

## What's The "Skinny" On Salvation?

By Mark Jarvinen

*<sup>22</sup> Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. <sup>23</sup> Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"*

*He said to them, <sup>24</sup> "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*

*<sup>25</sup> 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.'*

*<sup>26</sup> "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'*

*<sup>27</sup> "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'*

*<sup>28</sup> "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. <sup>29</sup> People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup> Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." (Luke 13:22-30)*

My Google dictionary defines **"getting the skinny"** on something as "becoming informed on the **`real truth`** or **`straight facts`**, or to be told **`inside`** or **`confidential`** information." As an additional note, Google says that "etymologists tend to believe that **`getting the skinny`** is an allusion to **`bare skin`**," and the phrase **`getting the skinny`** means to get the **`bare skin`** or **`naked truth`** of a matter." As Jesus went through the towns and villages of Perea, on his way to the final stop of his earthly ministry in Jerusalem, someone along the way wanted to know if only a few would be saved (**v. 23**). According to my NIV study notes, **"Perhaps the questioner had observed that in spite of the very large crowds that came to hear**

**Jesus' preaching and be healed, there were only a few followers who were loyal."** Jesus didn't answer directly, but warned that there would be many who would try to enter the kingdom of heaven after it was too late. This reminds me of how the people in the days of Noah had likely watched and even laughed at him for many years before the flood waters began to rise and Noah, his family, and the animals were safely in the ark. We can only imagine Noah's neighbors pounding on the door to be let in once the floodwaters began to rise. **Genesis 7:16** is graphic as it states:

***"The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. THEN THE LORD SHUT THEM IN."***

The NLT records the final sentence of v. 16, saying – **"THEN THE LORD CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND THEM."** Not only were Noah's family shut in with the animals and saved from the flood ... but everyone else was shut out. God closed the door behind Noah and his family, saving only them, because as **Genesis 6:5** records:

**"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."**

So what did Jesus feel it was important for people to know regarding salvation?

## **I. WHO WILL BE SAVED?**

The man asking this question was likely someone from one of the towns nearby who had either heard Jesus' Kingdom message through the preaching of the 70, whom Jesus had sent out earlier, or he had become a recent follower of Jesus and had heard Him in

person rebuking Israel for their lack of faith. His question seemed more personal than theoretical and probably meant one of two things: **“Am I among those being saved, especially if that number is few?”** Or, **“Have I done enough to merit salvation?”**

**Who’s in and who’s out**, when it comes to heaven? These remain popular questions for people even today. According to a **2015** survey conducted by the **Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study**, **72%** of all Americans say they believe in heaven. Among religiously affiliated Americans, the number jumps to 82%, and even slightly under ½ of Hindus, Buddhists and Jews in America also believe in heaven. Interestingly, even 37% of **“nones,”** a growing group in America that includes atheists, agnostics, and those who say their religion is “nothing in particular”, still believe in heaven. It’s hard to interpret an exact meaning from statistics, but **it seems like many are hedging their bets when it comes to the life hereafter.**

The same Pew survey from 2015 found that **58%** of Americans believe in hell as a place of eternal punishment, but get this, in a study done by the **Barna Research Group** in 2003, only ½ of 1% of Americans thought they were **“hell-bound.”** In other words, almost everyone feels that they know a lot of people who deserve hell, but they’re pretty certain they’re not one of them. Is it fair to say that the vast majority of Americans believe that although they’re not perfect, they’re as good as most and certainly not as bad as some, so ultimately their chances of making heaven are pretty good? I have no scientific evidence for this, but based on my own conversations and observations, my impression is that a fairly strong majority of people

today who lose a loved one, have some notion of that loved one **“looking down on them from a better place,”** regardless of what that person’s own religious beliefs prior to death had included. For many this view seems to stem from an eclectic **“folk religion”** rather than biblical truth.

When Jesus was asked if only a few were going to be saved, Jesus answered not only the questioner, but all of those gathered. Removing all ambiguity on the subject, Jesus gave a vivid description of what will happen on Judgment Day. Listen again to **v. 25 –**

***<sup>25</sup> 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.’***

This is a vivid, not to mention blunt picture to be sure. Thankfully, the door is still open today, but there is a time coming when the owner of the house will get up and close the door, and all the pounding and pleading in the world won’t matter. In other words, someday, human history, which is under God’s control will culminate. There will be no more opportunities to be saved. A separation between the righteous and the condemned will take place. In **v. 24** Jesus says, **“... many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”** Notice that Jesus says **“MANY.”** This certainly debunks the notion that all or most people are on auto-pilot for heaven.

Who is Jesus talking about here as those who won’t make it into heaven? His answer gives us an inkling. In **v. 28** He says,

<sup>28</sup> ***“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.***

Jesus does seem to be referring here to those Jews who had always taken pride in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham – true blooded Jews. Here, Jesus is debunking the myth that heaven is for those with the right ethnic background or pedigree. The Apostle Paul, himself a Jew, follows the same line of thought when in **Romans 9:6-7** he writes:

***“... For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.”***

As we follow Paul’s argument to its end, he states in **Rom. 9:30-32** -

***“What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.”***

This fits with our text in which Jesus says in **v. 24** – ***“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.”*** This image of a narrow door, although it sounds exclusive and therefore, not very comforting, nevertheless makes the point that salvation is an individual matter and not dependent on belonging to the right group. **You get through a narrow door not one group at a time, but one person at a time.** In our case today, we’re not going to heaven because our name is on the church roster, or our family is from a long line of Lutherans. We aren’t going to heaven because we grew up in church, or were confirmed. God doesn’t care about our nationality or skin color. All that matters is that we entered personally, by faith in Jesus Christ.

Even as the text says many will not be able to enter and will be left on the outside looking in. The good news is that the Kingdom of God was not limited to Jews alone. Notice **vv. 29-30** –

***29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. 30 Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.***”

In **Revelation 5:9** a new song is sung to the Lamb:

***“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation....”***

Although many will not enter heaven, it is also clear from Scripture that people from the far corners of the world will take their place at the feast in the Kingdom of God, and some of the very people the Jews thought of as unworthy, would in fact, because of their faith in Christ, ultimately be there.

A second question addressed by Jesus is:

## **II. WHY AND HOW ARE PEOPLE SAVED?**

If your neighbor came up to you and said, **“I’m going on a trip to Mars,”** and you asked, **“How?”** – and he replied, **“I don’t know.”** What would you think? I dare say you wouldn’t think much of that plan. The “why” and the “how” of a plan matter.

We’ve already established that a lot of Jews thought they were going to heaven just because they were Jews by birth – the chosen few. But that’s not the only reason they thought they’d qualify. In the parable, after the homeowner says **“I don’t know you or where you**

***come from,***” the response of those shut out of the house was ***“We ate and drank with you and you taught in our streets.”***

Do you see the basic reason behind why they felt that they should be allowed to enter? If they had lived in our day they’d be saying, ***“Hey, I’m a good person. I’ve been to church before. I know who Jesus is. I attended Sunday School and youth group when I was young. I ate at more than one church potluck. I put my share of money in the offering plate.”*** Notice the text says ***“You taught in our streets,”*** not ***“You taught us.”*** They were around Jesus without knowing Jesus. They knew about God without really knowing Him. Jesus said of them in ***v. 27 – “Away from me, all you evil doers!”*** Wow! All those trusting in their own good works, although they were decent people externally, are called ***“evil doers.”*** Jesus wants people of every generation to realize their deep need for a Savior. ***Romans 3:23*** says, ***“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Furthermore, not only do all consciously commit sins, we are born into a sinful condition – sin is part of our very nature! ***Psalm 51:5*** says -

***“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”***

Now let’s be clear, most people are not as evil as they could be, but in God’s eyes no one is considered righteous on the basis of their inherent goodness. This flies in the face of many people today. Many want to enter the door to heaven on their own terms. Author, ***John McArthur*** shares a newspaper clipping from someone reacting to the evangelistic ministry of ***Billy Graham*** as typical of the views of some who want “salvation” on their own terms:

***“After hearing Dr. Billy Graham on the air, viewing him on television and reading reports and letters concerning him and his mission, I am heartily sick of the type of religion that insists that my soul (and everyone else’s) needs saving - whatever that means. I have never felt that I was lost. Nor do I feel that I am wallowing in the mire of sin, although repetitive preaching insists that I do. Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance, that acknowledges no barriers of color or creed, that remembers the aged and teaches children of goodness and not sin. If in order to save my soul I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard preached, I prefer to remain forever damned.”***

Now to counteract this notion of easy believism and salvation on our own terms, once again note **v. 24**, which says –

***“Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”***

What does this verse mean when it says that we are to ***“strive to enter”***? If heaven is a free gift, then what are we striving for? He uses the verb (***agonizomai***) translated ***“make every effort,”*** also translated ***“strive,”*** which is the word from which we get our word ***“agonize.”*** **But Jesus is not describing that one may work their way into heaven. He is implying that there is only one specific route by which one must enter; that is why Jesus mentions a narrow door and sets forth what it is.** Hearing this, my thoughts turn to track sprinters, running toward the tape. **Intense focus** is how I’d describe their facial expressions. They are intensely focused on the finish line. Nothing else matters. There is only one way for any runner to have a hope of winning, and that is crossing the finish as fast as possible. The “striving” Jesus mentions is not a self-centered works based striving, but the **intense focus** on a very specific goal. Jesus Himself, says in ***John 10:9 – “I am the door; whoever enters through me***



*will be saved.*” Lutheran commentator, **R.C.H. Lenski** brings helpful theological insight on this point, saying:

***“The thought is never that man’s dead self efforts are to move and to save him, but the very Word itself, “strive,” by grace offers what it demands, bestows what it requires, and brings those it calls, to come. “Make every effort!” says Jesus, and in the very saying of his words there was the narrow door that was open to receive and the power to produce the striving which is called repentance. When Jesus cries “Strive!” he actually means “Repent and believe!” and by his very call he reaches out to kindle faith.” (p. 748). In theology this is called “the gospel imperative.”***

## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, we might still be wondering why Jesus makes heaven sound so difficult to enter when he says in **v. 24** -

***24 “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.***

Why didn’t He simply say, **“It’s easy! Come through Me, it’s free!”**

The phrase **“make every effort”** is the same idea Paul expresses in **II Timothy 4:7**, where he writes:

***“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”***

In a sense, winning the prize (heaven) is like a race. Even though we have the prize, and even though we already have the holiness of Christ imputed to us as a gift of grace, it doesn’t mean that our enemy, Satan, is going to give up seeking to undermine our faith. **We must stand against him, while remembering that we don’t struggle in our own strength.** The blood of Christ has been poured out for us. We exercise all our effort to cling to Jesus who by His death and resurrection has disarmed our enemy. Jesus is the narrow way to heaven. He has won the ultimate victory. In that we stand. **A-men.**