

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because of the church's desire to possess his pulpit ministry the special relationship was created. The final relinquishment of this relationship in 1925 was the dénouement of an ecclesiastical drama too fresh in the public mind to need comment here. To great multitudes it passes comprehension how the author of *The Meaning of Prayer* could conceivably be charged by any Christian as a heretic.

The storm of heresy agitation having been stilled by his resignation, Dr. Fosdick was called to the pastorate of Park Avenue Baptist Church, New York, which call he accepted under two principal conditions: one, that a new house of worship should be built near Columbia University; the other, that the congregation should adopt what Dr. Fosdick called an "inclusive" basis of membership instead of the narrower basis of immersion-baptism. These conditions were accepted, and Dr. Fosdick departed for his sabbatical year in Palestine and the Mediterranean countries, to return in the fall of 1926 for his duties. He continues his relationship with Union Seminary.

Dr. Fosdick was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1878 and was graduated from Colgate in 1900, spending an additional year in the theological seminary there before going to Union. He has received many degrees from universities: M.A. from Columbia; D.D. from Brown, Yale, Colgate, and Glasgow; LL.D. from Michigan and Rochester; S.T.D. from Ohio University.

THE OPEN DOORS

By DR. HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

*"Behold I have set before thee an open door,
and no man can shut it."*—Rev. iii, 8.

Our thought this morning springs from a verse in the Book of Revelation. John was on Patmos when this book was conceived. Patmos is a convict island some ten miles long and five or six miles broad, off the coast of Asia Minor. There the hapless prisoners, marooned for many causes from high misdemeanors to Christian discipleship openly confessed, like John's, spent their days working in the mines or marble quarries and their nights in the convict huts. Save for the bare mention of the fact, John says nothing about his imprisonment, but more than one phrase reveals his hidden feeling. When he dreams of heaven he says, "and the sea is no more." To some of us that would be rather a limitation on heaven, but even we can understand how John felt, every day looking out on the encompassing ocean, the symbol of his bondage, the shining but terrible jailer which shut him on that convict isle.

I am convinced that our morning's text also represents John's reaction to his imprisonment. God says, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." To be sure, John uses these words about one of the churches to which he is writing, but

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they must have welled up first of all in response to his own experience. His imprisonment had shut doors all around his life. Doors of opportunity, happiness, and privilege had been closed, and there in his pent and shuttered experience he heard the voice divine that cried, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

What do those words mean if not this: that all the doors which man and circumstance could get their hands upon had been closed, but there still were doors, inner doors, that no man could shut. No circumstance could reach them; no man could get his hand upon them. They were not in this world's control. They were *his* doors, which opened on broad vistas and he could go out and come in through them and be in the spirit free, though he was compelled on Patmos to look down upon the encompassing sea. I speak to you this morning about this inner kingdom of the soul and the doors there that God has opened and that no man can shut.

One naturally thinks of such a subject and feels its importance at a new year's beginning. We are going out into a twelvemonth wherein no one of us knows what will happen. Here we are this morning, a great company of people upon this wandering island in the sky without the faintest idea of what will befall any one of us before the year is done. We praise those old explorers who dared to sail unknown and perilous seas, but every day we all of us are daring adventurers. The voyage of this new year takes us into strange new places. We never have been there before. No one has ever been there before, and we do not know what will happen there.

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In this situation it is important for us to see clearly that there are two sides to our lives. One side is at the mercy of man and circumstance; its happiness, its opportunities, and privileges can be shut out from us. And if that were the only side, then soon or late we all would land upon some hapless Patmos, pent in, body and soul, by the enclosing sea. Alas! with what tragic suddenness the doors do shut about some lives! But there is another side to us. It is a great gospel. There are doors in us that no man can shut. There are areas of our lives not at the mercy of man and circumstance. And all the sources of a man's liberty, independence, spiritual richness, and resources lie in his uses of these inner doors that God opened and that no man can shut.

The more a man knows about human life or reads biography, the more it is evident that here lies one of the chief differences between men. Set over against each other, for example, two powerful personalities like Napoleon and Paul. Outward circumstance treated them somewhat alike. That is to say: they both came from obscure beginnings little likely to issue in so resounding a consequence; they both rose to tremendous influence; and they both ended in prison. But there the similarity stops. Go to Napoleon on St. Helena. All the doors that man and circumstance could shut are closed around him. Are there any other doors through which he can go out and come in? None. It is a sad story, that last, mean, tawdry, quarrelsome, tinsel court of his.

But step from that to Paul's imprisonment. Once more all the doors that man and circumstance can close are shut about him. But as you watch him you are most aware of doors no man can shut. Nero had a

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long arm, but there were gateways in Paul's life that Nero could not get his fingers on. "Being rooted and grounded in love, strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge,"—ah! Paul, you had heard that voice, too: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

It is evident that this realm where our thought moves this morning is the special realm of religion. There are realms where religion overlaps other human interests. It overlaps industry and pleads as the will of God for the application of Christ's ideals there. It overlaps politics and pleads as the will of God for the working out of Christian principles in national and international relations. It overlaps philosophy and in theology endeavors to achieve a unified and rational outlook on the universe. But this morning we are dealing with religion at its heart, its unshared and incommunicable realm where, in the inward kingdom of the soul, it opens doors no man can shut. On the street corners they will talk with you about everything else under heaven, but not about that. In the lecture halls they will speak with you of many matters of high import to society, but not about this. This is religion's speciality. And is there anything that in the long run makes quite so much difference to life? I do not see how any one can go far on this adventurous and hazardous enterprise of the human pilgrimage, seeing how much of our life is at the mercy of man and circumstance, without feeling year by year an increasing cry for inward independence and resource.

I do not want to be the slave of circumstance. I do

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not want to be at the mercy of man. I want inward resources that man and circumstance cannot touch. Even when ill fortune flogs me as an old tradition says they flogged Anaxarchus, the martyr, I would be able to say as he did, "Beat on at the case of Anaxarchus. Anaxarchus himself you cannot touch." Even when unfortunate circumstance rims me round I would have a freedom of the soul.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.

If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

This morning, therefore, I talk with you in practical and homely fashion about these inward doors of the spirit that God has opened and no man can shut.

For one thing, there is the door of spiritual growth. No matter what man or circumstance may do to you outwardly, you always can use it for the development of a finer character inwardly. That door of spiritual growth stands open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. The Roman Government can put John on Patmos and ring him round with cramping circumstance, but there is one thing that the whole Roman Government together cannot do. It cannot prevent John from being a better man because he is there. That John should be more patient, more fine-grained, more high-minded, more inwardly strong and courageous, the whole Roman Empire together cannot prevent that.

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Do you remember from our childhood those exciting stories where the hero of the tale was almost caught, his enemies were closing in, the trap was almost sprung, and, lo! a secret door through which in the nick of time he made his thrilling exit? In later life we have seen that happen often, in ways just as thrilling and twice as true. Blindness closes in on a man's life. He has been active and energetic. Now the doors shut on every side. Avenues of action and vistas of vision close. He seems caught like a rat in a trap. And then comes that spiritual miracle before which all men with eyes must stand with reverence and awe. He is not caught like a rat in a trap. There is an open door. Sight dimmed but insight deepened, he becomes inwardly beautiful so that, whereas once he was outwardly active, he becomes now radiant within, and men and women draw closer to him in the walk of life that they may be reassured about the reality of the spiritual life. He, too, has heard a voice: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

You see, there are many things in our lives that do depend upon commodious and comfortable circumstance. But there is one thing that does not primarily depend upon fortunate environment, and that is development of character. If you once get a fair start with that you can make it grow in all environments. If the south winds blow you can let them warm your roots. If the northeast gales land on you you can let them toughen your fiber. Hardship can pass over you and leave you a better man. Bereavement can come upon you and leave you a gentler and more sympathetic spirit. Enemies can rise against you until all your

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friends are sorry for you, when all the time you are growing a more gracious soul, freer from the folly of bitterness and fuller of the wisdom of magnanimity. The door of spiritual growth stands always open.

Whether we take advantage of it or not depends altogether on what our major objective is: whether we are making a living or making a life. If we are primarily making a living, then God pity us! for all those doors, soon or late, can shut. But if we are making a life, if we are growing a soul, if we are seeing that the most sacred entrustment God ever gave us was our personalities to be made as fine, deep, dependable, and courageous as they can be made, then we have an open door no man can shut,—treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.

There is another open door, the door of high thought. No matter what man and circumstance do to you outwardly, they cannot prevent you from inwardly living in the companionship of high thoughts. That door is open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. You have only to read the Book of Revelation to see that. The Roman Empire could put narrow limitations around John's body, but it could not put narrow limitations around John's mind. Marooned on Patmos, he saw a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. He lived in a high world of great thought.

Well, that is the world we all live in—the world of the thoughts we think. Walk up and down Fifth Avenue, look at the faces, and see. You say they live in New York. How little difference that makes! Look at the faces and see the worlds they live in, as diverse

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as the thoughts they think. For there are disillusioned faces and flippant faces and anxious faces and cynical faces and vicious faces and strong, calm faces over which the dove of peace has brooded. And as one sees the faces he longs for a voice that could make them all hear: O, you people, what are you doing to your lives by your thoughts?

A young man came into the minister's confessional to all outward appearance in comfortable circumstance. Really he was living in hell. He built that hell. For long years with his thoughts he had been at work upon it and now he had moved in, and with everything to live for he did not want to live at all. As I listened to him I thought of another man who was in prison, but what a world he lived in! "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Ah! Keep that door open in your lives. Make frequent journeyings through it into the world of great thoughts. Let the books of the master spirits nourish your meditations. Learn what Sir Edward Dyer meant when he said, "My mind to me a kingdom is." Go deeper; learn what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of God is within you." For all around your lives today are open doors that will not always be open. You have your happy entrances and exits through them now, yet they will close. As you grow older you will inevitably grow accustomed to the sound of those doors closing shut. Happy then the man who knows how to step through a secret and familiar door

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within, and, lo! he stands in a great world of high thought.

There is another open door, the door of goodwill. Whatever man or circumstance may do to you, nothing can prevent you from living in undisturbed goodwill. You can shut that door, but nobody else can if you really want it open.

Do you recall that verse in the Sermon on the Mount which in our ordinary versions is translated, "if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light"? What does that mean? Who on earth can tell what it means with such a translation? Through that perversely literal rendering that verse has been largely lost to English-speaking Christianity, yet it is one of the truest things the Master ever said. Dr. Moffatt has given us the plain English for it: "if thine eye be generous, thy whole body shall be full of light." That is to say, if you will look upon this world with generous eyes, your inward life will be illumined.

So the Master lived. An unnoticed woman, with shamefaced modesty, puts her slender mite into the treasury, and appreciatively he looks upon her with generous eyes. Peter, fighting an unruly temperament, makes blundering endeavors at discipleship, and encouragingly he looks on him with generous eyes. Little children are held back from him by officious followers, and affectionately he looks on them with generous eyes. A prodigal returns stained by the sin and bowed by the shame of the far country, and forgivingly he looks on him with generous eyes. And at last his enemies crown him with thorns and hang him on the cross, and, praying for their pardon, magnanimously he looks on them with generous eyes. All

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through his ministry they were trying to shut doors around his life, but there were some doors they never could get their hands upon. Nothing can keep any man from looking on this world with generous eyes if he wants to do it. And if he does do it, nothing can prevent the consequence; his whole body will be full of light.

Is there anything we need much more to learn in these embittered days? This is a very bitter world but, thank God! I do not have to live in a bitter world. This is a world full of hate and vindictiveness and vituperation and envy and jealousy, but, thank God! I do not have to live in that world. There is an inner door—no man can shut it—through which I step into the world of magnanimity and friendship and goodwill, from which I look out upon mankind with generous eyes. That is the Christian's inward triumph, his victory over the world. No man but himself can keep him from that inward kingdom of good will that is

Hushed by every thought that springs
From out the bitterness of things.

There is even another open door, the door of large interests. For whatever man or circumstance may do to you, they cannot prevent you from living in a world of large interests and great causes. To be sure, man and circumstance can keep you from active service for some of the causes that you are interested in. They did that with John. They cooped him up on Patmos. Was not the poignant sting of his captivity this, that he beat his arduous wings against the bars of his limitations, longing to be back again in his active service for the Christ? Yet, even so, marooned on

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Patmos, they could not make him live in a small world. Read the book and see. All the most important movements of his time swept through his mind. Thank God for that.

You do not know and I do not know what crippling of health, what cramping of circumstance may come to us this year, but so long as we live at all and have any minds; we can live in a great world of large interests. If you doubt it, look at Miss Helen Keller. If ever there was a life around which all the doors seemed shut, it was the life of that extraordinary woman. But see her now as one by one those inner doors have opened so that, marooned upon a narrow Patmos though she is, she lives in a great world. Those of you who know her know that all the major interests and greater causes of this exciting generation throng through her mind. She lives in a far larger world than most of the men and women who walk up and down Broadway. For a man's life is as large as his interests and no larger.

What exciting things there are to be interested in now. Education—we call this a civilized earth, but out of every three people on the planet two people cannot read or write. Think of the work that is yet to be done for the cause of making Christendom Christian. We must do it. Christendom is the greatest handicap Christ faces. What scathing condemnation in that remark an Indian made to Dr. Robert E. Speer: "Jesus Christ is hopelessly handicapped by his association with the West"! Or consider the crusade against war. The reactionaries of America have thought that they ultimately would step on and quite crush America's better purposes to have a worthy share in build-

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ing international substitutes for war. Well, we shall see. This crusade against war is barely under way. Once more, in our generation,

“He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.”

Thank God, man or circumstance to the contrary notwithstanding, no one of us needs live in a small world!

Last of all, there is the open door to faith in God and fellowship with him. No matter what man or circumstance may do to you, that door stands open. You can shut it, but nobody else can if you really want it open. That is the heart of religion—that inner door through which one steps to stand, it may be quietly, in the presence of the Unseen Friend. A woman once said to me that prayer had utterly left her life, but, suspecting that I knew her better than she knew herself, I said, “Do you mean to tell me that you are not conscious of a Presence in fellowship with whom you find your peace and power?” “Why,” she said, “I couldn’t live without that.” But that is prayer. Behind all more formal and stated methods of devotion that is prayer at its very center. As Jeremy Taylor, the old preacher, said, prayer involves frequent colloquies and short discourses between God and one’s own soul.

Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in Thy presence will avail to make!
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take;
What parched grounds refresh, as with a shower!
We kneel, and all around us seems to lower;
We rise, and all the distant and the near
Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear!
We kneel, how weak; we rise, how full of power!

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Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong,
Or others, that we are not always strong;
That we are ever overborne with care;
That we should ever weak or heartless be,
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy and strength and courage are with Thee?

Is that door open in your life? Is it wide open? No unforgiven sin that bars your way? No secret evil half hated and yet clung to, that trips you up when you would pass that threshold? No vindictiveness, no quarrelsome relationship with a brother man that prevents you from looking into the eyes of God? Is that door wide open? Then you know what the Psalmist meant:

“Jehovah is on my side; I will not fear;
What can man do unto me?”

Here, then, are five open doors no man can shut: spiritual growth, high thoughts, goodwill, large interests, fellowship with God. Is it not clear what the saints at their best have meant when they have defied the world? O world, take from me this next year what you will; these things are mine and no man can touch them. And when at last death seems to close the final door, even more manifest is the Christian's triumph. Charles Kingsley often expressed his longing for that moment, saying, “God forgive me if I am wrong, but I look forward to it with an intense and reverent curiosity.” Just so! For even then he heard the word that John heard long ago on Patmos: “Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.”