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A Doorkeeper in the House of My God

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Mr. Chairman, Governors, Colleagues, Graduates, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord: "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked." You probably recognize those words from Psalm 84. "One day in the Lord's courts is better than a thousand elsewhere." I'd rather be a doorkeeper. What is a doorkeeper, and does it even matter? Some would say, "No." Not much has been written on the topic. According to John Wesley Wright, the gatekeepers of the tabernacle "have not proven an area deemed worthy of scholarly energies."¹ And if it barely hits the radar for Old Testament scholars, should it matter to any of us? I hope to persuade you this evening that it does.

The gatekeepers were Levites stationed at the gates of God's house. It was their task to open the temple gates in the morning and to close them again at night. They stood ready to receive the tithes and gifts that the Israelites brought. They stood watch over the storerooms and treasuries to make sure that nothing was stolen. They stood on guard to make sure that no unclean person would enter God's house. They stood – for hours on end, day and night. Not a glamorous job, but as the poet John Milton reminds us, "They also serve who only stand and wait."² And the psalmist tells us that there's no place he'd rather be.

If the goal of Old Testament studies, of theology, and of our lives as Christians, is to know God better, to be close to him, what better place to go than to the threshold of the temple where the doorkeeper stood on guard, at the very entrance into God's presence? So this evening let's consider the office of God's doorkeepers. We'll trace their history through the Old Testament, and we'll outline their significance for us as Christians in the New Testament age.

Origins

Gatekeepers were not unique to Israel. Other nations too had temples for their gods, complete with temple personnel. It stands to reason that they also had temple guards to restrict access and to protect treasures. There is no evidence in Scripture, however, that Israel's gatekeeping institution derived from surrounding cultures. Rather it is rooted in the redemptive history of God's people.

Standing guard at the entrance to God's house, the doorkeeper was a reminder that communion with God is a privilege not to be taken lightly in a sinful world. The Garden of Eden did not need gatekeepers, until Adam and Eve became unrighteous and unholy; then God "drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen 3:24).³ Yet in his grace God continued to call people into fellowship with him. Any such fellowship, however, had to respect his holiness. Moses could come only so close to the burning bush, because he was standing on holy ground (Exod 3:5). Though God spoke face to face with Moses as a man speaks with his friend (Exod 33:11; Num 12:7; Deut 34:10), even Moses could not see God's face and live (Exod 33:20). At Sinai God told Moses to put limits around the mountain. Whoever would even touch it would be put to death (Exod 19:12).

For God to dwell with his people in a tabernacle was a miracle of grace, only possible with a myriad of regulations that included a covenant framework, ongoing sacrifices to atone for sins, detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, an orderly arrangement of the tribes around it, and a detailed division of duties within it, all spelled out by God himself. After the glory of the Lord had entered the tabernacle at the end of Exodus, we read in Numbers 3 that the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to help the priests. One of their duties was to keep watch over the

temple furnishings. The books of Moses do not mention gatekeepers per se. In 1 Chronicles 9, however, we read that Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was in charge of the gatekeepers, so there must have been gatekeepers at that time already. Verse 19 says that they guarded the entrance to the dwelling of the Lord. In the Hebrew it says that they were “over the camp of the Lord, guarding the entrance.”

Gatekeepers protected the holiness of the tabernacle

In that context we can understand the actions of Phinehas in Numbers 25. Do you remember what he did when the Israelites sinned at Beth Peor and an Israelite man took a Midianite woman into the camp? The people stood weeping at the entrance, but Phinehas took a spear, went into the tent, and thrust it into the two of them, and so he turned away God’s wrath. Some explainers suggest that the tent where Phinehas stabbed them to death was actually the tabernacle, that this was an act of cultic prostitution committed in the house of the Lord.⁴ But the word that’s used for tent there is unique, not otherwise used of the Tent of Meeting. It is enough to know that Phinehas, as priest in charge of the gatekeepers, protected the holiness of the camp of the Lord. As Numbers 25:13 puts it, “He was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.” So his work as chief gatekeeper had atoning value.

Samuel and David

After God’s people conquered the Promised Land, the Levites settled in their towns. Then came a period of apostasy. We know very little about the gatekeepers during that time, but again 1 Chronicles 9 gives a clue. It says in verse 22 that Samuel the seer assigned gatekeepers to their position of trust. Samuel himself had done the work of a gatekeeper as a little boy. In 1 Samuel 3 we read that he opened the doors of the house of the Lord in the morning (v.15; cf. 1 Chron 9:27). Samuel grew up in the days of Eli. He would have known how the temple doors became a place of sin: Hophni and Phinehas slept with the women who were serving there (1 Sam 2:22). Samuel would have seen how those wicked priests were responsible for losing the ark. It’s understandable then that Samuel later appointed gatekeepers to protect the holiness of the tabernacle.

The ark never came back to the tabernacle again. David brought it from the house of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem. He put it in a new tent which he had pitched for it. In 1 Chronicles 15 we read that he appointed two gatekeepers for the ark, Berekiyah and Elkanah (v. 23). But that was a temporary measure. David wanted to build a house for God’s name. He spent much of his reign not only gathering building materials but also organizing the Levites so that they would be ready to serve once the temple was built. Four thousand Levites were to become gatekeepers, and another four thousand were to praise the Lord with musical instruments (1 Chron 23:5). This was temple service on a grand scale!

Sons of Korah

There was especially one family that David appointed to become gatekeepers as well as musicians, namely the sons of Korah. That brings us full circle to Psalm 84. The title of this Psalm tells us that it was a Psalm of the sons of Korah. It was they who sang, “I’d rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God.” Now the Hebrew there does not have a noun, “doorkeeper,” but a verb. It says, “I’d rather be stationed at the threshold in the house of my God.” Some explainers understand it to refer not to a gatekeeper but to a beggar asking for alms.⁵ But that’s less likely. Psalm 84 is sung by sons of Korah stationed at the doors of the temple, and there’s no place they’d rather be.

There’s a delicious irony in this Psalm. Who are the sons of Korah? They’re a true-blue Aussie Christian music band, you say. True enough, but who are they in the Bible? They’re descendants of *that* Korah, the one who rebelled against Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16. Korah argued that the priests should not be the only ones allowed to offer incense. The whole congregation is holy, he said, so anyone should be able to offer incense before the Lord, anyone should be able to be a priest. You know what happened. The earth opened and swallowed up Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 26:10), and fire from the Lord destroyed the 250 men who followed them. But Korah’s children survived (Num 26:11), and here is the irony: Korah wanted to open up the tabernacle service so that anyone could enter and offer incense, but God appoints Korah’s sons to be gatekeepers, to guard the entrance to make sure that not just anyone could enter. They have to make it their life’s work to prevent the sin of their father from happening again. Korah says, anyone can enter, but the sons of Korah learn to sing, “I’d rather be a doorkeeper than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”

I'm not sure why David chose this family to become gatekeepers, but here is an interesting detail: Samuel was also a descendant of Korah – we know that from his genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6 – so it may well have been Samuel who singled out this family for the task (1 Chron 9:22). Another descendant of Korah was Obed-Edom, the man who had the ark in his house before David took it to Jerusalem. The Lord had blessed the house of Obed-Edom richly for the three months that the ark was there. In contrast to Uzzah, who had touched the ark, Obed-Edom had shown himself to be a trustworthy man. Perhaps that was another reason for choosing this family of Levites for the task.

The king's gate

When Solomon finished building the temple, he assigned the gatekeepers to their posts (2 Chron 8:14). They were stationed on all four sides, east, west, north, and south. Lots were cast to decide who went where, so this too was the Lord's decision (1 Chron 26:13; Prov 16:33). The most important gate was the east gate; that was the king's gate. The gatekeepers worked in shifts of seven days each (1 Chron 9:25); both they and the musicians worked day and night. As we sing with Psalm 134, "Come, bless the Lord with one accord, you faithful servants of the Lord, who praise him in his house by night and serve him there with all your might."⁶

"I'd rather be a doorkeeper than dwell in the tents of the wicked."

Did they do their work faithfully? Sometimes they did, especially when the kings were also faithful to the Lord. During the reign of Joash, the high priest Jehoiada "stationed doorkeepers at the gates of the LORD's temple so that no one who was in any way unclean might enter" (2 Chron 23:19). During the reign of Hezekiah, too, the gatekeepers were busy. The people faithfully brought their tithes and firstfruits to the storerooms of the temple, and 2 Chronicles 31 tells us that the keeper of the East Gate, together with six helpers, went out to the towns of the priests to distribute the gifts to them (2 Chron 31:11-15). In the time of Josiah, the gatekeepers collected money from the people to repair the temple (2 Chron 34:9). Those were good times.

Often, however, the kings were unfaithful, and then things went wrong at the king's gate. Uzziah became proud and entered the temple to offer incense there.

Eighty-one priests confronted him, but he raged against them and stopped only after the Lord struck him with leprosy (2 Chron 26:16-20). Ahaz packed away the temple furnishings and replaced the altar of the Lord with a Syrian altar. He took away the royal entrance to the temple out of deference to the king of Assyria, and finally he shut the doors of the temple all together (2 Kings 16; 2 Chron 28). Manasseh filled the temple with foreign idols. Mere gatekeepers were powerless against these royal shenanigans.

Those who are ready for him will enjoy table fellowship with him and will enter a city with gates that are always open

In Ezekiel 8 we read that the prophet was transported in a vision to the temple in Jerusalem, and what did he see? At the entrance to the north gate there stood an idol that provokes to jealousy; unclean animals and idols were pictured on the walls, and seventy elders were burning incense to them. At the same gate women were worshipping the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz. At the entrance to the inner court Ezekiel saw about twenty-five men who had turned their backs toward the temple and were bowing toward the sun in the east. One scholar has suggested that these twenty-five men were gatekeepers, but it doesn't say that.⁷ No wonder, though, that two chapters later Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord leaving the temple, through the east gate, the king's gate. When the city was finally destroyed we read in Jeremiah 52:24 that the Babylonian commander captured the high priest, the second priest, and also the three doorkeepers.

The exile and beyond

Fourteen years later, Ezekiel saw visions of a new temple (Ezek 40:1). He had to describe it in full detail to the exiles so that they might be ashamed of what they had done (Ezek 43:11). Especially the Levites were put in their place: they were still allowed to serve at the gates, but because they had burned incense in the midst of idols, they would not be allowed to do priest's work ever again (Ezek 44:10-13). Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord come back through the east gate (Ezek 43:5), but then the gate was shut. The Lord said to him, "This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the

God of Israel, has entered through it. The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the LORD" (Ezek 44:2-3).

The doorkeeper families did not die out in exile. 1 Chronicles 9 tells us that among the first to return were 212 gatekeepers (v. 22). Ezra gives a smaller number, 139 (2:42), Nehemiah says 138 (7:45), and according to Josephus only 110 doorkeepers returned with Zerubbabel.⁸ Whatever the exact number, it was a far cry from the 4000 that David had appointed. More gatekeepers came back with the second return under Ezra (Ezra 7:7), how many exactly, we do not know. We do know that they were restored to service. In Nehemiah 10 we read that the people promised to bring their firstfruits and their tithes into the temple storerooms where the gatekeepers and the singers were staying (v. 39). But there was trouble too. The book of Ezra ends with a list of men found guilty of marrying foreign women. Three of them were gatekeepers (Ezra 10:24). Before Nehemiah went back to the king of Persia, all the Israelites gave daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers (Neh 12:47), but while he was gone, the priest Eliashib emptied out one of the storerooms of the temple and gave it to Nehemiah's nemesis Tobiah. The people stopped giving, and the Levites went home to their fields (Neh 13:4-10). When he returned, Nehemiah was very upset; he threw Tobiah's goods out of the temple and called the Levites back to their posts.

Fulfilled in Christ

So ends the Old Testament history of the gatekeepers. Psalm 24 describes their task well: "Who shall ascend the hill of God, stand in his holy place, and laud the Lord who lives and reigns forever? He who withstands the wicked's lure, whose hands are clean, whose heart is pure, who keeps his oaths and does not waver."⁹ It was the task of the gatekeeper to ensure that only such people entered the temple, and all too often they failed. Yet their task was not without hope. They were waiting for the true king of Israel to come to the temple. Psalm 24 speaks of that too: "Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." This psalm was fulfilled in the New Testament when the Lord Jesus made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, sitting on a donkey while the crowds spread clothes and palm branches on the road (Matt 21). When he had entered the city, Jesus went to the temple, and he drove out the merchants and the moneychangers. Filled with zeal for the Lord, he fulfilled the office of the gatekeeper by cleansing the temple.

It was not for lack of gatekeepers that Christ did so. Several times in the gospels we read of a temple guard, so they were there! But how were they used? In John 7, the Pharisees sent them to arrest Jesus while he preached in the temple courts, but they came back empty-handed, saying, "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46). In Luke 22 Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and to the officers of the temple guard to discuss how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. The officers of the temple guard were among the crowd that arrested our Saviour in Gethsemane (Luke 22:4, 5, 52). Temple guards sat with Peter at the fire while Jesus was on trial (John 18:18), accused of endangering the temple – he, the one man who withstood the wicked's lure, whose hands were clean, whose heart was pure.

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*May Canada be a place where  
God is given his due as the  
covenant LORD of Israel*  
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The King of Glory who had come to his temple had to suffer outside the gate, excluded from the camp of the Lord (Heb 13:12, 13). But in doing so he showed himself to be a better priest than Phinehas. Phinehas, the first chief of the gatekeepers, made atonement by killing the Israelite man and his Midianite partner, but that was not enough. The Lord Jesus saved his people by offering his own life and bearing the wrath of God in their place. And it is here that we begin to see the significance of the gatekeeper for our lives as Christians today. Let me mention five areas of significance.

Significance

1. When we think of gatekeepers we tend to think of guards with locks and keys, shutting doors to keep people out. It's true that they had to stand guard around the house of God, especially at night. But they had charge of the key to open it in the morning (1 Chron 9:27). The Lord appointed gatekeepers because he wants a house with open gates so that his people can eagerly enter his presence with praise and thanksgiving. Think of Psalm 118: "Open for me the gates of righteousness: I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter" (v. 19-20). For us these words take on a new

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of Grace Canadian Reformed Church,
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Rev. M. Jagt

of Taber, Alberta

significance. Christ has fulfilled the tabernacle ministry and opened the way to God by his blood poured out on the cross. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Eph 3:12). We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19). Instead of gatekeepers who keep the unclean and the foreigners out, there are heralds of the gospel who go into the world with the message that through Christ both Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father by one Spirit (Rom 5:2; Eph 2:18). The message is urgent because Christ wants the communion that we have with God to become more perfect than it is now. In Mark 13 he warns his disciples to stay awake like a doorkeeper waiting for his master to come home, not knowing when he will arrive (Mark 13:32-37). Those who are ready for him will enjoy table fellowship with him. They'll enter a city with gates that are always open (Rev 21:25). No gatekeeper will ever be able to bar them from communion with the Lord. But Christ also warned about the door that closes to those who were not ready for his coming. He said, "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from'" (Luke 13:25). Once Christ has shut the door, no gatekeeper will ever be able to pry it open again.

2. The task of the gatekeeper is instructive for the office of elder, on several counts. The gatekeepers had to learn from the sin of their father Korah not to intrude into the office of another but to be content with the position that God had given them, however lowly it might be. Still today, intrusion upon the office of another is a serious sin, worthy of suspension or deposition from office, and it is the elder's task "to prevent anyone from serving in the church without having been lawfully called."

On the other hand, the elders should not attempt to do everything on their own. If in the old covenant

the priests had Levites to perform all kinds of menial tasks, including standing at the gates, how much more in the new covenant, when we are all priests to God, should not the elders make good use of the gifts and talents of everyone in the congregation!

3. There is also a lesson for deacons. The gatekeepers held a trusted office. They had to know what was in the tabernacle and to make sure that none of it went missing. In the New Testament deacons, too, hold a position of trust. Much money passes through their hands, and it does not belong to them. Therefore we read in 1 Timothy 3 that deacons must not be greedy for money, and they must be tested first (vv. 8, 10). But we should not jump too quickly from the office of gatekeeper to the office of deacon; otherwise we miss the heart of the matter. The office of gatekeeper was not simply a matter of guarding the wealth of God's house. The gatekeeper had to open the doors of the temple so that the people could come in with their gifts. The gatekeeper saw those who gave generously, and those who gave sparingly. Now, the gatekeeper could see the size of the gift, but he could not see the heart of the giver, and here we learn a great lesson from our Saviour. In Luke 21 he stood by the temple treasury and watched as the people put in their gifts. He saw how the rich put in large amounts, but he also saw a poor widow who put in two very small copper coins. He did not despise the smallness of her gift, for behind the gift he saw the heart of one who gave all that she had. And there is the lesson for the deacon today: a deacon is not just concerned with the size of the gift, but with the heart of the giver.
4. In the New Testament age, believers are called temples of the Holy Spirit, and as such they need to be gatekeepers of their hearts and lives, fighting against the sins that threaten them, keeping unholy influences away, and giving the Spirit room to do his work, and from that perspective the whole congregation can sing Psalm 84: I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. In the Old Testament the gatekeepers and the singers worked together, day and night. Gatekeeping and singing still go together for Christians who live by the Spirit (Eph 5:18, 19; Col 3:16).
5. Finally, if I may, there's something quintessentially Canadian about the gatekeeper. And no, I'm not just referring to our self-deprecating humour, our tendency to think small of ourselves. I'm thinking of the last words we'll sing before leaving this

auditorium tonight: "O Canada, we stand on guard for thee." Now, I'm quite certain that the authors of our national anthem did not have 1 Chronicles 9 on the brain when they penned those words. Quite frankly, I'm not sure what they meant by them. What concerns me more tonight is what we mean by them when we sing them as Christian citizens. Perhaps, at the very least, we mean that Canada be a place where God is not merely an impersonal deity invoked for the sake of tradition, but a place where God is given his due as the covenant LORD of Israel who wants communion with Canadians too, the Father of Jesus Christ who reigns from sea to sea. If that's what we mean, then we have work to do.

Closing

Let me close with a few words of thanks. First of all I'd like to thank my wife Darlene for her support and for all the sacrifices that she made as we left Albany, settled back in Canada, and adjusted to a completely different life. Together we thank the Lord for his care for us as family over the past couple of years. I'd also like to thank the Board of Governors for the trust that they've placed in me by appointing me as professor of Old Testament. I pray that God will grant all that is necessary for me to bring out the wonderful gospel of the Old Testament for the students, for the wellbeing of the churches and for his glory. I thank my colleagues, as well as the staff of the Seminary, for their kindness

and support, and also my predecessor Dr. Van Dam for his help and encouragement. And finally, to the students: thank you for your patience with me, for your encouraging feedback, your stimulating questions. I look forward to exploring the rich treasures of the Old Testament with you.

¹ J.W. Wright, "Guarding the Gates: 1 Chronicles 26.1-19 and the Roles of Gatekeepers in Chronicles," *JSOT* 48 (1990): 69.

² John Milton, "On His Blindness."

³ Some have suggested that man had to *guard* the Garden of Eden (e.g. to keep Satan out), because the verb translated "to guard" in Genesis 3:24 is also used in Genesis 2:15. In the context of Genesis 2:15, however, it more likely means "to tend."

⁴ E.g. John Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 184-185.

⁵ See, e.g., L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition* (tr. M.E.J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:765. See also Acts 3:2.

⁶ *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier, 2010).

⁷ Dan Olson, "What Got the Gatekeepers into Trouble?" *JSOT* 30.2 (2005): 223-242, esp. 237. This comment forms part of an intriguing but poorly substantiated argument that the gatekeepers fell into disgrace for engaging in "solar Yahwism."

⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 11.70.

⁹ *Book of Praise*.

¹⁰ Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons, *Book of Praise*, 612; Church Order, Article 72.



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