

WHEN HEAVEN'S DOOR IS SHUT, WHICH SIDE WILL YOU BE ON?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

A few months ago a young man from this church invited me to have lunch with his Christian parents who had come from out of state to visit him. The young man and his wife had informed me ahead of time that part of the purpose of our lunch would be to discuss with his parents our theological view of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, which would differ in some ways from his parents' view. We all met at a local restaurant, and soon we were engaged in a delightful conversation about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life and ministry. I must say that at certain points our conversation became so intense that I still can't remember what I had to eat. But near the end of our lunch, in the midst of the discussion, suddenly the mother looked right at me and said, "Look, what we really care about is whether or not we are going to heaven!"

What a wonderful statement! It was wonderful because this woman did not just want to win a theological debate; what she and her husband really wanted was an assurance based on the word of God that they were on the right path, because there are so many who imagine they are on the right path to eternal life when they may not be at all. Each one of us needs to grasp, wrestle with, strive for, and come away with a clear understanding of this question, because this life is not all there is to living. There is someplace else besides this earth, and Jesus Christ has come and made that very clear to us. This woman's statement prompted me to think again about my own understanding of eternity, and so as we turn to Luke 13:22-35, let me ask you and myself the question: When heaven's door is finally shut, which side will you and I be on?

I. Enter while the door is still open

Luke 13:22-30

And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out. And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."

According to the gospel of John, our Lord had gone into Jerusalem for the eight-day Feast of Dedication (December 25). (John 10:22.) It was during this week that our Lord healed the blind man and was confronted by the Pharisees after he taught about the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. As a result the Pharisees were divided, some saying he had a demon, others saying he was insane, leaving others uncertain. Many in the temple wanted to know if he was the Christ. When he said, "I and the Father are one," the Jews took up stones again to stone him. But Jesus eluded their grasp (John 10:22-39). So our Lord then moved from Jerusalem to the east of the Jordan into the district of Perea (modern Jordan), governed by Herod Antipas, who had earlier ordered the death of John the Baptist. He would continue to minister in that district until spring, when he would proceed back to Jerusalem to attend his final Passover feast and to fulfill the

prophecy that John the Baptist gave to his disciples when he saw Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29.) Now as we open to Luke 13:22-35, we find our Lord teaching and healing in the cities and villages of Perea "seek[ing] to save that which was lost."

And someone said to him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" As the men and women watched and listened to the Lord, especially in his dealings with the Pharisees, they started to realize that the teachings of the rabbis was in direct contrast to the teachings of Jesus concerning the issue of eternal salvation (see Matthew 22:28-33). The rabbis taught that God was offering salvation to all those who were born of the physical seed of Abraham, and that this gift of salvation was confirmed by the symbol of circumcision and maintained by the works of the Law of Moses (see Genesis 15-17 and Romans 2:25-3:27). They saw it as a national salvation. But Jesus came along and taught over and over that his Father offered salvation by grace through faith in him as the promised Messiah.

This salvation from the wrath of God, from the power of sin in our lives, from hell, and to a life that pleases God comes by faith on an individual level, not on a national level. John wrote, "There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:9-13.) Salvation is not national; it's personal and essential to the life God intended us to live. But the Jewish leadership of our Lord's day (and that of our own day) continued to reject Jesus' personal and spiritual invitation of eternal life in and through him alone. In the Jewish mind the kingdom of God would be populated only by Jews and converted Gentiles.

"And He said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." The Lord did not answer the man directly, but was about to tell him that the issue was not how many of those around him would be given the gift of eternal life, but making sure he himself was saved. Was he saved from the wrath of God? Would he experience the kingdom of God now and forever? Our Lord commanded the man who asked the question as well as the crowd that followed him: "Strive [that is, agonize, strain, or struggle wholeheartedly] against all the forces-the world's philosophy, the Pharisees' teaching-that might cause you to deny that I am the long-promised Messiah of Israel, for I am the narrow gate. Then place your faith in me as your Savior, and you will receive the gift of salvation by grace and not by works."

Matthew wrote in his gospel the following words taken from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide [which the Pharisees offer], and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14.) And the understanding of this narrow gate or door is clearly seen in the words of Jesus when he warned his disciples in John 10: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep...I am the door of the sheep...if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved...I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." (John 10:1-11.)

These are hard things to hear. It's hard to think through your life, when all your life you thought you were on the narrow way, only to discover, when you encounter Christ and he starts to teach you his way, that you were way off; you were on a broad way, and that broad way was leading you to destruction. So our Lord warned the people that after the door of eternal life with him has been closed, "...many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Man's problem is that God has "set eternity in [his] heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11), but sinful man keeps turning within himself and trying to figure out a multitude of ways to get into that eternity. One song writer wrote: "Everybody wants to get to heaven but no one wants to die." Men also seek to create religious groups that hope they will get to heaven by accommodating sin, doing good works, having the right family ties, or even giving their bodies to be burned, but in each case they have designed a plan of salvation without going through Jesus. Peter would later tell the Sanhedrin at his trial for healing a crippled man in the temple, "...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12.) The Jewish people of the seed of Abraham were hoping that by keeping the Law and doing good works they would automatically enter into eternal life. But here our Lord

was warning them that their theology would keep them from entering the gate of salvation.

Then the Lord gave them a terrible picture: "Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, I do not know where you are from." The Lord Jesus is the head of the house, and there is coming a day when the wonderful invitation to accept him as our personal Lord and Savior, and in turn receive the gift of eternal life, will be over, and he will get up off his throne and walk to the front door of his mansion and close the narrow door of salvation. In the parable of the ten wise virgins and the ten foolish virgins of Matthew 25:1-10, the bridegroom came when no one expected him, and the ten wise virgins with their lamps full of oil were able to enter into the wedding feast, and the door was shut. "And later the other virgins [who had had to go and purchase oil for their lamps because they weren't ready] also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' But he answered and said, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour."

"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets...' Some of these folks may have been guests at our Lord's two picnics in which he fed the 5,000 and the 4,000 with the loaves and fishes. (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-39.) Others may have stood and listened to him teach in the cities and villages in Galilee, Samaria, Perea, and Judea. But the fact is that salvation is never based on a casual relationship with Jesus at a Sunday picnic or just listening to him in an open market. Jesus would illustrate the need for a personal relationship with him after his resurrection and ascension to the the right hand of the Father. He would say to those in the church in Laodicea, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20.)

If any of us has heard the Lord Jesus knocking on the door of his heart and refused to open that door, then one day he will hear the most frightening and heart-rending words in the universe directed to him personally: "I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from me,...you evildoer." (see Psalm 6:8.) In Matthew 7:21-23 our Lord told his disciples somewhat the same thing: "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'" Do you see why he commanded us to strive? He wants us to strive not for our salvation, but against the notion that we are getting in to the kingdom of God by some kind of philosophy that we designed ourselves.

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out." It appears that, although the door of salvation would close, they would have a small peephole through which to look into the kingdom of God. According to Matthew 8:11-12, they would be able to see a great banquet being given, and they would be shocked by two things they saw.

First, they would see all the spiritual fathers of their nation, and because they thought they were physical kinfolk, they wouldn't be able to figure out why the fathers were invited to the banquet and they were not! But what they would not have taken into account was that the key to salvation was faith and not their Jewish heritage. The author of Hebrews wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval....without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." (Hebrews 11:1-2, 6.) "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (Hebrews 11:8-10.)

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.'" (Hebrews 11:17-18.) Paul would later write in a summary of Abraham's salvation: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:2-3.) "By faith

Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped...." (Hebrews 11:21.) And so on-they would be able to see all the prophets throughout the ages from Moses to John the Baptist and everyone in between who had placed their faith in God.

Second, the people they would never have expected to see in the kingdom of God were the hated Gentiles. But sure enough, there would be Gentiles from east and west and from north and south, and they would recline at the table in the kingdom of God. They would see a variety of Gentiles from the Queen of Sheba to the men of Nineveh to the Roman officer Cornelius and many among us-Gentiles from every tongue and tribe out of every generation who had placed their faith in God and his promised Son Jesus and called upon him to become their personal Lord and Savior. Before the Lord went to the cross he told his disciples: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." (John 12:32.) When our risen Lord appeared to Thomas, the doubting disciple said, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, 'Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed [Jews and Gentiles alike].'" (John 20:28-29.)

After our Lord's resurrection he gave his disciples what we now call the Great Commission: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always...." (Matthew 28:18-20.) And then he told them on another occasion just before his ascension to the right hand of the Father: "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8.) Within a few short years after the day of Pentecost, the apostle Paul and Barnabas, who had been sent out by the church of Antioch on their first missionary journey to central Turkey, returned to that church. "And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." (Acts 14:27.)

In the immediate context our Lord was addressing the Jewish community, but in fact all those who rejected Jesus as their Messiah on earth would come to the realization that the door of salvation had finally been closed on them. They were being cast out of the kingdom of God, and they were going to be eternally separated from the God who had given them life and opportunities to invite Jesus to become their personal Messiah that would have resulted in their salvation. It is at this moment that they would experience in their consciousness the "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The weeping would be caused by never-ending wretchedness combined with a sense of everlasting hopelessness. The gnashing or grinding of teeth is a symbol of eternal anger.

"And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last." Based on the immediate context our Lord was telling the crowd that in the kingdom of God there were different degrees of honor, authority, and position based on how one responded to the "light of the gospel" in their given generation. For example, Abraham received the light of the grace of God in a very spiritually dark society. Isaac and Jacob had much light earlier in their lives, but it took Jacob many years to respond to that light. While some Gentile like the former demoniac named Legion who responded quickly to the light as a latecomer to the kingdom might be placed "first," at this point we do not know who God has in mind, for only he knows man's heart. But the key here is that some who were last would be first and some who were first would be last (but not all).

At this moment in time our risen Lord continues to hold open the "door of salvation" to all who are willing to invite him into their hearts to become their personal Lord and Savior, whether they be Jew or Gentile. He also has placed us in a season where we have our finger on the pulse of the world community, and so each and every day we can know almost everything that is going on in our town as well as our state, our nation, and the world. One of the gifts our Lord gives us each day is the news about the natural and tragic deaths of men and women all around us. The young have had to deal with the deaths of eight teenagers in a terrible auto accident last week. And the old were reminded that their own death wasn't so far away when they heard that Harry Reasoner of 60 Minutes died last week. There are as well the deaths of members of our own extended and immediate family. But each and every death is a gracious reminder that on the one hand the word says, "...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27), and on the other hand it says, "...behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'" (2 Corinthians 6:2.)

When heaven's door is shut, which side will you be on? Enter while the door is still open! And...

II. Enter before the door is finally shut

Luke 13:31-35

Just at that time some Pharisees came up, saying to Him, "Go away and depart from here, for Herod wants to kill You." And He said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal.' Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'"

Our Lord was ministering in Herod Antipas' territory. This was the same governor who already had a run-in with John the Baptist over his own adulterous affair with his brother's wife, resulting in the death of the prophet. It may have been that Herod did not want to have any more trouble with Jesus in Perea, so he sent some Pharisees to get the word to Jesus that his life was on the line, with the hope of moving him back across the Jordan river and up to Jerusalem, where the Jewish supreme court could get its hands on him.

"And He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox, "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach my goal [literally, I am perfected]."' Jesus called Herod "that fox" because of his slyness and crafty ways. David Gooding writes in his book According to Luke, "Christ was following a divinely foreordained course through this world, expressing God's love to men through innumerable acts of mercy and salvation. Herod's threats would not lead him to speed up or cut short his ministry." Rather, in his reply Jesus told them symbolically what he was going to do. He summed up the three months ahead of him till Passover as three days; two of those days would be his teaching and healing ministry, and the third day would be the week beginning on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem, followed by his trial, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, resulting in the redemption of his people who placed their faith in him as their Messiah. The writer to the Hebrews summed up the life of Christ in this way: "In the days of His flesh...Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." (Hebrews 5:7-9.) His decisions would not be influenced by Herod's threats, because he was following his Father's plan.

"Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem." The city of Jerusalem was the site for the deaths of many of the true prophets of God. Jeremiah, who also wept over Jerusalem, had been sent there some 600 years earlier to speak a word of warning to the wicked King Jehoiachin to turn back to God or the city would be destroyed by the Babylonians and the Jewish people would be taken into captivity. Once he spoke, the priests and the false prophets seized him saying, "You must die!" Though he was tried, Jeremiah did not die at that time, but a prophet and friend named Uriah who sided with Jeremiah died for speaking out the truth of God (see Jeremiah 26). Death sentences were handed out by the Jewish supreme court located in the very heart of the nation: Jerusalem. This was the city that killed prophets, that killed men whom God sent to tell them the truth, for a prophet is one who speaks the words of God, not his own. God was moving his final "Prophet" toward Jerusalem to give the Jewish nation its last warning and then the judgment.

So Jesus wept over Jerusalem. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" Jerusalem symbolized the heart of the Jewish people. It was here that the beautiful temple stood and where God was supposed to reside within the Holy of Holies. To the center of this religious community God sent many prophets to warn the people of their wicked ways, and in each case the people managed to kill the prophets. And because Jerusalem was coming under the wrath of God by the hands of the Roman General Titus in 70 AD, our Lord said he had been sent like a mother hen to spread her wings and protect all the chicks from harm and danger. But when he came to warn them of their sin and the coming wrath of God, they rejected him as their Messiah and, rather than gather under his wings, sought to find a way to

have him killed.

"Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" As a result of this rejection, the nation of Israel would not see the Lord again until Palm Sunday, during the Passover feast, when he would enter the city and present himself as King for the last time. On that day the crowds would break out with the words from Psalm 118:26, which were sung only at Passover: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD." (Luke 20:38.) The Lord again reminded them that because the nation had rejected him as its Messiah, it was now going to be left as desolate as it was in the days when God spoke to the nation through Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 22:5). Our Lord would later predict: "...when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand." (Luke 21:20.)

For within that Messianic song were the other words that were fulfilled that day: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." (Psalm 118:22-23.) The next time they would sing, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD," would be at his second coming: "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him." (Revelation 1:7; see also Philippians 2:10-11.) Those who have accepted Jesus as their personal Messiah and Savior will sing this song with tears of joy, while those who have rejected Jesus as their Lord will see him coming as their judge through tears of regret, as he closes the door of salvation and they find themselves on the outside,

When heaven's door of salvation is finally shut, which side will you and I be on? At this time we know that our loving God has kept the door of salvation open, for as we saw earlier, his word says, "...behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'" We know it is open for all those who are willing to confess Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior because the Scriptures tell us, "...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." (Romans 10:9-10.)

We know that our Lord's invitation of salvation is personal, for as we just saw, he said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20.) And we know that if you hear this invitation to invite Jesus to become your Lord and Savior and you reject it, eventually the door of salvation will finally be closed and you will regret for all eternity with weeping and gnashing of teeth this day when you were given an opportunity by a loving Lord to experience eternal life, and you said, "NO!" Don't do it. Invite Jesus into your heart now. There may not be another chance on this earth.

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