

Who Will Get into Heaven?

Luke 13:22-30

Luke juxtaposes a significant collection of incidents and sayings in chapter 13. In 13:1-9, Jesus uses the recent slaughter of political protestors, and the death of others in the collapse of a building, to warn his Jewish contemporaries twice, “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did” (13:3,5, cf. 13:9). Luke follows up this harsh warning with a heart-warming story of an unlikely salvation: Jesus heals an insignificant woman of a long-standing disability (13:10-17), as a model for how the reign of God advances: from quiet beginnings to pervasive influence (13:18-21).

The juxtaposition of these two themes – widespread judgment and creeping salvation – raises an urgent and intriguing question. Which of the two themes predominates with God: judgment or salvation? Are only a few people going to escape judgment? Or will many be saved? An anonymous inquirer poses the question in 13:23, and Jesus answers in 13:24-30.

Day 1: Luke 13:22-23 Teaching on the way to the cross

This passage is introduced by a travel note which could easily be passed over, but is likely pregnant with meaning and emotion: Jesus journeys through one town and village after another, teaching as he goes, *on his way to Jerusalem*. He is headed toward the cataclysmic event of his ministry and life. It is a time when people must choose for him or against him: Will his teaching persuade many, will the people choose for him or against him? It is a time when he will die to provide salvation for the world: Will his death avail for many, or will it prove largely pointless? “Lord, are only a few going to be saved?”

Two thousand years later, of course, we know the answer to that question in Jesus’ case: his teaching has spread around the world, and his death has achieved the salvation of tens – perhaps hundreds – of millions. But to appreciate what Jesus was going through on that final journey, we need to enter the uncertainties and the tension of the biblical narrative. Surely the question occurred to Jesus, as he headed toward his fate: How much would it all accomplish? Are only a few going to be saved?

A similar question also may occur to those missionaries whom we have sent out to work among unreached peoples. They will likely labor for many

years and at considerable emotional and financial cost to themselves and their families, before seeing any concrete fruit from their labors. (The traditional guideline is 18 years' ministry among an unreached people before seeing the first convert.) Will it ever be worth it: are only a few going to be saved? There is no way for them to know at this point. Only time will tell. So today, let us pray, and in two ways: (a) thanking Jesus for taking this last journey to Jerusalem on our behalf, and (b) praying for our missionaries as they take their respective journeys overseas to pave the way for the salvation of others, whether few or many.

Day 2: Luke 13:23-30 Are only a few going to be saved?

Some first-century Jewish groups were quite exclusive, doubting the salvation of their rivals. The pre-1st-century Jewish writing 1 Enoch, for instance, disallows the salvation of the ruling class: "On the day of judgment, all the kings, the governors, the high officials, and the landlords shall see and recognize [the Son of Man]... They shall beg and plead for mercy at his feet... He will deliver them to the angels for punishment" (62:3,4,9,11). Various other groups – such as the Qumran community of Dead Sea Scrolls fame – excluded all rivals and opponents from the kingdom of God. So this bystander's question to Jesus makes perfect sense: How many will be saved? Just a few? Or many more?

Jesus' answer is two-fold. On the one hand, many of those who expect to enter will not: "Many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (13:24). At the same time, many unexpected people *will* enter: "People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (13:29). In short, many of those who had priority access to the kingdom will miss out, while some with no claim on it will gain access: "Those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last" (13:29).

We see this same phenomenon in our own day, as Europe, once a 'Christian continent', is now largely secular, and as the number of Christians in the Southern Hemisphere now outnumbers those in the North. The warning is also applicable to individuals, whether those actually raised in the church, or those raised in America with such easy access to the gospel. We must ensure that this aphorism not apply also to us!

Day 3: Luke 13:28-30 From and to the east and west and north and south

Jesus does not teach in a vacuum. He speaks against the backdrop of both

the Old Testament and Jewish teaching in his own day. So to understand the significance of Jesus' teaching as his contemporaries would have, we properly reach back to its Old Testament origins, and its subsequent Jewish interpretations.

Isaiah writes in the aftermath of the conquest of Israel by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. After brutal devastation and massive destruction, the prophet anticipates a glorious day of deliverance. He uses the metaphor of a banquet to capture the flavor of that deliverance:

“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for **all** peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. (25:6).

Five times in three verses he affirms that people from **all** nations will enter the kingdom of God.

Ironically, though, by Jesus' time, some Jewish interpreters turned Isaiah on his head, reading it to *exclude* the salvation of the nations:

“And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make a feast and a banquet; they [the nations] think that it shall be for their glory; but it shall be to them for disgrace and for mighty afflictions, from which they shall not deliver themselves (Targum Isaiah 25:6-8).

The promise of salvation for people of all nations and ethnicities transmogrifies into a message of judgment on the nations which oppressed Israel (25:6-7), and salvation for Israel alone (25:8).

So Jesus reverses the expectation of this Jewish interpreter, and revives the original message of Isaiah: salvation is thrown open to all peoples. And thus, toward this end, the gospel must go out to all peoples, east, west, north, and south.

Day 4: Luke 13:24 Salvation to all peoples, provided that ...

Salvation is open to all, but many who expect to receive it, will not. Given that risk, how should we respond? The NIV translates, “*Strive* to enter” (13:24), but the verb is stronger than that. Its literal setting is the stadium, in wrestling or other athletic contests: “struggle” captures its flavor well. Paul uses the term literally of athletes who “struggle” to win sporting contests (1 Cor 9:25), and metaphorically of his “struggle” for the evangelism of the Thessalonians, among others (1 Thes 2:2; Col 1:29; 2:1; 1 Tim 4:10). The word captures his and the Philippians' “struggles” under persecution (Phil 1:30), and even of “struggles” in prayer for those in dire

need (Rom 15:30). The word captures his entire life of ministry: "I have 'struggled' in the good fight" (2 Tim 4:7; cf 1 Tim 6:12).

Are you engaged in disciplined, determined effort in your Christian life and service? Or are you coasting, blithely hoping everything turns out all right?

Day 5: Luke 13:24-27 Don't wait too long

The opportunity for salvation cannot be taken for granted, Jesus warns. It is available now, but can be withdrawn at any time, and once withdrawn, may never be available again: "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading... But he will answer, 'I don't know you ... Away from me!'"

It is widely considered inappropriate for us to speak this way today, so I am not advocating such directness under most circumstances. Still, I occasionally have conversations with seekers who have no real objection to faith, but just have no interest in it *right now*. "Maybe sometime in the future." While I may not say it, Jesus does: "Okay, and maybe sometime in the future, the opportunity will still be open. But like a young woman who spurns a persistent suitor for a prolonged time, the opportunity may be gone when it is finally sought." What a needless disaster! If you are a 'seeker' (or, more properly, a persistent resister), take Jesus' words to heart. The door is open now. But there's no telling when it will close. And once closed, you may not be able to gain entrance. This disaster can be prevented. You can prevent it by responding today.

Day 6: Luke 13:28 Weeping and gnashing of teeth

The gospel has not just a bright side (salvation), but also a dark side (condemnation). Many today prefer to act like this risk does not exist. Liberal churches tend to renounce any prospect of final judgment. A great many evangelical, purportedly Bible-believing, churches prefer to ignore the issue, at least from the pulpit. A few, like the otherwise commendable C. S. Lewis and Pastor Tim Keller, prefer to portray hell as a self-selected destination: the only people who end up are those who prefer to be there. But Jesus is not as timid as we may be. Consequently, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" among those who are excluded from heaven (13:28). None of this is palatable, even if all of it is deserved. Yet we do neither ourselves nor others any favor when we dismiss this teaching, ignore it, or sanitize it. Reality does not change just because we prefer not to face it.