

Strive for Heaven Now, Not Later - Part 1

Jack Hughes

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If you have your Bibles, turn to Luke 13:22, where we are going to begin looking at a passage [that] is really yummy. There are some passages that I can hardly even move through, and this is one of [them]. I always tell myself, "I'm going to preach the whole section," and it never happens. There [are] so many good things here. But, I think you'll like it as we go through slowly. Sometimes when you're preaching, there are certain little theological implications that you want to address, and you want to talk about, but you just don't have enough time. They are too complicated and they're too important to really rush through. So, why rush?

Throughout history, there ha[ve] been times when the Church has been mostly full of unbelievers. I think this has been the common thing throughout the centuries. For instance, when Constantine became emperor, he required everybody to join the Church and become a Christian. When this happened, many people, at sword point, had to become Christians. The problem is [that] you don't become a Christian that way. You can't say, "Become a Christian right now and go to heaven, or you're going to die." That just doesn't work. There [is] no such thing as forced conversion.

Later on in history, there were times when the Roman Catholic Church, or different Protestant [denominations], tried to force people to become Christians. These [were] all politically motivated, power-motivated ways of trying to bring about unity, or peace, or whatever. But, it just doesn't

work that way. If you take an empire, a nation, [or] a community and force people to become Christians at sword point, what you have is a bunch of unbelievers who call themselves Christians. Those unbelievers, then, often go to church and send their kids to church, and it will become kind of a cultural thing, but that doesn't mean they're all saved.

Satan has also raised up preachers, especially in these latter days, who think that if they can say the right thing, create the right emotion, get the right lilting music, and the right drama, and the right whatever, they can basically lead anybody to Jesus. Thus, through emotional pleading, and theatrical endeavors, they do get people emotionally charged up, [and often] those people do raise their hands, or come forward and pray a prayer, or sign a card, or whatever. They're then followed up on. They're told that they are now Christians, they're now saved, [and] once you're saved you're always saved and you can never lose your salvation. Thus, all of these people think they're saved, and most are not.

[At] still other times, Satan has made Christianity a cultural, fashionable thing. [Do] you remember back in 1969 the Byrds' song on their [album] *Ballad of Easy Rider*, "Jesus is Just Alright"? It was cool to be into Jesus in the latter [19]60s and early 70s. It was cool. It was fashionable to hang out, have Bible studies, and read your Bible. That was how it was, but then as soon as Jesus went out of fashion, then everybody became what they really were. A few were saved; most were not.

Finally, there are others who are slowly indoctrinated into Christianity. They grow up in a Christian home, they have Christian parents, they have Christian friends, they get used to the Christian church culture—the jargon, the hymns, the Sunday morning services, mid-week meetings, or whatever—and they're really convinced they're saved. Maybe at a point in time they feel sorry about their sins and they ask Jesus in[to] their heart[s]. But many of these people are not Christians. They just feel compelled to call themselves that because, after all, their parents are Christians, their friends are Christians, they go to a Christian church, why wouldn't they be Christian[s]? Everybody would think they were weird if they didn't call

themselves Christians, so [they think], “Of course I’m going to call myself a Christian. Besides, I want to be associated [with Christians],” or “I want to be baptized,” or “I want to be able to eat that little cracker and drink that juice on Sunday morning when I’m hungry.

There [are] a lot of reasons that [make] people claim to be Christians [but] that don’t make them Christians. Satan knows that the person who is further from Christianity [than many others] is the person who is in church who thinks he’s saved. That person is in the greatest danger. He’s inoculated into Christianity, surrounded by Christianity, thinking he’s a Christian when he’s not. Therefore, he never looks to be saved because he [believes he] already is.

The Jews [during the time of our text] had the same basic kind of problem. The Mishnah¹ said that basically all Israelites are going to share in the world to come. They’re all going to get to heaven except those who deny the resurrection, those who say that the Law of God wasn’t from heaven, and those who are Epicureans (that is, those who don’t believe that God intervenes in the world and works with men in this world). But everybody else is getting through. You just need to be a child of Abraham. So, the common thought among the Jews at the time of Jesus [was]: “We’re all going to heaven.” That’s why Jesus had to rebuke them. “You think that you’re going to heaven because you’re children of Abraham? God is able to make children of Abraham from these stones!” [see Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8].

So, back then, like many today, there were a lot of very religious people. We’re talking synagogue-attending, believing Jews who believed in the Law [and] who kept kosher kitchens. They all [thought] they [were] going to heaven because they [were] Jewish, just like many people today think they’re going to heaven because they go to church or because they call themselves Christians.

¹You can find information about the Mishnah at the following link as well as by entering the term into a search engine:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mishnah>.

This brings us to our text in Luke 13:22 and following, where Jesus is working His way to Jerusalem, where He is going to die for our sins. He is stopping by at various villages and He's teaching. This is one of those instances. So, follow along as I read, starting in [Luke 13:]22:

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 through 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.' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown 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." [Luke 13:22–30]

From this portion of Luke, Jesus gives us five truths about getting to heaven so that we are not deceived into thinking we are on our way to heaven and then end up in hell; so [that] we are not one of those people who goes to church, calls himself a Christian, and then ends up in hell; so that we [don't] let Christianity pass us by, thinking we're Christians all the while, but are not. The parallels between the Jews at that time and Christians at this time [are] striking.

This text is so loaded with good things and has so many pivotal things to say and implications [that] I don't know how long we're going to take in here. We're going to take as long as it takes. We may get through it in one more week, and maybe in ten weeks. I don't know.

We're going to look at the first two [truths from this passage] this morning. [The] first is an honest question that you should ask. Look at [Luke 13:]22: "And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem." This is the latter part of His ministry. He's about to die. He's teaching in these villages. He has tried many approaches to break up their stony, unbelieving hearts. He still has a rather small group following Him, which is surprising in that He has been preaching for three years, but He has very few followers. [There was] almost universal rejection [of His message].

He's going through the countryside, trying to see them come to salvation. He longs for them to be saved. He *loves* them. He *wants* them to be saved. He has tried miracles; He's tried parables; He's tried threatening; He's tried baiting. He's tried everything. As He approaches [the end of His time here on earth], as we're going to see in this chapter and later on in [chapter] 14, He starts saying some very hard things.

You know, pecans have pretty soft skins on them. Walnuts you [have] to give a little bit harder crush [to break them open]. [Then] you start looking at macadamia nuts, [and] man, they take a blow. [Similarly], the harder the heart, the harder you have to strike it [to break it open]. So, Jesus now (and we're going to see this, and I'm just warning you), begins to strike very hard. Sometimes, when He strikes hard, it is confusing to Christians who live in an age of ease and social Christianity. They wonder, "Why is He doing that?"

Look at [Luke 13:]23. Jesus has been striking at them. He has been rebuking them, warning them, [and] threatening them of hell. "And someone said to Him, 'Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?'" This is such an excellent question. Who knows why the guy asked it. Maybe he was feeling convicted of his sins. Maybe he was wondering how Jesus compared to

the rabbis, who were saying that everybody pretty much [was] going to get in. Maybe he was wondering because Jesus has basically condemned all the religious leaders. He told the religious leaders that they were the children of Satan [see John 8:44], and when they made a disciple he became [two] times more the child of hell than themselves [see Matthew 23:15].

He warned the multitudes of judgment. He said, “Nineveh is going to judge you—that pagan place, where a guy came [after being] spit up out of a whale, and went and preached a message. They all repented, and you won’t repent, and I’ve done miracle after miracle. I’m the Messiah, and you still won’t repent” [see Luke 11:32]. So, man, He’s laying into them, and the whole implication of all that Jesus is saying is: pretty much everybody is lost. That runs antithetical to what they’ve been told by the religious leaders, [which was that] pretty much everybody is saved.

This man [in Luke 13:23] is moved to ask the very pertinent question at the time: “Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?” If Jesus [had] said, “Well, ninety percent will get to heaven,” that would pretty good, wouldn’t it? If you were a gambling person, [and] even if you’re not, nine-to-one odds [are] good. [You would probably] think, “You know, chances are, if I’m just a little bit better than the worst scum of society, I’m going to get in, especially if I go to church—a Bible-teaching church—and I’m giving, and serving in the ministry. *Obviously* I’m going to get in because if nine out of ten are getting in, I [have] to be in that group.” You’d feel pretty good about that.

But what if Jesus said, “Ten percent are getting in”? That [would probably make you] a little bit more uneasy, because you’re thinking, “Hmm. One of out ten people—that’s not very many. There are about 300 million people in [America], [so] ten percent [of that is] about 30 million people.” Do you think there are 30 million born-again believers in this country—30 million people who love Jesus, who love His Word, who are serving, and giving, and sharing their faith? Let’s just say there were and they all lived in California. California has about 38 million people, so [three] out of [every] four people in California would be saved. The entire rest of the nation, all

forty-nine other states [and the rest of the people in California], would all perish and go to hell. That's if one out of ten were saved. That is a scary thought, isn't it?

What makes it [scarier] is [that] these Jews were religious, synagogue-attending, temple-worshipping, feast-observing Jews. So, [Jesus] is saying this to religious people, not [to] the whole nation, pagans included. He's speaking to the religious *minority*, and saying [that only] a few [would be saved]. What if you knew that only one out of ten in this *room* were going to heaven? That would be scary. Matthew 7:13–14 is a text that is similar to ours, [but] it's at a different time, at a different place, [and is part of] the Sermon on the Mount. [Jesus] says: "Enter through the narrow gate;" He uses "gate" instead of "door." He gives a little extra information: "for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." [Do] you know what? Jesus is right. Few people are going to get in, only a few.

This brings us to Jesus' answer in our text [in Luke 13], and this is the scary answer you should heed. Look at the end of [Luke 13:]23 and the beginning of verse 24: "And He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door.'" Here we have two very unsettling words, if you know what they mean, and you consider their implications. The first word we have is "strive." In the Greek, this word is *textitagonizomai*, and you can probably guess what English word[s] we derive from *agonizomai*—the word[s] "agony" or "agonize" come from that [Greek] word. This word is no mild term. This word can be used to describe "a fight to the death, to expend extreme effort, to struggle with strenuous zeal against opposition in order to achieve something." Jesus says, "*Agonize* to get in the narrow door."

We just witnessed the Olympics, and those athletes have *textitagonizomai*-ed. You can't watch [them compete] and [not] think, "Man, look [at the] shape they are in. Look at that guy flip around on the floor and do triple flips." Have you ever tried to do that? Don't, it's dangerous. [You] see their strength. They get that way by training [for] four years. Some of them train

from Olympics to Olympics. It's amazing. We often have conversations as the announcer is telling us about how hard the person trained and what they did. We say, "Man, I could never do that. I could never set aside four years of my life, be on a strict diet, train six days a week, six hours a day. I couldn't do that." But that's what Jesus says: "You want to get to heaven? You better *agonizomai*."

That poses a problem in a world where not very many people are agonizing to get into heaven. But Jesus commands us here [in this text], and it's a plural command, which means [that] when the man asked the question "Are there just a few who are being saved?" Jesus, then, doesn't respond, "You," single man "strive." He says, "All of you listening to Me agonize to get into heaven." That's what Jesus is saying. "Overcome every obstacle. Strive, struggle, expend every amount of effort to get in."

Why does Jesus tell us to put forth such extreme effort? [It is] because of the second scary word—["narrow"]—because the door you have to get through is a narrow one. Alvin [Colston] has taken it upon himself to create a sermon slide [each Sunday]. You probably saw it up there this morning—some cartoon thing with some thing with a little door in the end, and Mount Doom on the other side. I don't know what it was. [Earlier in the week], he sent me a couple [of] slides [to consider], and I said, "Well, there's no door in any of these slides. There's no agonizing in these slides."

He [said], "Well, I can't find a narrow door." Think about it. Who makes narrow doors? Who would ever make a door so narrow you couldn't get through [easily]? [When] you go to the building supply place, you can get twenty-four-inch[-wide] doors, but they don't sell them any narrower than that because if they did, who could fit through? If you get somebody who is pretty big, they [wouldn't] even get through. So, why would you make a door to access something that is so narrow you have to strive—agonize—to get through it. It just doesn't make sense, [and] therefore it's very difficult to find pictures that work.

Let's just say you have entered into a very large, well-manicured park. It has this big stone wall around the outside of it. You come in, and you're just

taking a stroll. You see the big trees and their canopies, green grass, shrubs, and flowers. You're walking around the perimeter of the park; you're enjoying yourself. You're about halfway around, when you stop and you notice that in the wall there is a funny little door. It is narrow, and you're thinking, "That is strange. Why would anybody put that there?" You see the door-knob, and you try it, and you can even open and close [the door]. You're thinking, "Hmm. What's that for?" It's so skinny you couldn't even get through it.

Then, you hear somebody on the [bull]horn, "Excuse me!"

You think, "What's that?" and you turn, and you see about 200 yards away, there's a guy standing on the roof of [a big] truck. He says, "I'm going to let the lion out now. You better get through the door." The gate [in the side of the truck] comes open, and this 500-pound male lion steps out, looks around, fixes its gaze upon you, and starts trotting in your direction.

You wonder what's going on. "Hey! What's going on here? This isn't a zoo, is it?"

The guy says, "I'd get through the door. Bye!"

You realize, "I can't run back to the entrance where I came in. I've got to get through that door, but it's so narrow!" So, you [go] up to it, and you realize, "I can get my head in, but my body is not fitting." You hear the lion roar. You're getting a little scared because that doorway is about one inch narrower than your rib cage. In desperation and fear, you start pulling off your jacket, and your sweater. You think, "OK. All right. How am I going to do this? How am I going to get through?" The lion has covered half the distance by now, and it's starting to run a little bit faster. It runs very silently, [so] you keep looking over your shoulder [to see where it is]. In desperation, you begin to claw, and you begin to throw yourself into the doorjamb. You blow out all your air, and you crush through, and it's scraping your chest and your back. You pop through [and] slam the door shut, just as the lion's claws hit the door. You have *agonizomai*-ed to get through the narrow door.

This is the exact thing that Jesus is talking about. You need to strive to enter heaven because the lion of Judah is coming [see Revelation 5:5], and he will rip you to shreds if you don't seek Him now. The statement "strive to enter through the narrow door" should be enough to cause any unrepentant sinner to break out into a cold sweat. Judgment *is* coming. This is not [an] idle threat. This is not [a] myth. This is going to happen, and there [are] going to be a lot of people who find themselves on the wrong side of the wall when the lion comes in judgment. It is at that time [that] they are going to say, "I need to get through the door."

Jesus is saying, "You need to do it now." But the problem is [that] we don't want to do it now because we don't want Jesus telling us what to do, controlling our [lives], beating up on us, and making us feel bad about our sins. We like our sins. Our sins bring us pleasure. [We think], "If I were to strive to enter now, I'd have to make changes in my life. I don't want to make those changes. I want to be my own god. I want to be in control of my own life. I'll put it off until later. I want to enjoy my stroll in the park. I am just going to pretend the lion isn't coming." That is so foolish. That is insanity.

Then, Jesus says something even [scarier]. Look at the middle of [Luke 13:24: "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." This is one of those texts where it is very important to notice what the text does and does not say. First, notice [that not everyone] refuse[s] to believe there is a heaven and hell. There is a large contingent described as "the many" who *do* believe in heaven and hell, and there is a point [at which] they do want to enter in. But, Jesus says, "Even though that's true, they're going to seek to enter and they won't be able. There will be a belief there, there will be a desire there, a seeking there, but [not an] entering into heaven. They will get devoured. They will perish."

Second, notice the words Jesus uses. He doesn't say, "*Strive* to enter the narrow door; for many, I tell you, *strive* to enter and will not be able." Notice He didn't use that word ["strive"] the second time. He uses a completely different word, with a different verb tense. He says, "But many will

seek to enter,” not *strive* to enter. The word “strive” describes this agonizing effort, and the word “seek” describes a complacent “Yeah, I kind of desire that, I want to do that someday, I know I need to exercise and floss my teeth” [attitude]. It’s something that we agree is a good thing, but [we want to do it] later. He uses “strive” in the present: “I command you now to enter by agonizing effort, but in the future, people are going to try and complacently enter.”

We might paraphrase it this way: “I command you right now to agonize to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will in the future put forth a little effort to enter that narrow door, but will not be able to enter and will perish in hell.” That’s what He’s saying. The word “seek” is a much milder word than “strive.” Jesus does admit [that] they are going to seek, probably when they stand before [Him] on judgment day, and they say, “Lord, Lord, have we not. . .” [see Matthew 7:21–22]. They then want to get into heaven because they see their doom is coming, and they want to make something happen, but it doesn’t. [For] the Jews, I’m sure [this] happened when Titus came to conquer Rome, and they saw so many thousands being killed, and then they wanted something to happen. It was too late. They died.

Many people think they have plenty of time: “I can just enjoy the pleasures of the world now, the sins of the world now. I don’t have to read my Bible, [or] serve, [or] give. I don’t have to live my life for the Lord. I’ll do the Christian thing. I’ll put on the Christian face, speak the Christian jargon when I’m at church—blend in. But, I mean, come on, do you expect me to do that when I’m at work, when I’m playing, when no one is around? I need to be what I really am, and I don’t [want to be] pretending to be a Christian when no one’s watching.” Well, God is watching. Do you think that being a Christian is easy? Do you think that as the car plunges off the cliff and I’m heading down toward the rocks below, I’ll just say, “Lord, I repent and believe,” [and I’ll go to] heaven? Do you think that’s what you’re going to be able to do?

“Oh, yeah! Don’t you remember the thief on the cross? [In the] last minute, right before he died, he cried out and Jesus saved him.”

You know what? Jesus did, but listen, don’t comfort yourself with deathbed conversions. Those stories [in which] people say, “Oh, yes, so-and-so, on his deathbed, he gave his life to Christ.” You know what? Praise God if he did. One minister did a study of a thousand people who had deathbed conversions and then became well. Only two in a thousand kept walking with the Lord. So, never take the exception and turn it into the norm. Jesus says, “You strive *now* to enter in.” Don’t be one of those lazy, procrastinating, sin-loving people who thinks that they can live their whole life [against] Jesus, sin against Jesus, hate Jesus’ law, hate His people, hate His Church, and then at the very end, say, “OK, listen, I don’t want to go to hell, so save me.” It’s not going to work.

This brings up a whole other issue about striving to enter, if you think about it. Does it bother you when Jesus says things like this: “You have to do this, and if you don’t do this you won’t get into heaven”? What does that kind of work into? It sounds like salvation by works. I want you to know [that] if you look for grace, you’re not going to find it in the rest of the book [of Luke]. [Jesus is] going from city to city, from village to village, giv[ing] hard calls: “If you don’t do this, you’re going to perish!” and then [He] move[s] on. [It makes you think], “Well, Jesus, couldn’t You explain a little bit? Couldn’t you [work] in a little Pauline theology?” No, He doesn’t do that.

Some people look at this, and say, “It just seems that if *we* have to strive, and *we* have to do this to enter in, that salvation seems to be partly based on our works.” But, you know, there is a difference between being the door and going through the door. [There’s a difference between] somebody providing an exit and you taking the exit. But some might argue, “Yeah, but listen, I can take a small bit of credit for my salvation. After all, I did come to the place in my life [where] I realized I was missing something. I did come to the place in my life [where] I began to seek out different religions, and I finally talked to somebody about Christianity. I studied my Bible, I

listened to what they said, and you know what happened? After I did that for a while, I began to understand the truth and I began to understand that I needed salvation and what the gospel was. Then I chose to turn from my sins and believe in Jesus. I was saved. So, granted, Jesus died on the cross, and made atonement, and rose again from the dead. Yes, He did all that stuff, but I just want you to know [that] I had a part. I did part of what I had to do, and Jesus did what He had to do. And so, together we both did what we needed to do. I agonized and I got in.”

This is the common thought of every new believer, almost without exception. [Do] you know why it’s the common thought? [It is] because that’s what [a new believer’s] *experience*, not the Word of God, tells him. He knows, “Yes, I got interested. Yes, I understood. Yes, I believed and then I was saved. I did those things, God did His things, and together we got it in the end.” That’s what he thinks. Then, he starts reading his Bible, and he comes to Romans 3:11[-12], and he reads that interesting section—actually [Romans 3:]10–18 all says pretty much the same thing, but [those two] verse[s] kind of stick in his mind, where it says: “THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; . . . THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.” Then he wonders, “Hmm. How is that? I sought Him. Why does Paul say [that] no one seeks God if *I* sought God?” He doesn’t know how to answer the questions. [They] trouble him, though.

He keeps reading along [and] comes to 1 Corinthians 2:14, where Paul says this: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” [The new believer] wonders what that means. He [goes] up to the preacher, and says, “I read this verse here. What does ‘cannot understand them’ mean?”

[The preacher] says, “Well, it means in the Greek, ‘does not have the power to experientially know the truth of God’s Word.’ ”

Then [the new believer] says, “Oh,” and he goes away thinking, “Hmm. That is interesting. I sought God, but it says I didn’t. I understood the

gospel, but it says I can't. Hmmm." Then he reads further in his Bible, and he comes to Ephesians 2, and Paul says this in verses 1–3:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

[The new believer] thinks, "That is really fascinating. It says here that before I came to Christ, I was dead in trespasses and sins. Well, obviously, that couldn't mean physical death because I'm still physically alive. He must be talking about 'spiritually dead' here." He [thinks], "I know if somebody is physically dead, and if I were to go down to the morgue, and say [to the corpse], 'Wiggle your toe, raise your hand, nod, do anything,' [the corpse couldn't] do anything physically because [that person is] physically dead. So, if I am spiritually dead, I wouldn't be able to do anything spiritual. But salvation is a spiritual thing." Now he's really confused. "OK, I don't seek God. I can't understand the things of God. I can't do anything spiritual. Yet, I sought God, I understood the gospel, and I have been born again. How does that work?" A lot of people never quite get that fixed in their minds. It is a dilemma because they are basing their doctrine, as young believer[s], [on] their experience rather than [on] the Word of God.

Then [the new believer] keep[s] reading, and [he] come[s] to John 6:44, where Jesus lets the multitude know: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." [He thinks], "Huh! There we go! I *wasn't* seeking God; God was seeking me. God drew me and then I came to Christ." No kidding! It's just like this epiphany: "I got it! I got it now!" Then [he thinks], "I'm going to go back to 1 Corinthians 2:14 and I'm going to read the context." [He] read[s]

the context, and all of a sudden [he] discover[s] in the context that Paul is [saying] that we know things because [of] the Spirit of God, so if the natural man, unaided by the Spirit of God cannot know the things of God, then if we know the things of God it must be because the Holy Spirit was working in [our lives]. Then, [he reads] John 3 and Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. You remember that discussion, where He said this in John 3:5–8:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

That's how it is, isn't it? You can go outside and you can hear the wind, right, rushing through the trees? Well, are you really hearing the wind? You see the trees move. Are you seeing the wind? A lot of times you say on a windy day, "Look! It's really windy." Why, because we see the wind? No, we see what the wind is doing. The wind is invisible. So it is when God's Spirit begins to work in a person's life. We don't see the Holy Spirit drawing him, opening his eyes to the truth, helping him to understand the gospel. We don't see any of that. What do we see? The effects: A changed and transformed life.

"Oh," [the new believer] say[s] to [himself], "I'm beginning to see [that] the Father was drawing me, the Holy Spirit was enlightening me to truth, the Holy Spirit was working in me behind the scenes. Even though I couldn't see the Spirit working, [He] was working because look at the effects in my life. This was God. This was all of God." Then [he] see[s] the more [he studies] the Word of God that *God* grants us repentance, *God* opens our hearts, *God* gives us grace and faith to believe, and then we respond to God's saving grace working in our lives. And then we [think], "Oh."

There [are] these two opposite extremes that you come to in the world. One is the person who says, “I’m a Christian because I call myself one, because I go to church, because I grew up in a Christian home, because I was baptized, [because] I raised my hand, or [because] I’m an American.” [That person thinks that] you’re a Christian, because you’re better than the average person and you call yourself one. No, that’s just salvation by works. [It’s] a heresy to say you’re a Christian because of something that you’ve done.

The opposite extreme is to not understand how grace works in the life of a person, to think that grace is a concept detached from anything that happens, that grace means an absence from any sort of action or movement, [that] grace is stagnant, which, of course, is not so. When God grants sinner[s] repentance, things happen. There is repentance. When He gives them faith, they believe. When He draws them, they come. So, they repent, they believe, they come in response to saving grace working in them. So, from one perspective, we’re doing those things, but from God’s perspective, these are the works of grace working upon us. We don’t want to seek God, and then God changes our will so that we want to believe. We do believe, and we are saved because God is working in us. Grace is working in us.

Never think of grace as being stagnant. You [can] see [that grace is not stagnant] when you look at texts [that say something like], “The grace of God has appeared, *instructing us to...*” take action, right? “[To] deny ungodliness, to live sensibly and godly and righteously in the present age, zealous for good deeds” [see Titus 2:11–14]. Grace moves us into action. Grace does not mean the absence of work, the absence of any sort of movement. Theologians [use the term] “meritorious work” (I try not to use big terms because they make people fall asleep in ten seconds), [which means] anything you do that pleases God has to be from His grace working in you. If you end up getting saved, though you did believe, and repent, and follow Christ, you know from the Scriptures that it was God’s grace working in your life.

Never confuse grace with a stagnant concept. When God gives you grace, He is giving you the means. [Think of the verse that says], “How can they believe without a preacher, and how can the preacher preach if he doesn’t have a message?” [see Romans 10:14]. God uses the means of the preacher, the means of the gospel, the means of prayer—not just one, not just the other. He uses those things. That is grace in those different forms.

Let’s say you’re a criminal, and [a] sentence is passed against you: “[You will be dropped off] in the Gobi Desert, [where you will die of exposure].” The Gobi Desert is [approximately] 1,000 miles long [and] 500 miles wide. The warden takes you out into the middle of the desert—[he] drives you, drives you, drives you, and after about four hours of driving, you get into the middle of the desert. You’ve gone around sand dunes and there’s just dirt and wind [everywhere]. It’s a wasteland out there. [The warden] says, “Get out. You’re going to have to serve your sentence.”

You begin to plead, and say, “Please, please, don’t leave me here. I don’t want to die this terrible death. Please!”

He feels compassion on you, and says, “OK.” He reaches into the back of his rig, and he pulls out a backpack and sets it on the ground. “You see this backpack? Inside this backpack you’re going to find shoes, proper clothing, water, food, [a] map, [a] compass, [a] survival book, and everything you need to get out of here. I’m going to give these to you as a gracious gift, though you do not deserve it, and though you have not earned it. I set them before you freely. I’ve done this many other times to many other criminals. I can do this because the sentence is that you are dropped off in the desert. Since I just can’t bear to think that you would suffer such an agonizing death, by my grace, I am giving you these gracious gifts so that you can escape such a terrible death. I can still stay within the realm of the letter of the law [because I have dropped you off]. So, I give you this command: Use these things and you will live. Refuse and you will die. Everybody who has made it out has made it out because they followed that survival book to the ‘T.’ Goodbye.” And [he] drive[s] away.

Think about that. What are you going to do? Are you going to sit there on the ground, looking at that backpack, waiting for the top to unzip and the clothes to fly through the air and dress you, the shoes to come out and stick themselves on your feet? Are you going to wait for the canteen to have its lid unscrewed and the water to float through the air and dribble down your throat? Are you going to wait for the map to unfold itself, and bring itself before you, along with the compass, to show you where to walk? Is that what you're going to do? I mean, hey, these are gracious gifts. No, you're going to get on it.

But let's just say [that] right before [the warden] give[s] you these things, there's this anger. You're angry at [him] because [he's] not going to drive you out, because you have to walk out. You say, "I don't want your backpack. I don't want your water. I don't want any of that stuff. You take it with you and I'll figure out my own way," because you're angry [and] scared.

So [the warden] sit[s] down and [he] reason[s] with you, and say[s], "OK, let's just calm down here. I [have] to do this. This is my way to give you provision. The closest place is over 250 miles away, [and] you [have] to walk it. I just want you to know [that] if you walk at the right time [of day] and you do what this book says, you could [cover] about twenty-five miles a day. In a week you'll be out of here."

You say, "OK."

When [the warden] drive[s] away, [he has] not only given you the gifts, but [he has] actually changed your will so you want to use the gifts. You don't just sit there look[ing] at them and wait[ing] for them to kind of levitate you out of the desert. No, you have to put your hand to those gifts. You have to use those gifts. That grace is given to you to move you into action. The only way you're ever going to escape the desert is to put them into action.

Let's say you make it out. You're 250 miles out, and just as you're crossing the line where [the landscape] is just brown and then turns bright green, there's a McDonalds'. There actually was a little letter in [the backpack]

with some money so you could have lunch. So, you go in there and you're sitting in there eating something at McDonalds' and drinking a Super Gulp or whatever, and a guy there [asks], "Man, where have you been?"

"The middle of the Gobi Desert."

"What were you doing out there?"

"I was dropped off out there."

"You were?"

"Yeah."

"Well, how did you make it out?"

"I'm tough." Is that what you're going to tell him? "Man, you don't know how tough I am." No, you'd probably say, "Well, there was this warden who gave me everything I needed so I could get out of the desert. He gave me the instruction book, and he told me what I needed to do. So, I took all of his gracious gifts and that's why I'm here today. When I didn't want to do it, when I was angry, when I was hostile, when I was rebelling, he reasoned with me, he changed my heart so that I wanted to live. And so, I took his advice, I followed the book, and that's why I'm here today."

That's how grace works. Grace is not the absence of work; it's the absence of work initiated on our own, apart from God. When God grants somebody repentance, he repents. When He gives him faith, he believes. When He moves him, he comes. When He opens his heart, he understands. It's not just God's concept, it is concept moving into our lives. That's why people are confused about that. Paul says, "I labored more than all of them yet not I but the grace of God within me" [see 1 Corinthians 15:10].

"What's that? Did you do it or not?"

"Yes, I did it. *However*, I did it by the grace of God."

"Well, was it just grace?"

"No, it was me. That was me getting beat up and travelling around preaching."

"Well, then it was you."

"No, it was the grace of God in me, too."

See, people have a hard time with that because in their minds they think [that] grace means “not a result of works.” It is not a result of *our* works apart from God’s grace, but [it is] not [a complete] absence of work. [It is] the same thing with faith. Faith without work is dead [see James 2:26]. So, faith moves us, [and], of course, faith is given by grace.

I want you to know [that] there is so much more good stuff in this passage that we’re just going to end with a little lengthy quote from J.C. Ryle, who preached a sermon on this same text. I just want to read [a section of it] to you. Even though he wrote it in 1877, I think it applies today just as well or even better than it did then. Ryle writes:

There is a widespread delusion abroad about the number who shall be saved, and that this very delusion is one of the greatest dangers to which our souls are exposed. What do people generally think about the spiritual state of their relatives, and friends, and neighbors, and acquaintances? They know that all around them are going to die and be judged. They know that they have souls to be lost or saved. And what do they consider their end is likely to be? Do they think those around them are in danger of hell? There is nothing whatever to show they think so. They eat and drink, they laugh, and talk, and walk, and work together. They seldom or never speak to one another of God and eternity, of heaven and hell. Will they allow that any of their friends are wicked and ungodly? Never! Whatever may be his way of life—he may be a neglecter of the Bible, he may be utterly without evidence of true religion—yet his friends will often tell you it does not matter. He has a good heart at the bottom and is not a wicked man.

And what do people generally think about the spiritual state of others after they are dead? I say that there is an unhappy common fashion of speaking well of the condition of all who have departed this life. It matters little, apparently, how a man

has behaved while he lived. He may have given no signs of repentance or faith in Christ; he may have shown no evidence whatever of conversion or sanctification; he may have lived and died like a creature without a soul; and yet as soon as this man is dead, people will dare say that he is “happier than he ever was in this life.” They will tell you, complacently, that he has “gone to a better world.” They will follow him to the grave without fear and trembling, and speak of his death afterward as “a blessed change for him.” They may have disliked him, and thought him a bad man when he was alive, but the moment he is dead, they turn around their opinions and say that he has gone to heaven.

And what does all this prove? It proves that people flatter themselves there is no great difficulty in getting into heaven. It proves plainly that people are of the opinion that most people will be saved. Now, what solid reason can people show us for these common opinions? Upon what Scriptures do they build this notion that salvation is an easy business and that most people will be saved? They have none, literally none at all. They have not a text of Scripture which supports their view. They have not a reason that will bear examination. They speak smooth things about one another’s spiritual state just because they do not like to admit that there is a danger. They build up one another into an easy self-satisfied state of the soul in order to soothe their consciences and make things pleasant. They cry, “Peace! Peace!” over one another’s graves because they want it to be so and would gladly persuade themselves that it is so.

Surely against such hollow, foundationless opinions as these, a Christian may well protest. Whether we like to believe it or not, hell is filling fast. Many are on the broad way that leads to destruction; few are in the way that leads to life. Many, many

will be lost; few, few will be saved. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13–14, “Enter in the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are those who enter by it. How narrow is the gate and restricted is the way that leads to life; and few are those who find it.”

That is how it is today. It’s still the same way, but worse. I have never done a funeral [at which] someone said, “It’s too bad he’s in hell. It’s too bad she lived for the devil all her life and now she is suffering in agonizing flames. I’d love to give you comfort, family, you who hate God, but you’re headed there, too.” Instead, [you hear], “He was a good person. He’s in a better place now.” Not if he didn’t know Christ. There are few who are entering into heaven, Jesus says, and so He commands us to strive to enter through that narrow door. He says, “Agonize. Crush your way through it. Get in there because many are going to procrastinate, wait until the last time, and then when it’s too late, they won’t be able to enter.” Let’s keep these things in mind as we leave here today. There’s more to come. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You for Your grace and mercy, which drew us to salvation, repentance, and faith in Christ. Father, I think of so many in the world, in America, in the Church, who are certain they are good people, that they’re on their way to heaven, but like the Jews of old are deceived, and most are perishing but they don’t even know it. Father, I pray Your Holy Spirit would seek out [those] in this congregation who don’t know You; that right now Your grace would prevail upon them; that You would grant them repentance; that You would open their hearts to the truth; that they would see Jesus as He is, a Savior who came to live and die for our sins on the cross and be resurrected for our justification; that they, in understanding that, would believe; [that] by Your grace they would seek to enter that narrow door; that they would strive to enter with all their might until they are absolutely sure they have entered in, until they can see the Spirit working in their lives and their lives changing from one glory to the next.

And then, may this truth drive all those who know You to see humanity as lost and to remember [that] few of those people, regardless of what they say, are going to enter into heaven unless they, too, strive to enter in that narrow door. So, Father, may all of us leave here examining our hearts, motivated to help other people come to Christ, that narrow door, the way, the truth, and the life; that no one can see the Father but through Him [see John 14:6]. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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