

Jesus!

“Living in the Light of Eternity, III” (Luke 13:22-35)

The Narrow Door of Salvation

[Parallel Reading: Psalm 103:1-10]

Take a first look.

I. There was a lot of talk about the *United* aspect of the United States in the first decade of the new millennium. In the aftermath of 9/11, my heart was warmed by some television commercials that had people from all sorts of ethnic and geographical backgrounds—European, Latin American, African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Native American—saying simply, “I am an American.” Truly this is a country formed through the process of immigration, all the way from the settlement of those we call “native Americans” to the founding of Plymouth Plantation in 1620 to the present. *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of Many, One”) is still our strategic, though unofficial motto, ranging back to 1782. “In God We Trust” was adopted as our national motto by Congress in 1956.

Along with this kind of necessary emphasis during a time of war, there was also in evidence a great sensitivity by our government leaders to be “religiously inclusive.” President Bush was careful to make reference to the variety of religious perspectives in our country even when he called upon Americans to pray, asking us to go up to our “churches, synagogues and mosques.” A return to such an American spirit, “Out of Many, One,” would be a calming wind in the current storm of political and racial division.

II. But note something about the mention of “churches, synagogues, and mosques,” by President George W. Bush. This brings up an interesting observation. The people who worship in those three places have always had one thing in common (at least until recent years in some churches). Christians, Jews, and Muslims all hold that religious truth is *exclusive, not inclusive*.

Jews recite the Shema Israel from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (NIV), and they mean it: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

Muslims believe that “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet.” There is no discussion on the matter (especially on the second half of that compound sentence).

Christians have always believed what Jesus Himself said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, NIV). The words “except through me” make the point quite clear. This is an exclusive claim. To be a Christian at all is to confess faith in this clear affirmation of truth: Jesus is Lord, not one among many, but simply and exclusively *Lord*.

In teaching His own disciples and in teaching all of those who listened to Him as God Incarnate, Jesus made this very clear. He said that the door into the kingdom of God is a narrow one and an exclusive one. This may not be a popular conviction at this period in Western civilization, but it is truly one that our Lord Jesus taught without qualification. He compelled His hearers to live in the light of eternity. In that light, there was only one way into God’s kingdom of grace and truth. We would do well to heed His teaching and make this clear in our time that so greatly needs it.

Take a closer look at Luke 13:22-35 (beginning with 22-30).

Luke 13:22-30

I. THE NARROW DOOR OF SALVATION REQUIRED JESUS’ JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM. 13:22-

1. *Salvation has only one cost: the cross of Christ.* “He made his way to Jerusalem.” Jesus was on His way there with only one central purpose in mind. He was going there to die for the sins of the world. This is clear from what He said when warned by the Pharisees of Herod’s murderous intentions. “Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” (v. 33).

A—The great comfort of Jesus’ resolve to go to Jerusalem and face death for us is that we never have to wonder if the full cost of human salvation has been paid.

I—Some years back, and for about a year, except for a couple of months in the summer, I met with a little group of three men on Thursday afternoon to help them learn Greek. Two of those who stayed with it during that year were not been able to get back with it the following fall, but one young man, Teague McAmeY, was very diligent with it. We made it to the point in the study that we translated a paragraph or two each week from the short letter of First John. In discussing the teaching there about the tests of genuine life in Christ, we had several great conversations about assurance of salvation. First John is all about assurance of salvation.

In our tangent for one week, we talked about the difference between the Catholic and the simply Biblical approach to salvation. In Catholic theology proper, the baptism of a person as a Christian takes care of the sins committed up to that time. After that, the devoted Catholic believer must go to confession regularly and do penance for the sins committed after baptism. They make a distinction between mortal sins (that will send you to hell), and venial sins (that can be “worked off” so to speak) [I confess that this is a very poor simplification of Catholic teaching.] Back to our conversation over First John. Teague told me about a copy of the New American Bible (a modern Catholic translation) that he perused that had belonged to his grandmother. In the front, it listed various sins that one might commit. After them, it gave the *penance*, the remedy. In one case that he remembered, a certain sin (I can’t remember which) required about 25 or so repetitions of “Hail, Mary.” After that, the sin was forgiven, and all was well.

We mused together about how such rules square with Christian assurance (our subject in First John). We asked each other, “Could you ever really be sure that you have done enough to make up for your sins since your baptism? What if you only did 20 “Hail, Marys” when 30 were required? Would you still have assurance that all was well between you and the Lord?” We concluded that such an addition to the teaching of Scripture was a robber of assurance.

Jesus resolutely went up to Jerusalem because salvation has only one cost, a cost that Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to pay with His own blood. Now, for all who have put their trust in Jesus, we gain great assurance from the words of First John 2:1-2 (FJV), “¹ *My little children, I am writing these things to you in order that you may not sin. But if anyone should sin, we have an Intercessor with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* ² *And He Himself is a propitiation¹ concerning our sins, and not concerning our sins only, but also concerning the entire world.*” [Propitiation is a technical term for a gift offered to God that turns away His just punishment from the sinner.]

2. *Salvation has only one way: the way of Christ.* “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.” Because there is only one cost, there is only one way, the way of faith in Christ. This is where the teaching about the “narrow door” comes in. Notice in the parable of vv. 24-30 the contrasts.

¹ For the technical discussion about the difference between “propitiation” and “expiation” in translating *ἱλασμόν* (*hilasmon*), see Leon Morris in *The New Bible Dictionary, 3rd Edition*, ad loc. (and extended discussions referenced there), and the discussion in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*, Volume 3, pp. 151ff. “In short, propitiation is directed towards the offended person, whereas expiation is concerned with nullifying the offensive act” (Colin Brown, *NIDNTT*, Vol. 3, p. 151).

On the one hand, *many* will try to enter, but on the other hand, *few* truly will. The few will be on the *inside*, sitting down at the feast in the kingdom of God; the many will be on the *outside* where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

A—We must ask ourselves the question of application: Are we the many “who will try to enter and will not be able,” or are we the few who enter through the narrow door?

I—The early evangelists understood the exclusive nature of the Christian faith well.

When the apostles were on trial before the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin, because they wouldn't stop their preaching, Peter stated it clearly, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV).

It surely was Jesus Himself Who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

This what a modern writer named Stanley Jaki called “the scandal of particularity.” It is this particular man, not just any man, through whom God has revealed Himself most clearly. “All roads lead to Rome” was probably not even true in the ancient world. It is surely not true in the figurative sense today. All spiritual paths are not equal. Some of them do lead to a measure of truth, but in regard to our ultimate salvation, *close* is not good enough. We need *assurance*, not merely hopefulness.

3. *Salvation has the highest stakes: ultimately people are inside or outside.* “There are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” It is the difference, based on Jesus' teaching here, between taking one's place at the feast in the kingdom of God or “weeping there, and gnashing of teeth.”

A—It is important to remember, when “religious diversity” is a value seeming to be “in Vogue,” that the ultimate outcome for people is heaven or hell.

I—“There are no *ordinary* people,” wrote C. S. Lewis (his emphasis). He noted that “You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”²

Jesus taught all of this, because He wanted His hearers, He wanted us to take our places at the feast, to be sustained in the meantime with that hope and confident expectation. The reality should be just like this little boy and his father.

He was just a little fellow. His mother died when he was just a child. His father, in trying to be both mommy and daddy, had planned a picnic. The little boy had never been on a picnic, so they made their plans, fixed the lunch, and packed the car. Then it was time to go to bed, for the picnic was the next day. He just couldn't sleep. He tossed and he turned, but the excitement got to him. Finally, he got out of bed, ran into the room where his father had already fallen asleep, and shook him. His father woke up and saw his son. He said to him, “What are you doing up? What's the matter?”

The boy said, “I can't sleep.”

The father asked, “Why can't you sleep?”

In answering, the boy said, “Daddy, I'm excited about tomorrow.”

His father replied, “Well, Son, I'm sure you are, and it's going to be a great day, but it won't be great if we don't get some sleep. So why don't you just run down the hall, get back in bed, and get a good night's rest.”

² C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” from *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Macmillan, 1980, original 1949), p. 19, original spelling and emphasis retained.

So the boy trudged off down the hall to his room and got in bed. Before long, sleep came—to the father, that is. It wasn't long thereafter that back was the little boy. He was pushing and shoving his father, and his father opened his eyes. Harsh words almost blurted out until he saw the expression on the boy's face. The father asked, "What's the matter now?"

The boy said, "Daddy, I just want to thank you for tomorrow."

This story was told by a pastor named Benjamin Reaves. He concluded it in this way: "When I think of my past and the fact that a loving Father would not let me go, reached down in his divine providence, and lifted me off of the streets of Harlem, when I think of what he has done for me and then think that he is planning a new thing for me that will surpass the past, let the record show this night in this place that Benjamin Reaves testified, Father, I want to thank you for tomorrow!"³

Luke 13:31-35

II. THE NARROW DOOR OF SALVATION CALLS FORTH JESUS' COMPASSION. 13:31-35

1. *Jesus was warned by some Pharisees that Herod wanted to kill Him.* This could have been Jesus' opportunity to gracefully pull back, to move to a safer haven and carry on His teaching and healing work. But that was not His ultimate objective. He did not come to find a safe haven. He came to save us from our sins.

2. *Jesus resolutely kept to His goal, knowing that He would die in Jerusalem.* This trip to Jerusalem was Jesus' second trip to Jerusalem during His earthly ministry. It would truly prove to be His last, humanly speaking. It corresponds to the incident recorded in John 11, where Jesus said to His disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." The disciples tried to dissuade Him from this trip, when they said, "But Rabbi . . . , a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" When they couldn't talk Him out of it, Thomas spoke up: "The Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (John 11:7-8, 16).

He knew why He was going. John 11 indicates that He was going up to raise Lazarus from death. But there was more. He was going up to die. In Luke 13:33, He said as much: "Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!"

A—I for one am eternally grateful that Jesus did not take the easy path, the path of safety and security, in His earthly ministry. Because Jesus went to the cross, you and I can have eternal life. Simple as that.

I—James Kennedy makes the point well:

For many centuries the men and women in Europe looked out upon the western sea, what we call the Atlantic Ocean, and they saw the sun coruscating upon the glittering surface of the waters and they wondered. They wondered if there was anything beyond. Scholars said that you could sail off the edge of the world—there was nothing out there at all. In fact, inscribed on the escutcheons of the coat of arms of the nation of Spain was its national motto, *Ne Plus Ultra*, meaning, "There is nothing beyond."

One day Columbus went westering on the shiny waters. He sailed off into the sunset as people waited expectantly, and finally after a long time the sails reappeared and the crowds were exultant. They shouted with joy, and Columbus announced that there was a land beyond the sea that was rich beyond their dreams. It was a glorious paradise. The king of Spain changed the motto of that land until it reads as it does today, *Plus Ultra*, meaning, "There is more beyond."

³ Benjamin Reaves, "Living Expectantly," *Preaching Today*, Recording No. 65.

[Now, whatever you think of Columbus and the motivation for such exploration, the illustration still holds. Kennedy continues:]

For many centuries innumerable people stood beside the dark hole that we call a grave and watched the remains of their loved ones lowered into the earth, and they wondered: Beyond the dark waters of death, is there anything beyond?

Then one day, a young explorer went westering into the setting sun and descended into the blackness of the pit. He sailed off the edge of the world and crashed into hell. People waited expectantly. Finally on ... Resurrection morning, as the sun arose in the east, the Son of God stepped forth from a grave and declared, "There is something beyond. There is a paradise beyond your greatest expectations. And there awaits a heavenly Father, waiting with outstretched arms to wipe away every tear from your cheek."⁴

3. *Jesus expressed sorrow over Jerusalem, because of the history of the people there to refuse God's grace and protection.* This could have made Him mad. There is good evidence of the truth that God does sustain a settled opposition, "wrath," against sin and ungodliness among people (see Romans 1). But why then doesn't He just blast us all and get rid of us? He could just create new people who will serve Him without question. Why doesn't He do it? He has compassion on us. He loves us! John 3:16. Romans 5:8.

4. *Jesus expressed sorrow over Jerusalem, because He knew that their refusal would bring the ruin of Jerusalem.* He foresaw the time when Jerusalem would be sacked, his people scattered, the covenant irreparably broken. He shed tears over His fallen people, despite their hardness of heart.

A—Again, I am thankful to God that He is gracious and compassionate and merciful! He grieves over the lost and desires them to come home. He treats us "not as our sins deserve," in the words of the Psalm-writer, nor does He "repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10).

I—Listen to the mercy of the Lord from the remainder of that psalm:

Psalm 103:11-22 (NIV):

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵ As for man, his days are like grass,
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
¹⁸ with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.

⁴ D. James Kennedy, "Message from an Empty Tomb," *Preaching Today*, Recording No. 66.

¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.

²⁰ Praise the LORD, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.

²¹ Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.

²² Praise the LORD, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the LORD, O my soul.

Take it home (applications).

I. Do we have such assurance of forgiveness and salvation?

1. We must admit we need salvation, that we need to be rescued from the danger of sin and death, that we need to be made whole again.

2. We must believe that Jesus Christ is the only way back home.

3. We must confess our faith in Him.

II. Have we learned to allow God to break our hearts for those who need Him, to grieve over what breaks His heart?

1. Face the need of those around us.

2. Reckon with the love of God for them, as well as for us.