

# The Saving God

Luke 13: 22 – 35

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We return to Luke today continuing on in chapter 13 with this idea that we have limited time to do what Jesus means us to do here on earth. God has plans and wants us to be part of those plans. But when we push God away, God will not simply abide, stopping all work on earth, but will look for someone who is ready to follow. Someone who, like Jesus, is willing answer God's call on his life. To be like Jesus is to be willing to answer God's call on your life.

Last week we ended with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree and asked what it might be in our lives that we need to cut down in order for us to move on with God. In the parable for today we are given the image of the narrow door and are told to strive to make it through.

This parable, more than the one before, provides a vivid image of those who never fully respond, who remain outside the owner's house when the door closes. This is the troubling answer Jesus gives to the question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

This question seeks to understand how God will choose those that God will save. The question is asked again later in Luke when the rich man comes to Jesus but walks away when he is told to sell everything. Jesus responds in view of the rich man's back with the ridiculous comparison that it is as difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God as it is for a camel to get through the eye of a needle. Those nearby, not seeing the humor of the image, ask, "then who can be saved?"<sup>1</sup>

It is ever so human for us to want to understand just how God will sort us out in the end. How will God choose to save? Who will God choose to save? Will only a few be saved?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18: 26

Jesus resists the temptation to go into a long philosophical treatise about God. He doesn't feel the need to defend God. Rather, Jesus holds up what we are to do: *Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.*

This response is of a piece with the idea that Jesus has come to earth to show us how to become those through whom God works; come to show us what it means to be faithful; come to show us what fruit can grow of God's kingdom here on earth, in our lives, when we dare trust God.

Luke is full of examples of those who dare to act on their faith and are saved. There is the woman who was hemorrhaging for years who makes her way through the crowd and touches Jesus' cloak. Immediately she is healed. Jesus says to her, "your faith has made you well."<sup>2</sup> The root verb for "made you well" is "sozo," "saved." Then there is the blind beggar man who dares call above the crowd, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*, stopping Jesus in his tracks. Jesus calls the blind man forward and gives him sight saying "your faith has saved you."<sup>3</sup> Again the root verb is "sozo." One more example, the one Samaritan out of 10 who returns to Jesus to thank him for his physical healing is told to "go on your way; your faith has made you well."<sup>4</sup> Again, sozo is the verb.

In all cases it is the active faith of each one that moves them into the path of Jesus. In each case it is spoken that their faith has saved them. So it seems to me that Jesus is calling on us to act on our belief so that we get in the way of Jesus, get on the Way with Jesus, that we might be part of God's plan.

It is our faith that will make us well; it is our faith that will save us.

Strive to enter through the narrow door...

The Greek word for Strive is *agone 'zomi* –which means to enter a contest; to contend in the gymnastic games; to contend with adversaries; to struggle with difficulties and dangers; to endeavor with strenuous zeal to obtain something.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 8: 48

<sup>3</sup> Luke 18: 42

<sup>4</sup> Luke 17: 19

<sup>5</sup> One way to find such definitions is to look on BlueletterBible.com. While the Bauer's Greek Dictionary gives even more, upon cross reference, the website does a good job.

It is a word used of an athlete willing to compete for a prize.

Often, to be good at sport, one has to specialize. So a great athlete, if they want to get a college scholarship has to choose between football and baseball; volleyball and basketball. Once you choose your specialty you hone your body and skills toward that sport. If you are a football player, you work on getting stronger and stronger that you might push people away; while a baseball player works on form when swinging a bat. A volleyball player works on spiking a ball downward, while a basketball player works on her wrist action to send the ball upward with a backward spin.

So we are to strive, to train that we might be able to enter through the narrow door. It is narrow because we have to specialize. We can't be about everything and be of any use to God, even if we are talented spiritual athletes. We train to be like Jesus, that we might follow God's way despite all the things that want to knock us off, or keep us stuck in a dead end, or send us running the other way.

In my mid twenties I was teaching at Redlands High School and dating a young man from church. I started to have this vision of myself in a home, settling down with this really neat friend. The vision was dashed one day when he needed to move on. Devastated I went to my pastor and shared what had happened. My pastor said to me "You knew it wasn't going to work..." an image of the fig tree comes to mind... and then he had the nerve (he had lots of nerve), to continue on..."besides, that's not the most important thing in life."<sup>6</sup>

I thought at that moment, "yea, right. You've got a wife and a son," trying to not let the bitterness show through my tears.

So I understand if there are those of you here who are thinking the same thing.

Still I want to share that it was in my letting go of this image of family and home that started me to move seriously towards God, and then towards the ministry.

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<sup>6</sup> For those who'd like a name, the pastor was Reverend Carl Becker.

I think Jesus talks about the narrow door because it is so easy to get distracted, to think that we can bring into the owner's home all our wants and desires. While we think Jesus is good to hang out with and we've experienced God's tender loving care for us, we are not willing to strive towards the narrow door.

We might try, though... a little church here, a little prayer while on the freeway, a volunteer commitment. But try is not the same as strive. I've often heard one, who wasn't fully committed to a task, say "I'll try." Then there's the response of the one who needs the task done..."don't try, do it."

In Greek the word for try is *zate'o*...to seek by thinking, meditating, reasoning, in order to find. The word just doesn't have the punch of *agonizomai*. Further along in the definition is...to require or demand something from someone.

Perhaps that is exactly what we too often try to do. We try to enter into God's realm carrying everything we need. When we get to the door, we knock because God is supposed to let us in.

I have this vision of someone trying to carry as much as they possible can into God's home.<sup>7</sup> Imagine someone with a huge backpack on the back, a shoulder bag hanging from one shoulder, plastic grocery bags hanging from the arms, pockets on the shirt and pants full of favorite candies, a hat with more pockets full, and the other arm dragging behind a huge overstuffed roller board. Sweating from the effort of carrying that load, this person sets the roller board upright, and knocks.

Is it no wonder that the owner takes one look at the mess outside and says "I do not know where you come from."

But I ate and drank with you...I heard your teachings. You are supposed to let me in.

The Lord looks again at this thing that is no longer a person but a transporter of desire and says, "I do not know where you come from. Go away you evil doer."

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<sup>7</sup> The image is drawn from what I think I must look like when traveling with my daughter. One needs things to keep her occupied!

Just as one who is training for the Olympics doesn't compete with a backpack on their back, so we cannot be part of the Kingdom of God when we keep trying to bring our happiness with us.

St. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, considered by some to be the first scholarly philosopher of Christian Theology writes about how we were meant, not only to be part of God's plan, but were meant to talk with God face to face as Adam and Eve once did. But when sin entered into our world, Anselm argues that God's design of the human being went askew. Humans began to seek their own happiness apart from God. But, if we are willing to put that limited happiness aside and focus instead on the justice of God, that is a belief that God will do the right thing, Anselm suggests, we will come to know a happiness beyond any we can author ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

To be faithful is to trust in God's way. When we are able to do that, we will be healed. We will be saved.

When we talked about the fig tree in the vineyard, I quoted to you from Isaiah. The passage where God removes his protection from the vineyard and it is destroyed. In contrast to that image and yet, also of Isaiah and a more direct quote from the Psalms, is the image that completes Jesus' parable.

"Then," Luke writes,<sup>9</sup> meaning that an understanding of what has come before is necessary for the understanding of what is next. Only when we understand that we are saved when we live by faith, only when we are striving to enter the narrow door, are we able to view this next image aright.

*Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.*

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<sup>8</sup> Okay, I don't have the actual reference, though with work I think I can find it. This understanding is informed by the re-reading of my notes from a seminary course taught by Marilyn Adams at Yale Divinity School in 1996. I was looking for evidence to take on Anselm's thought world, but, instead found what I consider to be a helpful gem from his teachings. I'm reminded again and again how difficult it is to discount those who have come before who have thought to faithfully describe God's ways. .

<sup>9</sup> If you have a Study Bible, you will be able to see by the footnotes that, while Matthew has much of the same material, it is scattered about. Luke has drawn together these sayings into a single narrative. While the words are of Jesus, by bringing them together, Luke creates another layer of meaning.

Psalm 107: O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Those who strive to enter into the narrow door see the goodness of the Lord; come to understand his steadfast love. They are the redeemed.

From Isaiah:

In the days to come

The mountain of the LORD'S house  
Shall be established as the highest of  
The mountains,  
And shall be raised above the hills;  
All the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain  
Of the LORD,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
That he may teach us his ways  
And that we may walk in his paths.”<sup>10</sup>

Those who enter into the house of the LORD seek even more to know God's way, seek even more fervently to walk in his paths.

Those who enter into the house of the LORD are no longer concerned about arguing about God's justice here on earth.

*Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so...*

When Jesus finishes, as if on cue, the Pharisees enter in and tell Jesus to “Go away... Herod wants to kill you.”

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 2: 2-3

How many times have we had someone or something threaten us, challenge us, to stay on the path?! It always seems to happen just when we are feeling good about ourselves too.

Jesus is undeterred. “Bring it on.” He says, Go tell that fox that I’ve got work to do and, besides, it is impossible for him to do anything until I enter Jerusalem.

We strive, we train to enter into the narrow door, so that when the Herods of the world, rise up, we will not be deterred. We strive to let our trust, our faith, in God train us...even in the reading of scripture itself.

As when prophets speak we hear God’s voice, when Jesus speaks next, it is God’s voice I hear. All that has come before is meant to make more keen our hearing. The final line, it is helpful to know, quotes the exact words that are spoken by the crowds when Jesus enters into Jerusalem, on the week when he would be crucified.<sup>11</sup> In Jesus we hear God’s voice of frustrated love foreshadowing God’s refusal to leave the world alone.

”Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.”

Your house is left to you.

And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

I dare you...I dare you to strive to enter the narrow door where trust of God leads to the foot of the cross.

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 19:37-38

