

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

Reflection 12 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

When Jesus was once asked, “Are only a few people going to be saved?” (Luke 13:23), his answer is at best ambiguous. He seems to answer Yes; he seems to answer No. He seems to be thinking of the great crisis facing the Jewish nation as they hurtle downward toward open and deadly revolt against Rome, and yet he also speaks of weeping and gnashing of teeth. So salvation in this context refers at least in part to the end of the age as we know it when we get our full mindfulness back, when we get our feelings back, when we see again, when in addition to all the good that we have done, we see the opportunities we let slide right past us, when we see our indifference to the poor and the feeble excuses we used to justify this, when we see the people we hurt intentionally but also unintentionally by our preoccupation with what we wanted, when we see the years we have wasted over matters that don’t matter, when our consciousness expands to see all that we have done and all that we have not done and the consequences sometimes to the third and fourth generations. And if this turns out to be our experience, there just could be weeping and gnashing of teeth. I don’t want to be there for that. I already weep and gnash my teeth enough. I wear a mouth guard at night. A number of us do. I’ve done enough of that. I don’t want to do it in the life to come. And so the great good news is that we have a Savior who saves us from this, who saves us from our sins.

But salvation also refers to the here-and-now: to being saved from catastrophe, maybe from national catastrophe, the collapse of a nation, a descent into chaos, the desolation of a civilization, as the Jewish nation faced in the time of Jesus; or to personal rescue, rescue from our sins, from our addictions, from scandal and shame, from all the scars and wounds of our souls whether self-inflicted or inflicted by others. For that too we have a Savior who is our shepherd, who leads us beside still waters, who restores our souls, who guides us in paths of righteousness even though it be through the valley of the shadow of death.

So “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Is the kingdom of God expanding or contracting? Both. It’s doing both. The long view is of an earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, of nations not training for war anymore, of a great multitude that no one can count celebrating the salvation of our God, of a new Jerusalem of mind-blowing dimensions that spreads out forever. But right now in our time, in your experience, is the kingdom of God expanding or contracting? It may not be clear. Jesus himself is ambiguous. But you, Jesus still says to each of us (in Luke 13:24), you make every effort to enter through the narrow door, the door that most people in their busyness and in their preoccupation with their own concerns don’t see.

So why don’t we? Why don’t we really commit? Knowing all this in our hearts already, why don’t we do something about it? Why don’t we make every effort to enter through the narrow door of which Jesus speaks? We know that for each of us one day the door closes. We know that. So why don’t we make every effort to enter through the narrow door? I think I know. Because

we know of the grace of God. We know God is love. And so we know we're going to make it. Maybe it'll be through the back door at the last minute, but we are going to make it. Right? You know what – in your thinking that way, you're right. But the story goes on.

Permit me this thought experiment. So there you and I are in that place beyond Near Death Experience, and now it dawns on us that we lived much of our lives out on the borderlands of Gehenna, arid, dry, scorched, in one mess after another of our own creation. But we became so used to it that we supposed it was just life, just the way life is. But it all could have been so much better. We were surrounded by grace. We were surrounded by the sacred. We were surrounded by joy. A state called beatitude was there for the taking. But we lived much of our lives, we can now see with our higher consciousness, out on the borderlands of Gehenna.

More than that, hundreds of millions of people on earth in our lifetimes were in Gehenna already, and we did nothing about it. So there we are. We made it through the back door at the last minute. But now we know. We know. Our consciousness has expanded, and now we know. We know all that we might have been saved from in the here-and-now. And we know what the people in our lives might have been saved from. And we know how little we did. And we know the excuses we made, and how weak they were. And we know how good it could have been if we had made every effort to enter through the narrow door that most people are too busy and preoccupied to see.

So back to the original question: “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” Jesus doesn't really answer the guy because he knows how much pain lies ahead for these people, his people, pain brought on by their own fears and by their own egos, unspeakable, unimaginable, crushing pain, pain that could have been avoided but wasn't.

His only answer is: Make every effort ...

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, the door that takes mindfulness, focus, compassion and wisdom, because one day the door closes. And it won't be enough to say, “I often took communion. I often heard you taught.”

– Dale Pauls