

Are Only Few People Saved?

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<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/people-saved/>

The Bible clearly teaches that not all people are saved. Instead, the saved are a remnant (Rom. 9:27) according to electing grace (Rom. 11:7). Historic confessions teach what has sometimes been called limited atonement, that the saving intent of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is limited to the elect, those for whom he died (John 17:9).

But does all this mean the elect remnant is small compared to the number of those lost?

And why does the question matter? What happens in our lives and ministries if we believe God is stingy with grace? If only a few are saved, should we be suspicious of people's claims to salvation? Can we use the perceived smallness of the elect to justify a small view of church, taking pride in being a "little flock" willfully cut off from others?

How might Scripture help us respond to the suspicion that a limited atonement equals a meager atonement?

The Elect Are Both Few and Many

In Luke 13:23 Jesus fields this question: "Lord, are there few who are saved?" But he doesn't answer it. Instead, he urges people to enter through the narrow gate, which many don't enter (v. 24). The passage doesn't answer the question.

Jesus is stronger in Matthew 7:14. "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and few there be who find it." That sounds conclusive. But is Jesus telling the future? Is he not rather preaching a sermon addressing the unbelief of the current generation? Jesus stresses that many of his contemporaries will be "thrust out" (v. 28). They were close to the kingdom but refused to enter through the narrow door, trusting instead in their own works (see Matt. 6:1–18). In their place, many outsiders (Matt. 8:11) will sit down in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29).

What about Jesus's insistence that "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14)? The comment is part of his parable of a wedding feast. Since many invitees refuse to attend, the master turns to the highways to find guests who will. Jesus is speaking to those builders who had rejected the Christ (21:42). The parable illustrates what Paul later observes: "Not all have faith" (2 Thess. 3:2). Those invited are more numerous than those who actually attend. It's bad exegesis to read the last phrase of Jesus's parable—many are called, but few are chosen—as a technical theological commentary using Pauline vocabulary of "calling" and "election." John Calvin cautioned that Jesus's words here ought not prompt us to enter into "the question about the eternal election of God."

If parables speak to the proportion of lost to saved, then should we do likewise with the parable of the ten virgins, where 50 percent of the characters are saved (Matt. 25:1–13)? Or the parable of the wheat and the tares might suggest the lost are only a small percentage of the population (Matt. 13:24). But this isn't how parables should be read. In parables Jesus is making moral points, not numerical calculations.

And what about passages that speak of the vastness of Christ's atonement? The Son of Man came "to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). "The gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many" (Rom. 5:15). "By one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). "But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20). In heaven John "looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9).

How can we reconcile these passages? According to B. B. Warfield, the texts frequently cited to defend a marginal election merely reflect the situation of pervasive unbelief in Jesus's day. These passages, which suggest a small size for the elect, might better describe the early visible results of God's redemptive work. Jesus himself said that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Luke 13:18–19). It begins small. It surely was small in Jesus's day. Few were walking his narrow path. It's always a hard path, but in Jesus's day it was also a new path. In time it would become better understood and more traveled. To ponder the breadth of God's saving grace, why would we prioritize the early warnings of Jesus to his unbelieving contemporaries (e.g., Matt. 22:14) over John's vision of God's gathered people (Rev. 7:9)?

So, are the elect a small number? We can respond in at least three ways.

1. Scripture Doesn't Say How Many People Will Be Saved

The question, "Are there few who are saved?" (Luke 13:23) presented Jesus an ideal opportunity to say, "Yes, sadly, only a few." But he purposefully didn't answer. Such passages prove, Warfield maintained, only that "salvation is difficult and that it is our duty to address ourselves to obtaining it with diligence and earnest effort. We can never learn from them how many are saved."

And if Scripture doesn't allow us to say that the elect are few, it doesn't help to appeal to experience. In the days of the apostles, a tiny fraction of earth's population were church members. But today nearly one-third of the world's population, an estimated 2.2 billion people, adhere to the Christian faith. And what if the church is still in its infancy? What if the astounding growth of Christianity from the first to the 21st century is only the first small segment of a vastly longer timeline of church history? We simply lack the perspective to quantify the elect.

2. Believers Should Be Hopeful for a Great Salvation

"In the lack of people is the downfall of a prince" (Prov. 14:28). Will God have such a problem? Charles Hodge wrote that, on the basis of God's electing grace:

“We have reason to believe . . . that the number of the finally lost in comparison with the whole number of the saved will be very inconsiderable. Our blessed Lord, when surrounded by the innumerable company of the redeemed, will be hailed as the . . . Savior of Men, as the Lamb that bore the sins of the world.

Likewise, Warfield said,

“The number of the saved shall in the end be not small but large, and not merely absolutely but comparatively large; . . . to speak plainly, it shall embrace the immensely greater part of the human race. “

Finally, Charles Spurgeon preached:

“I do abhor from my heart that continual whining of some men about their own little church as the ‘remnant’—the ‘few that are to be saved.’ They are always dwelling upon strait gates and narrow ways, and upon what they conceive to be a truth, that but few shall enter heaven. . . . I believe there will be more in heaven than in hell . . . because Christ, in everything, is to ‘have the pre-eminence’ (Col. 1:18) and I cannot conceive how he could have the pre-eminence if there are to be more in the dominions of Satan than in paradise. Moreover, it is said there is to be a multitude that no man can number in heaven; I have never read that there is to be a multitude that no man can number in hell.

Of all people, those who affirm the Bible’s teaching on unconditional election (Rom. 9:16) have reason to hope for a vast election. This is because salvation doesn’t rest on people’s willingness to choose grace, but on God’s free choice. He can have mercy on those we think are beyond repair. If we insist that only a few are saved, we risk subjecting God’s saving work to statistical probability. And if he hardly saves anyone, then why should I suspect he’ll save me or others?

3. We Should Enter the Kingdom and Urge Others to Do the Same

The door to glory is narrow; there is only one door, Jesus. No one will enter heaven who isn’t clothed in Christ’s righteousness. All those, and only those, who come to him in faith will be received by the Father (John 6:37). But we must come! In Luke 13, Jesus laments over those who were so close to the kingdom—but never entered. They were devoutly religious. They lived in the Holy Land. They heard Jesus teach. They ate and drank in his presence, but they were left outside because they never presented to Christ the ruins of their depraved hearts and said, “Save us!” Yes, we should believe the saved are a remnant. But let’s not try to make that number smaller than God has. Instead, enter the narrow door and strive to take with you as many as will follow.

The words of Revelation 7:9 echo God’s ancient challenge to Abraham: “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them . . . so shall your descendants be” (Gen. 15:5). Can you picture Abraham scanning the night sky, realizing he couldn’t even begin to number those stars? The apostle John got to see Abraham’s believing seed gathered in. Like Abraham, his head spun. He too saw “a great multitude which no one could number” (Rev. 7:9).

The picture of the narrow gate and difficult path is God's way of urging great effort. The picture of the innumerable company of the redeemed is God's way of evoking hopefulness and wonder at his great salvation.¹

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¹ Editors' note:

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