

Are You Saved?

In the name of him who is the *Narrow Door*, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel reading we find the Lord Jesus leading his band of followers through a number of unnamed cities and villages as he makes his way steadily toward his appointment with a cross in Jerusalem. His dreadful goal weighs heavily on his mind, no doubt; and yet, as he travels he's taking the time to stop in each place and teach his message of God's forgiving grace to the people he encounters on the way. It's in one of these unspecified places that someone – we don't know who – asks Jesus this question: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

I wonder what prompted the question. Until recently, I supposed that it was because the inquirer noticed how so many people who had once begun to follow Jesus were turning back in light of his more controversial teachings – so it seemed to him that only a few people were sticking with Jesus to the end. And that *may be* what lay behind the question; but it seems from Luke's account that Jesus was still fairly popular at this point in his ministry, so now I'm not so sure. Another possibility is that the questioner, like so many of his contemporaries, thought of salvation as something that pertained only to people of the Jewish nation to the exclusion of everyone else. So perhaps the question was about the eternal fate of the vast majority of the world's population who are not Jews. If salvation is for Jews only, what happens to the rest of them, and how fair is that? Or maybe the guy who asked the question had something else in mind altogether. We know that a part of Jesus' message was that the way to destruction is wide and easy and many are going into it; but that the way to life is narrow and difficult, and few will find it. So it may be that the guy has heard Jesus say this; but then he looks around and sees large crowds still following Jesus, and it seems to him that just about *everybody* is being saved. In light of this, the question may be "Well, what about this, Jesus? You keep saying that only a few are being saved, but it looks to me like lots of folks are. Can you explain this to me?"

All of these are possible reasons why someone might ask Jesus if it's only a relative few who will be saved, so I can't say for sure which is correct. But I can say this: it's easy to find people today who hold similar ideas to all three of these underlying points of view. That is, there are some who know that at best Christians comprise only about two fifths of the world's population. And then they look around at the majority of their fellow professed Christians and see what they're doing in their lives and think, "I don't care what they call themselves; they're not hanging in there with Christ. It doesn't look to me like most of them are going to make it." And there are others who think of salvation as belonging only to one exclusive group of people – a group (you can bet) that they happen to be a part of, whether it be some particular church, denomination, ethnic group, whatever. And there are still others who hold a view that says that salvation is more or less universal – that in the end pretty much *everyone* is going to be saved regardless of their faith, their steadfastness, or their way of life. So even today, a lot of people might want to know Jesus' answer to this question for a lot of different reasons.

What I'd like to point out, though, is that as different as these points of view are, they do share a common theme. They all begin with a basic assumption: that whether the number of those who are ultimately saved is few or many, the questioner counts himself among those who are saved. They all say, "I know that *I'm* saved; what I want to know is about the rest of them."

And that's why it's vital to see what Jesus does with this question. He turns it around completely. He essentially tells the guy, "You're not asking the right question." And it's interesting that while only one guy asks, the answer that Jesus gives is in the plural. It's like everyone there is leaning forward to hear the answer because they all want to know, and Jesus answers all of them. And what he says is devastating.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door because many, I tell you, are seeking to enter and will not be able to." And please forgive me, but to get the right emphasis I have to unpack the grammar here a bit. First, when Jesus says "strive", it's a command cast in a tense that implies ongoing action. He's saying *you all must keep on striving* to enter through the narrow door. It's not a one-time event, but a continuing struggle. And the even word *strive* is a weak translation of the Greek word Jesus uses – which is the word from which we get our word *agony*. So what he's saying is "You all must keep on *agonizing* to enter through the narrow door." It emphasizes that the ongoing struggle is difficult and painful. And to that he adds that many people hoping to enter will fail. They don't have the strength or ability to achieve it.

But then follow where Jesus goes with this. He says, "When once the Master of the house gets up and closes the door, you will be standing outside knocking. And he will say to you, 'I don't know where you come from.' And you will start sputtering, 'But we ate and drank in your presence. You taught in our streets.' And again, he will say, 'I tell you, I don't know where you come from. Depart from me all you workers of evil.'" And finally, "You will see the patriarchs and prophets seated at the banquet table in the kingdom of God but you yourselves will be cast out where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." There will be all kinds of people in the kingdom of God coming from the four corners of earth; but not you.

Mind you, when Jesus says these things, he's not speaking to his enemies or those who couldn't care less about who he is; no, he's addressing people who *are* following him. And what he's doing is challenging the basic assumption. Instead of asking about how many are being saved, what you really ought to be asking is: "*Am I being saved?*" The mistake is to smugly presume that your own salvation is already accomplished while you are still a work in progress. It's like running a race imagining that you've already crossed the finish line. You haven't; you're not there yet. And let me ask you, what kind of performance would a runner who imagines that he's already won put in? Not a very good one, I would guess. A certain fable about a tortoise and a hare comes to mind. The hare was so sure of his victory that he decided that he had time for a nap along the way. The result was that he lost. Big time.

And this is one of the potential pitfalls of assuming that your salvation is past tense – that it's already a done deal. The danger is that you might stop somewhere along the way and give up the race. Certainly this is what happens with those who come at the question from the second point of view I mentioned earlier – that my salvation is guaranteed because I fall into a particular group. "I'm a member of so and so church, or I was baptized, or I was confirmed, or I used to go to Sunday school. *I've checked the right blocks*" (whatever the person imagines them to be) "*so now I'm sure I'm in.*" This is what those who are knocking on the door in Jesus' example are saying. "Let us in, Jesus. We know you. Don't you remember us? We ate and drank in your presence. For goodness sake, we used to take Holy Communion. And you taught in our church. We remember hearing your Word." And the problem here is not that they are church members or that they are baptized and confirmed and took communion; no, the problem is that they are trusting in some past event or some past association with Jesus to

get them into the kingdom rather than being terrified of God's wrath against their sin and trusting in the gracious forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of Jesus *in the present*. Salvation is God's *ongoing action* in the life of a believer. While we are in this life, we are constantly in need of his Law and the work of his Spirit to bring us to repentance, and constantly in need of his grace and power to receive and trust in the forgiveness of Jesus our Savior. If ever you imagine that you've got enough or that you're done already, you're lost. You're no longer trusting in Jesus; but in what you once did with Jesus. It's the difference between wearing a life preserver while the ship is sinking and remembering that you tried one on during the practice drills at the start of the cruise. The latter won't keep you from drowning no matter how much you go on about how nicely it fit you at the time. In the same way, if you think you can enter the kingdom of God by virtue of some past association with Jesus, the door will be slammed in your face and he will tell you to go away. "I don't know you or from where you come."

But we've been talking about those who stop along the way because they imagine that they've already done what was necessary to ensure that they're safely within the kingdom. Theirs is a false sense of security based on the past. We need to be warned also that there are a whole lot of others who haven't stopped trying to enter the kingdom; but unfortunately their efforts are misdirected. This way of thinking is prevalent in much of American Christianity. And you know you're encountering it when someone tells you that first it's necessary to accept Jesus as your Savior; but then even more important to go on to make him your Lord.

What people who say this mean is that sure, you need to repent of your sins and receive the forgiveness Christ won for you on the cross; but that's just the first step. Now, having been forgiven, you have to submit yourself to the *Lordship* of Jesus – which means keeping the whole Law of God. In this view, faithfulness is measured not by how much you trust in Christ and what he did for you, but rather in how well you manage to obey him. So there's all kinds of ongoing effort involved as you strive mightily to obey the commands of God in order to convince yourself and others that you truly are a follower of Christ; the trouble is that none of it is any good. It's seeing the Gospel of grace merely as the stepping stone to what *really* makes you a disciple of Jesus – *what really saves you*: your obedience. To borrow the imagery from our last hymn, it's like singing "On Christ the solid Rock I stood in order to take the next step" – a step that they imagine is to even higher ground; but the hymn has it right. If you're not standing on Christ and his accomplished work on the cross, you're in the quicksand. You're going to drown.

And again, this is what Jesus means when he says, "Many, I tell you, are seeking to enter [the kingdom of God]; but they don't have the strength to do it". It isn't that they aren't trying and working very hard; it's that all their futile effort is directed toward achieving what Christ freely gives to those who continue to repent of their sins and trust in him.

The saving Gospel of Jesus – the forgiveness he earned for us on the cross – is something we need to be wrapped in at all times, for therein lies our salvation. It isn't a life preserver we try on once at the start of the cruise and put away, nor is it something we wear only until we learn to swim on our own. It's something we have to learn to wear all the time – and that's the agonizing struggle Jesus is talking about. The truth is that we don't want to wear the life preserver. We imagine, in our foolishness, that we've worn it long enough or that we've come to the point that we can swim well enough without it. But we're not talking about a little plunge in a pond here; we're talking about being able to stay afloat in the lake of the fire

of God's wrath. You can't survive for a second in that – unless you are safely inside Christ who endured God's wrath for you.

So what Jesus is warning you about in this morning's lesson is misplaced confidence in something – anything – other than himself. And he doesn't tell you these things to cause you to despair of your salvation; but rather to keep things in proper tension so that you will continue to cling to him in confidence with the result that you will be saved.

Will those who are saved be few? That's the wrong question. You should be constantly asking, "Am I among the few who are being saved?" Then, looking only to Christ – his oath, his covenant, and the blood he shed for you – you can be sure the answer is yes. May he, by the power of his Spirit and his grace keep you in this saving faith now and always as you strive to enter the kingdom through him who is the Narrow Door. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!