

# Will Many Be Saved?

**By Ralph Martin**

HAVE YOU EVER HAD QUESTIONS about life that made you think, “I’m really looking forward to getting to heaven so I can ask the Lord about that?”

Actually, some of the questions we would most like to ask have already been asked and answered. People had the opportunity to ask Jesus such questions during his public ministry on earth. We can find his answers by turning to the Gospels.

One of the questions that intrigues most of us is, “How many will be saved?” Have you ever wondered about that? How many human beings, relatively speaking, will get to spend eternity in heaven with the Lord? Will there be many or only a few? When all is said and done, how are things going to work out for the human race? Is it relatively easy to get into heaven, or is it relatively difficult?

We might ask questions like these out of intellectual curiosity. Or we might ask them out of intense personal interest. The real question then becomes, “What are the chances that I will be saved?” Or to put it another way, “How much effort do I really need to expend in order to make it to heaven?”

### **Jesus’ Answer to the Question**

That question has already been asked, and Jesus has given us his answer. In fact, what Jesus tells us about this all-important matter is clear and unmistakable. It is also completely consistent with the revelation that God gave his prophets—which is recorded in the Old Testament—and with the reflections of holy men and women down through the ages.

What's more, that answer has important implications for you and me—not just for the satisfaction of our intellectual curiosity. It has to do with our eternal destiny.

In his gospel, Luke recounts a time when Jesus answered the very question we are so interested in:

*He went through cities and towns teaching—all the while making his way toward Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, are they few in number who are to be saved?" He replied: "Try to come in through the narrow door. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and be unable. When once the master of the house has risen to lock the door and you stand outside knocking and saying, 'Sir, open for us,' he will say in reply, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your company. You taught in our streets.' But he will answer, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* Lk 13:22-27

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave the same teaching, but he put it a little differently.

*"Enter through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few there are who find it!"* Mt 7:13-14

The words of Jesus could scarcely be clearer. The way to salvation is narrow. The road is difficult. And few, not many, successfully follow that road. "The invited

are many, the elect are few,” Jesus again tells us (Mt 22:14). Many are invited to take the way that leads to salvation, but few respond in a way that enables them to receive what God is offering.

## **The Word of the Prophets: Only a Remnant Will Return**

This was not a new teaching which is unique to Jesus. In a sense, he was merely restating a consistent theme of the Old Testament. The prophets consistently warned the Israelites that only a few—a “remnant,” as they called it—would in fact respond to God in such a measure as to share in his salvation:

*A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to mighty God. For though your people, O Israel, were like the sand of the sea, Only a remnant of them will return; their destruction is decreed as overwhelming justice demands.* Is 10:21-22

This is only one of many places where the prophets tell us that only a remnant will be saved. For example, Jeremiah speaks of the remnant of Judah. He prophesies that only a small number of Jews will return to Jerusalem when the years of captivity in Babylon are ended (see Jer 23:3ff.). The prophets Micah (2:12) and Zechariah (8:12) also refer to the remnant that will be saved.

## **How God Deals with His People**

The words of the prophets reflect the way God deals with his people throughout history. Again and again we see judgment and destruction coming upon the

many who have turned away from God, while only a few find salvation. Consider the account of Noah:

*So the Lord said: "I will wipe out from the earth the men whom I have created, and not only the men, but also the beasts and the creeping things and the birds of the air, for I am sorry that I made them." But Noah found favor with the Lord. Gn 6:7-8*

Here we see God judging all of his creation; the question here was not whether many would be saved, but whether any would be saved. Only a few were saved: a mere eight persons, as Peter later points out (1 Pt 3:20). And this remnant is spared only because of God's mercy in showing favor to Noah. Given our hardness of heart, our guilt in sinning, our greed and lust and selfishness—the question for human beings should really be: Will any be saved? In fact, Jesus declared that the destruction of the world in Noah's time foreshadows what will happen to the human race when he returns in glory as the Judge and the King of all:

*The coming of the Son of Man will repeat what happened in Noah's time. In the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and being married, right up to the day Noah entered the ark. They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. Mt 24:37-39*

Another striking example of the sinfulness of human beings is the case of Lot and the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

*As dawn was breaking, the angels urged Lot on, saying, "On your way! Take with you your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city." When he hesitated, the men, by the Lord's mercy, seized his hands and the hands of his wife and his two daughters and led them to safety outside the city.*  
Gn 19:15-16

Even with God's special, merciful intervention—literally dragging Lot and his family out of the city—only four persons escaped the destruction of the cities. And only three of those ultimately were saved from God's wrath. Only Lot and his two daughters were ultimately saved from destruction. Jesus repeatedly used the example of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to indicate what would happen to towns and households that rejected him and his disciples. (Mt 10:14-15)

There are many other examples in Scripture. When the people of Israel sinned against God by making the golden calf, God was again inclined to wipe them out. It was only through the earnest intercession of Moses that they were spared (Ex 32:7-14). Even then, only Joshua and Caleb from the original generation that the Lord brought out of Egypt actually crossed into the promised land. They were the only ones among the Israelites who did not doubt that the Lord would deliver the Canaanites into their hands when they entered into the Promised Land (Nm 14:1-38). The New Testament makes clear that the relatively few who entered the Promised Land from those who originally set out is a warning to us lest we should likewise perish in our sin (1 Cor 10:1-12).

## Elijah and the Remnant of 7,000

Years later, Elijah was distressed by the massive infidelity shown to the Lord by the Israelites. God told him that there were 7,000 in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal and would therefore be spared from destruction (1 Kgs 19:18). Only 7,000 out of the entire population!

The apostle Paul saw in Elijah's experience a foreshadowing of what was to happen in times to come:

*No, God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what Scripture says about Elijah, how he pleaded with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars; I alone am left and they are seeking my life," How does God answer him? "I have left for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." **Just so, in the present time there is a remnant chosen by the grace of God.** Rom 11:2-5 (emphasis added)*

Paul saw that even in his own time, there were but a few—a remnant—who were to be saved. After all, as John tells us, had not people responded to Jesus just as they had responded to the prophets before him?

*To his own he came, yet his own did not accept him. Any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God. Those are they who believe in his name—who were begotten not by blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by man's willing it, but by God. Jn 1:11-13*

When Jesus came—the very Son of God—most of his own people rejected him. Yet his church arose as a remnant, like a tiny shoot out of dry ground. This is the historical account of the response that human beings have made to God’s merciful offer of salvation. Many, relatively speaking, ignore or even reject his offer. In doing so they forfeit the precious opportunity to receive salvation.

### **The Consistent Witness of Christian Tradition**

Sometimes statements are so obvious in their meaning but so radical in their implication that we have a hard time accepting them at face value. Jesus’ statements about many being called but a few being chosen might fall into that category for many of us. What does Jesus really mean by them?

One way to answer that question is to ask how those statements have been interpreted by holy men and women down through Christian history. When we look into this matter of salvation for many or for a few, we find a remarkable consistency of opinion. From the earliest days of the Christian church to the most recent, in fact throughout all Christian traditions, the virtually unanimous interpretation of these Gospel passages is that the majority of human beings do in fact reject the offer of salvation. The consistent witness of the greatest minds and hearts in Christian history is that when Jesus says many are traveling on the broad way that leads to destruction, he really means what he says. Many are traveling on the broad way that leads to destruction!



In one of his sermons on the New Testament, Augustine—who is acknowledged by Christians of all backgrounds as one of the most important Fathers of the early church—said:

*Yet doubtless there are but a few who are saved. You remember a question which was lately set before us out of the Gospel, “Lord,” it was said, “are there few that be saved?” (Lk 13:23). What said the Lord to this? He did not say “Not few, but many are they who are saved.” He did not say this. But what said He, when He had heard, “Are there few that be saved? Strive to enter by the strait gate” (Lk 13:24). When thou hearest then, “Are there few to be saved?” the Lord confirmed what He heard. Through the “strait gate” but “few” can “enter”... But few then are saved in comparison of the many that shall perish.<sup>1</sup>*

St. John Chrysostom, a prominent Christian leader in the fifth century, believed that even a majority of priests and bishops would be lost:

*I speak here with all the sincerity of my heart, and I say that few pastors are saved...the majority are damned, because pastoral responsibility demands heroic virtue.<sup>2</sup>*

Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was one of the greatest theologians in history, believed Scripture clearly taught that most of the human race was rejecting salvation. In his famous magnum opus *The Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas wrote:

*Those who are saved are in the minority. In this especially, however, appears the mercy of God, that he has chosen some for that salvation, from which very many in accordance with the common course and tendency of nature fall short.*<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Aquinas also cites the scriptural text of Matthew chapter seven, verses 13-14, in this same article of *The Summa Theologica* as support for his position.

St. Colette, a Franciscan reformer and mystic in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, had a series of visions. In one vision of hell, St. Colette beheld:

*Souls swirling, "as thickly as autumn leaves," ready to be sucked into the frightful fire. She saw the world in great panoramic visions which revealed to her the estates of the Church and secular governments. She knew the sins committed by the rulers and subjects of both. God then placed hell again before the eyes of her soul, and she saw more and more souls dropping into its torments.*<sup>4</sup>

St. Louis-Marie Grignon de Monfort, founder of two religious orders and known for his effective parish missions or retreats in the early 1700s, had this to say concerning the number of those who are going to be saved:

*The number of the elect is so small—so small—that were we to know how small it is, we should faint away with grief. The number of the elect is so small that were God to assemble them together, he would*

*cry to them, as he did of old by the mouth of his prophet, "Gather yourselves together, one by one," one from this province, one from that kingdom.*

St. John Vianney, a parish priest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century renowned for his holiness and purity, said that the number of the saved would be as few as the number of grapes left after the vineyard had been cleared by the harvesters. Using another analogy, he once said in a statement strikingly similar to that of St. Colette's vision of hell: "I tremble when I see so many souls lost these days. They fall into hell as leaves fall from the trees at the approach of winter."

On another occasion, St. John Vianney consoled the mother of a large family who was expecting another child. His words are striking:

*Be comforted, my child. If you only knew the women who will go to Hell because they did not bring into the world the children they should have given it!*<sup>5</sup>

While still an Anglican, Cardinal John Henry Newman—one of the outstanding Catholic thinkers of the 1800s—preached a brilliant sermon on the topic of "Many Called, Few Chosen:"

*Nothing is more clearly brought out in Scripture, or more remarkable in itself than this, that in every age, out of the whole number of persons blessed with the means of grace, few only have duly availed then of this great benefit. So certain, so uniform is the fact, that it is almost stated as a doctrine. "Many*

*are called, few are chosen.” Again, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” And again, “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in there at... Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” And St. Paul seems expressly to turn the historical fact into a doctrine, when he says, by way of remark upon his own day as compared with former ages of the Church. “Even so then, at this present time also,” that is, as formerly, “there is a remnant, according to the election of grace.” Mt 20:16; Lk 13:24; Mt 7:13-14; Rom 11:5<sup>6</sup>*

Cardinal Newman explains later in his sermon that it is not God’s will that many be lost: “It is man’s doing, not God’s will, that, while the visible Church is large, the Church invisible is small.”<sup>7</sup> Further, he points out the horrifying truth that many who have heard the call of salvation are not heeding it:

*All we know is, and a most awful thought it is, that out of the whole number of those who have received the Christian calling, out of ourselves and our friends, and all whom we see and hear of in the intercourse of life, but a few are chosen; but a few act up to their privileges.<sup>8</sup>*

Cardinal Newman closes his sermon by emphasizing that we must exercise care in interpreting Scriptures about salvation. Yet he insists that the basic meaning of salvation for the many or the few is unmistakably clear:

*Of course we must not press the words of Scripture; we do not know the exact meaning of the word "chosen"; we do not know what is meant by being saved "so as by fire," we do not know what is meant by "few." But still the few can never mean the many; and to be called without being chosen cannot but be a misery.*<sup>9</sup>

In 1917, the three children at Fatima—Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta—were given a harrowing vision of hell, which disclosed vast numbers of lost souls. The children reported that it "horrified" them and caused them "to tremble with fear."<sup>10</sup> One of them reported many years later:

*We could see a vast sea of fire, plunged in the flames were demons and lost souls, as if they were red-hot coals, transparent and black or bronze-coloured, in human form, which floated about in the conflagration, borne by the flames which issued from them, with clouds of smoke falling on all sides as sparks fell in a great conflagration without weight or equilibrium, amid shrieks and groans of sorrow and despair that horrified us and caused us to tremble in fear. The devils could be distinguished by horrible and loathsome forms of animals, frightful and unknown, but transparent like black coals that have turned red hot.*<sup>11</sup>

Before her death, Jacinta said sadly:

*The sins that lead most souls to hell are sins of the flesh! ... The sins of the world are too great! The Blessed Virgin has said that there will be many*

*wars and disturbances in the world: "wars are only punishments for the sins of the world!" ... So many lives will be lost and almost all will go to hell. So many houses will be destroyed, and so many priests will be killed. Oh! What a pity! If men ceased offending the Lord, the war (World War II) would not come and such great numbers would not go to hell.*<sup>12</sup>

Years later, Lucia, the only one of the three visionaries who remained alive was interviewed by a prominent priest. The priest held out the hope that God would save the greater part of humanity. But Lucia insisted, "Father, many will be lost." The priest reported later, "Her words disturbed me. I returned to Italy with that grave warning impressed on my heart."<sup>13</sup>

Similar theological support and even remarkably similar visions are found in the Protestant and Pentecostal traditions. For example, Pentecostal missionaries to China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the midst of a tremendous visitation of the Holy Spirit, reported that some of the children received a vision from God of souls falling into hell like autumn leaves falling from the trees.

Howard Pittman, an itinerant Pentecostal evangelist in this century, told of receiving a vision from God of souls entering heaven, along with a strong sense about the number of people who had died that particular day. He was later able to check the statistics and confirm that the number of deaths that had come to him in the vision was historically accurate. What struck him,

he said, was the small number of those who had died who were entering the kingdom.

Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation and the founder of Lutheranism, said in a sermon on godliness and righteousness:

*Suppose you say: "Such people (true Christians) are very rare, and who would be able to remain in this world were he to do this?" I answer: "This is not a discovery of today, that few are saved and that the gate is narrow that leads to life and those who find it are few." Mt 7:14<sup>14</sup>*

John Calvin, another leader of the Protestant Reformation and the founder of Calvinism, said in his greatest theological work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

*Now since the Lord saw the gospel published far and wide, held in contempt by many, justly valued by a few, he describes God to us in the person of a king, who, in giving a solemn feast, sends his herald round about to invite a great crowd but can obtain acceptance from very few...Mt 22:2-9<sup>15</sup>*

John Wesley, the great English revivalist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the founder of Methodism, in speaking to those with money, said:

*If you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, give all you can; otherwise I can have no more hope of your salvation than that of Judas Iscariot.<sup>16</sup>*

There are countless other examples. But we can see even in this small sample from across the centuries and across the lines of church tradition that there has been

a consistent interpretation of the words of Jesus. The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to salvation, and those who find it are few.

## **We Cannot Find What We Do Not Seek**

But why is this so? Why do so many miss the way that leads to life? Why do so many instead travel the way that leads to death?

The first reason is an obvious one: Many do not find the way that leads to life because they do not seek it. You can seldom find what you are not looking for. Jesus says, “The one who seeks, finds” (Mt 7:8). The opposite is also true: He who does not seek, usually doesn’t find.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, “Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6). The Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, promises that:

*When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you... Jer 29:13-14*

These passages contain both a promise and the condition for that promise’s fulfillment. When we seek the Lord, we will find him. But we will only find him when we do seek him. There is a clear condition. We must seek, based on the knowledge that he exists and is eager to be found by us.



Where do we find this important knowledge for our salvation? In the Letter to the Romans, Paul explains that God has made his existence known to the human race through everything he created. He has also given human beings an innate sense of right and wrong. In fact, he has put this moral sense right into the human heart. God makes it perfectly clear that those who do not act upon this knowledge, using it as a springboard to seek God, are without excuse. They are destined to eternal ruin (see Rom 1:18-32).

### **The Divine Deadline**

Another reason why so few find the way that leads to life is that they seek it too late. They do not utterly reject pursuing salvation, but they put it off with tragic results.

In one of the Gospel passages we have already read, Jesus warns that many will try to enter and be unable, because the master will already have locked the door (see Lk 13:34-25). What a sobering image! The point is all too clear. There does come a time—a definite, specific time—after which it is simply too late to gain entry into the kingdom of God. God's offer of salvation comes with a divine deadline. After that deadline, the offer is irrevocably withdrawn. For the generation of people who will be alive at the time, that deadline will usher in the glorious return of Jesus to the earth and the final judgment.

For others, the deadline will arrive at the hour of death. Many people know in their hearts about the narrow way, but they put off entering it. Many think, "I'll get around to it when I'm older." But none of us

knows how long his life will last. Every second two people die in our world. Every day, more than 170,000 human beings of all ages cross the line from time into eternity. Many of them meet death unexpectedly. No doubt almost all of them meet it long before they would have preferred. How many people reach the end of their life having intended to seek for the narrow way, but, tragically, have never gotten around to it?

The prophet Isaiah issued an urgent plea to those who would put off coming to the Lord:

*Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near. Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; Let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says The LORD.*  
Is 55:6-8

Again, the words of Isaiah carry both a promise and a condition. The promise is that God stands ready to show mercy to us, to generously forgive us. The condition is that we seek the Lord while he may be found.

The apostle Paul drives home the same urgent appeal in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. He quotes the promise of God given through Isaiah: "In an acceptable time I have heard you; on a day of salvation I have helped you." Then he says, "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2). Don't wait to seek out the narrow way, Paul urges us. Not only Paul, but Jesus before him and Isaiah before him strongly encourage us: don't put off receiving God's offer of salvation until a tomorrow that may never come.

## Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

A third reason why so few find the way that leads to life is the influence of false prophets and teachers. The New Testament frequently warns us of this danger. Jesus himself gives us a clear warning right after the very passage in which he speaks about the narrow way. “Be on your guard against the false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl” (Mt 7:15).

Paul solemnly charges his co-worker, Timothy, to be on guard against false prophets and teachers who would try to lead astray the flock of God. He is establishing Timothy as a bishop and wants to make sure he protects the flock he has been set over. Part of the reason for the effectiveness of these false shepherds, Paul indicates, is a lack of vigilance among God’s people against false teaching—or even an outright receptivity to it. Paul took the threat very seriously:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is coming to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power, I charge you to preach the word, to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient—correcting, reproofing, appealing—constantly teaching and never losing patience. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but, following their own desires, will surround themselves with teachers who tickle their ears. They will stop listening to the truth and will wander off to fables. 2 Tm 4:1-4*

That's quite a charge! We can see both the warnings of Jesus and those of Paul coming to pass in our own day. We live in a world filled with false prophecy and teaching. There are powerful forces at work in the world to lead people astray. Men and women are being invited to take the broad way that leads to destruction. False promises are being made and the narrow way that leads to life is being mocked and made to look foolish.

All around us we see men and women shutting out the truth of the gospel and settling for a way that seems easier. You can have more of what you want now. That's what the world tells us. You can disobey the commands of God seemingly without consequence. You can add those things of God that attract you to the things of this world. You can compromise on the truth and get away with it. You do not need to deny yourself, to take up your cross and to follow Christ. You can take the easy way.

In fact, if one were to attempt to describe what the general sense of our culture is regarding the reality of salvation and damnation, even within many churches; it could be put like this:

*The gate that leads to salvation is wide, the road is clear, and almost everybody ends up saved. How narrow is the gate that leads to hell, how difficult the road and how few there are who get there.*

This, of course is the very opposite of what the truth is, as revealed by Jesus.

And there are the false teachers and prophets of our day who play upon this, so that the air is filled with falsehoods about what is really important, about what truth is, and about how one finds eternal happiness. As the editor of a Catholic diocesan newspaper put it:

*I believe there is a hell, but that nobody is there... ten out of ten will go to heaven. It is inconsistent that a loving God would allow people to damn themselves.*<sup>17</sup>

All of us need to learn to distinguish the voice of the shepherd from the voice of the marauder. We need to recognize falsehood and reject it for ourselves. And we need to warn others about it as well. This is why I have written the book: *A Crisis Of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality, and Mission in the Catholic Church*.<sup>18</sup> I urge everyone who hasn't read it to do so.

## **We Fool No One But Ourselves**

A fourth reason why many fail to find the way that leads to life is because they deceive themselves. This is the point of the passage in which Jesus teaches that:

*"None of those who cry out, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."* Mt 7:21-23; also see Lk 13:25-27

Apparently, it is possible to persuade ourselves that we are safely inside the kingdom of God when we are not really doing the will of God. It is possible, for example, to be effective in service on Jesus' behalf without actually being under his lordship. Some of those who

will cry out, “Lord, Lord,” on the last day will prophesy, cast out demons, and even work mighty miracles, Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew (7:22). Yet, he will tell them he never knew them! It is possible to have spiritual experiences and even exercise spiritual power, but fail to do the will of God for our lives.

If we are using spiritual power to gratify our ego or to make a name for ourselves, if we are not denying our very self and taking up our cross and following Christ, we are deluding ourselves. The result can actually be blessing for others but damnation for us. These are the clear and forceful words of Jesus in the Gospel.

In the same way, if we hang back from genuine surrender to Christ but rationalize it by clinging to mere external actions, we fool no one but ourselves. “But I’ve got neighbors who go to prayer meetings. I’ve got relatives who are Christians. I’ve even gone to church with them. What do you mean you don’t know me?” we might say. It’s instructive for us to remember that Jesus predicted those who didn’t really know him would respond in just this way: “Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your company. You taught in our streets’” (Lk 13:26).

Merely being sympathetic to Jesus’ cause is not enough. Hanging around other people who love and obey Jesus is not enough. Being related to people who love and obey Jesus is not enough. We need to love him ourselves. We need to obey him ourselves. Deciding to stand on the fringes of his company now may leave us standing on the fringes eternally! He will say: “I tell

you, I do not know where you come from. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Lk 13:27).

## **Giving It All We’ve Got**

When we look at the words of Jesus, the words of the apostles and the prophets—when we consider how God has dealt with the human race and the reflections of holy men and women down through the ages—a clear picture emerges. The way that leads to damnation is wide and easy. And there are many traveling it. The way that leads to life and salvation is narrow and hard. And there are only a few traveling it. That is why Jesus says: “Try to come in through the narrow door. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and be unable” (Lk 13:24).

The Greek word for “try” or “strive” in the passage is “agonizomai.” It comes into English as *agonize* and conveys a sense of hard work and strenuous effort. Not surprisingly, it is sometimes used to describe the waging of war.

The effort Jesus is telling us to make to enter the kingdom of God is “agonizomai” effort. We have to work hard at it. We have to give it all we’ve got. We have to set out resolutely to enter through the narrow door. We have to fight to stay on the narrow way. That doesn’t mean of course that we don’t need faith to choose the Lord and his way. That doesn’t mean that any of it is possible without God’s grace. It does mean that God gives us the grace to respond to his call to life and salvation in a fittingly wholehearted way. If we don’t respond, we are rejecting his grace and putting ourselves in jeopardy.

## Faith Must Be Based on God's Revelation

Certainly it is true, as Paul writes, that salvation comes by faith, which comes by hearing the word of God (see Eph 2:8 and Rom 10:17). But the faith that God gives us is based on his revelation. He lets us see things as they really are. He lets us hear Jesus and grasp what he is saying. It is a faith that includes knowledge of what we must do in response to God's offer. Jesus tells us:

*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love. You will live in my love if you keep my commandments...”* John 15:9-10

In his first letter, the apostle John writes to his disciples in Christ:

*The man who claims, “I have known him (Jesus Christ),” without keeping his commandments, is a liar; in such a one there is no truth. But whoever keeps his word, Truly has the love of God been perfected in him. The way we can be sure we are in union with him is for the man who claims to abide in him to conduct himself just as he did.* 1 Jn 2:4-6

Jesus tells us that the way that leads to life is narrow. That is part of his revelation to us, part of the knowledge that underlies the saving faith he brings. And his word to us in light of that reality is, “Try to come in through the narrow door” (Lk 13:24). Jesus is that door. He tells us in the Gospel of John:

*“My solemn word is this: I am the sheep-gate. All who came before me were thieves and marauders*



*whom the sheep did not heed. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe. He will go in and out and find pasture.” Jn 10:7-9*

## **Running the Race that All Can Win**

Paul uses a different image to make the same point:

*You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win! 1 Cor 9:24*

Think of the training, the hard work, and the mental and physical discipline that an athlete invests in training for a race. Paul says we should invest that kind of effort in pursuing a life pleasing to God and worthy of the gospel. That is what it means to “try to come in through the narrow door.”

The great blessing of course, is that unlike a race in which there can be only one winner, in the pursuit of salvation all can win. Indeed, God wants us all to enter the race and to persevere in running it, so that all of us will win. God “wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). As the apostle Peter tells us:

*The Lord does not delay in keeping his promise—though some consider it “delay”. Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance. 2 Pt 3:9*

God offers salvation to the entire human race. That has been his pattern from the beginning. He offered deliverance to the entire populations of Sodom and

Gomorrah: as many as were willing to receive it could be delivered. He offered the entire people of Israel the opportunity to cross the wilderness and enter the Promised Land: as many as were willing to receive it could have entered. He offered and still offers the whole world salvation through Jesus: as many as are willing to receive it can be saved. His grace, expressed in his offer of salvation to all men and women, is unlimited.

### **Pointing the Way for Others**

That is why one of the implications of understanding the truth about the two paths is the importance of persevering in evangelism. There are two ways, and only two ways, set before the human race. In his farewell address to the people of Israel, Moses said:

*“Here, then, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy. I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by*

*loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him.” Dt 30:15-20*

Many years later, the prophet Jeremiah set the same choice before the people:

*“Thus says the LORD: See, I am giving you a choice between life and death.” Jer 21:8*

The apostle Paul indicates that the same fundamental choice faces the human race today:

*The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation it is the power of God.*  
1 Cor:1:18

There are those who are on the road to salvation because they have embraced the cross of Christ. There are those who are on the road to eternal ruin because they have rejected it—or because they have not yet heard of it and are living in sin and darkness. And there are those who, while not rejecting the gospel, haven't heard the gospel, see pages 67-84 of my book, *The Return of the Lord*.<sup>19</sup>

Our commission is to do whatever we can to help as many of our fellow human beings as possible to find and follow the right road. We should not let ourselves become discouraged by the teachings that only a few will find it. The words “few” and “many” are relative to each other. We don't know, in absolute terms, how many “a few” is or how great in number “many” is. We do know that even if God is sober and realistic about how many, relatively speaking, are likely to respond to

this offer—he still “desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” We do know there is a great field of opportunity. And God wants to use us to make a difference.

### **Taking Heed Ourselves**

A second implication of grasping the truth about the narrow way is the importance of taking heed ourselves by staying on the right path: “For fear that after having preached to others I myself should be rejected” (see 1 Cor 9:27).

It is sobering to note that some of Scripture’s warnings about failing to follow the narrow road are addressed to those who are presently in the church. Jesus warns that in the last days: “False messiahs and false prophets will appear, performing signs and wonders so great as to mislead even the chosen if that were possible” (Mt 24:24). Even the elect need to remain vigilant lest they abandon the straight and narrow way for the path that leads to destruction! Even saints need to persevere in following the narrow road all the way to the end!

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul comments on the tragic way that the Jewish people had rejected the Messiah. They were like branches of a tree who are now pruned away Paul says, while the gentiles have been grafted onto a tree. He makes clear that the Jews’ rejection of Christ carries serious consequences. Then he urges his readers not to take lightly their own need to decide, again and again, to be faithful to Christ:

*Well and good. They were cut off because of unbelief and you are there because of faith. Do not be haughty on that account, but be fearful. If God did not spare the natural branches, he will certainly not spare you. Consider the kindness and the severity of God—severity towards those who fell, kindness towards you, provided you remain in his kindness; if you do not, you too will be cut off.* Rom 11:20-22

## **Staying Squarely on the Path**

The only thing that can take us off the path that leads to life is our own choice to reject Christ and his grace. Such a choice could be made in an extraordinary, dramatic moment of repudiation. But it can also be made bit by bit, degree by degree, over a long period of time. It might begin with a decision simply to ease over to one side of the narrow path, just to get a better view of “what’s going on out there.” Bit by bit we drift farther and farther away. Then one day we discover we have drifted onto the broad way that leads to death without fully realizing it! And perhaps we are not easily able to return to the narrow way.

We need to stay squarely on the narrow way. We need to decide not to wander out near the edge but to hold firmly to the middle of the path. We need to be serious about dealing with our sin. We need to be serious about removing things from our life that tend to lead us into sin. We need to be serious about filling our lives with Christ and the things of Christ. We need to take seriously the call to holiness, personal prayer, corporate worship, the study and application of God’s

Word in Scripture, and loving service to others. We need to recognize the urgency of intercessory prayer and evangelism.

Persevering on the narrow way that leads to life is indeed challenging. It was challenging to the disciples when they heard Jesus' teaching for the first time. Relying on our own human strength, it is impossible. But relying on God and having confidence in him and his help, makes it indeed possible:

*Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples could only marvel at his words. So Jesus repeated what he had said: "My sons, how hard is it to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." They were completely overwhelmed at this, and exclaimed to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus fixed his gaze on them and said, "For man it is impossible but not for God. With God all things are possible."*  
Mk 10:23-27

Life in this world can be very hard for a Christian. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Christ brings with it pain:

*Jesus said to all "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. Lk 9:23-24*

But even in this life the return is blessing and joy a hundredfold when we choose the narrow way, because we become part of God's household and are given a share in the riches of his kingdom, even now, on this earth:

*Peter was moved to say to him: "We have put aside everything to follow you." Jesus answered: "I give you my word, there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children or property, for me and for the gospel who will not receive in this present age a hundred times as many homes, brothers and sisters, mothers, children and property—and persecution besides—and in the age to come, everlasting life. Many who are first shall come last, and the last shall come first."* Mk 10:28-31

As we take up the burden of going along the narrow way and denying ourselves, as we take on the yoke of following Jesus daily, we observe a wonderful reality: his burden is light, his yoke is easy. As Jesus tells us:

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy, and my burden light."* Mt 11:28-30

We need to persevere in the love and grace of God. We need to choose day after day, through trials and difficulties, to be faithful to Christ no matter what. We need to trust that God will give us the grace to do it. Yes, God, who gave up his only son to die on the

cross for us, will now give us everything we need to persevere in running the race, to pray for and reach out to others until the day we die.

Scripture promises that so long as we remain steadfast, there is nothing outside of ourselves that can make us leave the narrow way:

*For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Rm 8:38-39*

Brothers and sisters, let's persevere in traveling on the narrow way—which is Jesus himself—and invite as many as possible to join us on this glorious way that leads to life eternal! Let's pray in our hearts:

*Lord Jesus Christ, I place my faith and trust in you. Forgive me my sins and grant me everlasting life. Help me to obey you and follow you all the days of my life. ✠*



I wrote this in 1988 to raise an alarm about the creeping universalism that presumes that virtually everyone is automatically saved, and showing how contradictory this is to Scripture and Tradition. In 2012, I was able to publish a full-length study on this important issue entitled *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*. In 2013, I published a shorter book, *The Urgency of the New Evangelization*, that summarized and developed this theme further. See pages 35 and 36 for more information.

Ralph Martin

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## Endnotes

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For an in depth consideration of this important topic we have available a book by Ralph Martin, **Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization**

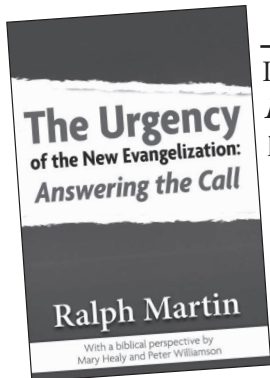
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In *The Urgency of the new Evangelization* Ralph Martin has gathered together the major themes he has been speaking and writing about in recent years concerning the New Evangelization and the New Pentecost and put them into this comprehensive, easy to

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