

“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (Part One)

Reflection 11 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Here’s a question we all at some time or another wonder about, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” We wonder about this because many groups claim this – claim that only a few are going to be saved based on a large misunderstanding of Matthew 7:13-14 with its “narrow gate” and only a few finding it. But we also wonder about this when we look at the state of the world around us, at all its seemingly unbridled violence and greed. And we wonder this when we look at our own lives and the people around whom we live, and we see in a great many cases no spiritual connection. Often if they’re churchgoers they seem to be only going through the motions. And then they sometimes do the most confounding things, and you wonder: How could a Christian, I mean, a conscious Christian, do this? But then most people we live alongside of don’t go to church. And so we wonder, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Jesus himself in Luke 18:8 asks, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

One day Jesus was going through the towns and villages on his way to Jerusalem, and someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (Luke 13:22-30). Now it’s hard to know what this person meant by this. Did he mean, “Will only the lives of a few be saved?” In the imminent catastrophic clash with Rome, will only a few of us survive? Will only a few be rescued, delivered from danger, kept safe? We have seen that this is often the meaning of salvation. It was the original meaning and it often remains the baseline meaning of salvation. In fact, in the context here, the concern is with “the present time.” Back in Luke 12:56 (just before the chapter break), Jesus asks the crowd, “How is it that you don’t know how to interpret the present time?”

Then he goes on, now in Luke 13, to refer to some Galileans whom the Roman governor Pilate had had killed at the temple in Jerusalem. And then he reminds them of eighteen who died when one of the towers on the Jerusalem walls, the tower of Siloam, had fallen on them. And Jesus warns his audience then that “Unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Unless they change their ways, unless they reconsider, unless they refocus, they too will all perish. And all this is background to this question, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”

But something else is going on in the lead-up to our text. There’s a rhythm. There’s a pattern. Is the kingdom of God getting bigger or smaller? Is it contracting or expanding? So Romans are slaughtering Galileans at worship. Towers are falling on people. Jesus envisions a fig tree with no fruit whose owner determines to cut down but relents “for one more year.” Jesus then heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath and runs into the usual nitpicking of the legalists. And the kingdom would seem to be contracting.

But just then, in Luke 13:18, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that becomes a tree in which birds perch. Or the kingdom of God, he goes on, is like yeast, a little yeast, that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it was all leavened. The kingdom’s expanding, growing larger, transforming everything it touches.

It's then that we come to the person who asks Jesus, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" (Luke 13:23). And Jesus goes small again. He starts talking about a "narrow door" that many will try to enter but won't be able to. So the owner of the house gets up and locks the door, and Jesus tells his listeners, "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.' You will protest then, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But the owner repeats, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, you evildoers!'" The kingdom is contracting. Big time. "Then," Jesus says, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but your yourselves thrown out." The kingdom seems extinct.

Jesus, however, is still talking: "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." In a parallel passage in Matthew (8:11-12), it reads, "Many will come from the east and the west." The kingdom is expanding. Or is it? Your call! Figure it out. The text is ambiguous. So what are we to make of the question, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"

You will have noticed that Jesus refers to weeping and gnashing of teeth, drawing on the apocalyptic notion of Gehenna as the destiny of the wicked – as we saw in a previous reflection, not exactly the hell-fire-and-brimstone angry preachers over the centuries have reveled in but the recognition that justice will be done, that people will be held accountable for what they have done or not done. So there is here some sense of salvation as eternal salvation.

Still the text here seems transitional and has multiple meanings, or rather, has layers of meaning. Because it's also playing out against a great crisis facing the Jewish nation who are now one step away from open revolt against Rome. In forty years they will revolt and they will be crushed. In fact, let your eye move on to Luke 13:31-35, a text in which Jesus laments over the fate of Jerusalem, the coming desolation of Jerusalem. So "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" Jesus is saying: Yes, the door is closing. Your chances are down to a few now. And when the door closes, it won't be enough to say, "I ate and drank with Jesus, and he once visited our town and taught here."

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.