

Are Only a Few People Going to Be Saved? **By David Feddes**

Jesus says in the Bible, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is the only way to God, the only way to receive eternal life. Does this mean that only a few people are going to be saved? If Jesus is the only way to heaven, does that mean the vast majority of people are headed for hell? What’s going to happen to friends and neighbors and coworkers and family members who don’t take Jesus seriously? And what about those who grew up in another religion, or in a part of the world where there’s no knowledge of Jesus? Some of them don’t even have a Bible in their own language. Are all these people doomed?

“Are only a few people going to be saved?” If you have any *compassion* at all, you tremble to think that even one person could go to hell. So how can you help but shudder at the idea that the vast majority might be lost? The thought is so horrifying to some people that they want nothing to do with Christianity, if it teaches that so many people will perish. Others don’t turn away from Christianity completely, but they adapt their beliefs to say that perhaps people can be saved without Jesus, or they reject the idea of hell altogether and say that in the end everyone is saved.

“Are only a few people going to be saved?” You might ask this question out of *compassion*, or you might ask it out of *courtesy*. You may find the message of the Bible personally convincing, but who are you to say that you’re right, and so many others are wrong? Isn’t that rude and arrogant? And if you’re not a Christian at all, why should you become one, if it involves such arrogance and intolerance? Doesn’t *courtesy* demand that you recognize the legitimacy of other viewpoints? Many people in this world believe in other ways of salvation than through Jesus. Can that many people be dead wrong?

“Are only a few people going to be saved?” *Compassion* or *courtesy* might drive you to ask that question, but then again, you might ask this question out of *curiosity*. And it’s not healthy curiosity, but idle curiosity. It’s easier to sit around, idle, and ask questions, than to respond to God and start doing what he calls you to do. If you’re not a Christian, maybe you’d rather debate the statistics of how many or how few people will be saved, than face up to your own sin and your own personal need of a Savior. And if you are a Christian, you still might like to spend your time in idle discussions of what happens to people who don’t hear of Christ. That’s a lot easier than spending your time and energy and money to do your part in making sure as many people as possible do hear of Christ.

“Are only a few people going to be saved?” Maybe you ask that question out of just plain *cowardice*. Many of us are cowards. We’re afraid of many things, and we’re especially afraid of fewness. In fact, we may be more afraid of fewness than we are of not being saved. Nothing scares us more than going against the flow, being among the few who don’t do what everyone else does. Kids are afraid of peer pressure. Politicians are afraid of opinion polls, Even preachers are afraid of seeming out of step. Many of us tend to choose religious beliefs the way we choose clothes: we go with whatever’s in style, with what seems to be popular with others. Who wants to be an oddball?

As cowards, the majority of us want to be—well, part of a majority. We can’t bear the idea that the greatest truth in the universe might be a minority position. We can’t bear the thought that we might actually have to make up our own minds, without first checking to see how many or how few people happen to agree with us. We’d rather take our cue from the crowd.

So when Jesus comes with his claims about salvation, you might not be satisfied simply to ask whether he's telling the truth. You might also want to ask how many people agree with him and accept him. And if the number turns out to be too small for your liking, you might have a hard time accepting Jesus.

"Are only a few people going to be saved?" There are many different motives for asking this question: compassion, courtesy, curiosity, cowardice, or maybe a mixture of motives. But what's the answer?

What Does Jesus Say?

Wouldn't it be nice if you could go straight to Jesus himself and ask him directly: "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" Well, believe or not, you can do that—or at least you can listen in while someone else asks Jesus that question. In Luke 13 the Bible says that someone asked Jesus, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" Jesus replied,

"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.'

"But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'

"Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.'

"But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'"

"There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." (Luke 13:22-30)

That is Jesus' answer to the question, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" But what sort of answer is that? Here somebody asks a simple question, and Jesus won't give a simple answer. Instead he dodges the question and tells his listeners what they each ought to do as individuals. And if they're still looking at Jesus' words for some hint about how many people will be saved, Jesus seems to be confusing them on purpose. First he talks about a narrow door and people being shut out, making it sound like hardly anybody will be saved. Then he talks about people coming from every direction, from east and west and north and south, making it sound like just about everybody is saved, except perhaps an unfortunate few. So which is it, Jesus? Are only a few people going to be saved, or many? Please answer the question!

But Jesus won't answer. He says, in effect, "None of your business! Stop thinking about the arithmetic of salvation, and make sure *you* are saved." You see, salvation isn't a matter of statistics. Whatever the grand totals turn out to be, the thing you need to know is that people enter the doorway to heaven one person at a time. The door is narrow. You can't squeeze in as part of a crowd. So make every effort, says Jesus, to enter at this narrow door.

Think of a turnstile. You go to a stadium or an auditorium to see some big event, and at the entrance there's a turnstile. It's a tight, narrow opening, and there's a kind of metal arm that turns and clicks as you squeeze through. It's hard, if not impossible, for a group of people to push through all at once. In fact, that's what a turnstile is for: to make sure people come in one at a time.

You go through the turnstile by yourself, as an individual, and you have to present your ticket. If you don't have a ticket, you don't get in. You can't tell the ticket collector, "I came here

with a carload of people, and they all have tickets.” That won’t get you anywhere. You need a ticket of your own.

Now, the fact that you have to go through the turnstile all by yourself doesn’t tell you anything about how many other people are going to be there. There may be only a few, or there may be a huge crowd. You won’t really know until you get inside.

But in the meantime, getting in is the important thing. If you’re really excited about getting in on a certain event, you want to be there, regardless of how big the crowd turns out to be. You’re drawn by the event, not by attendance statistics.

Imagine if you just stood around in front of the turnstile, without moving, and you told the ticket collector you wouldn’t go in unless he could tell you the total number of people who would be there. He’d give you a funny look and say, “What are you talking about? Are you here for this event or not? Make up your mind! Do you want to come in, or don’t you?”

The door to eternal life is a turnstile. It’s narrow, says Jesus. It admits one at a time. You stand before God as an individual person, and your eternal destiny depends on your own personal relationship with him. This doesn’t mean that families and friendships and church relationships are spiritually meaningless. These relationships can be a blessing and an encouragement for you. But don’t think you can squeeze into heaven as part of a crowd. You need a ticket of your own, and you need to enter before God shuts the door permanently. As for the question of how many other people make it to heaven, you won’t find out till you’ve made it yourself.

What’s this narrow door that Jesus talks about? It’s none other than Jesus himself. He’s the turnstile, the door, the gate of entry into eternal life. Jesus says, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:9). Jesus is the entrance, the only entrance, to heaven. And people enter life in Jesus one at a time. You must come to him personally, and you must come to him now, before it’s too late.

“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door,” says Jesus, “because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’”

If you find yourself on the outside looking in, it won’t do any good to talk about where you grew up, or who you knew. It won’t even help to say you were familiar with Jesus and with his teachings. Jesus told his listeners, “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’” You can’t get much more familiar than that, can you, eating at the same table as Jesus and hearing him with your own ears. But what will Jesus say? “I don’t know you. Away from me, all you evildoers!”

Familiarity with Jesus means nothing. You need to *respond* to Jesus. If you remain an evildoer, and you don’t come to Jesus for forgiveness and a new way of life, then whatever familiarity you have with Christ—whatever your family background, whatever knowledge of the Bible, whatever church you belong to, whatever religious activities you take part in—none of these will help if you don’t respond to Christ with a decisive commitment of faith. Various religions have their own view of Jesus, but these religions won’t help you to be saved if they present Jesus as anything less than the Son of God and the only Savior from sin. The only way to be saved is to respond to Jesus in faith.

So don’t just learn a little something about Jesus. Respond to him. Don’t just stand around looking at the narrow door. Make every effort to enter through it, before the door closes and the time of God’s grace ends and the opportunity to enter God’s kingdom is gone. You have to enter personally, and you have to enter now. Later might be too late.

Still Not Satisfied?

That's how Jesus answers the question, "Are only a few people going to be saved?" You might not be satisfied with that answer. You might still be curious. But Jesus is more interested in saving you than in satisfying your curiosity. While you're asking questions about numbers, Jesus keeps calling you to pass through the turnstile. Once you're in heaven, you'll have plenty of opportunity to check out the size of the crowd.

If cowardice and fear of being different from others are what make you ask how many people are following Jesus, then I'm sorry, but Jesus won't try to reassure you with statistics or polling results, and I won't either. You've got to let it sink in that God deals with people one at a time. You must deal with Jesus person to person. Respond to Jesus for who he is, not for who your friends or some opinion polls say he is.

But what if you have nobler motives for asking about salvation statistics? Maybe your courtesy and sensitivity make you uneasy with the notion that Jesus is the only way. You start doing some arithmetic in your head, and you add up quite a lot of nice, intelligent people who don't see Jesus as the way. Isn't it rude and arrogant to say you're right and they're wrong?

Well, it's usually good to be open to other people's opinions and not always insist that your way is the only way. But in this case, it's not just a question of whether you're right or they're right, but whether *Jesus* is right. You can be so eager to agree with everybody around you that just about the only person you don't agree with is the Lord Jesus Christ. Wouldn't it be awful if, in trying to be courteous to everyone else's viewpoint, you ended up calling the Son of God a liar? I can't think of anything more arrogant or rude than that. It's saying that you know more than Jesus, that you know more than Someone who knows everything. Even worse, it's rejecting the most loving Person in the universe, the Person who poured out his blood and gave up his life to open the turnstile to heaven.

What about compassion? Maybe you feel deep concern for people who are in danger of hell. If Jesus is the only way, then what's going to happen to people who've never heard of Jesus? What about people who grew up with another religion? What about people who've heard of Jesus but don't take him seriously? Wouldn't any compassionate person be distressed if only a few people are going to be saved?

Well, I'm glad you feel compassion for others, but let me ask you: Do you really think you're more compassionate than God? Do you think God will destroy people just for the fun of it? If so, then you've got a lot to learn about God. "God is love," says the Bible. "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8). If someone falls under God's wrath and judgment, it won't be because God lacks compassion but because they have turned their backs on God.

Jesus refuses to answer our question about numbers, even if it's prompted by a sense of compassion. Jesus refuses to let us evaluate God's compassion in terms of statistics. Jesus refuses to pander to any idea that we're in a position to judge God and his ways. God is my Judge. I'm not his judge. God doesn't need my approval on how many people he's decided to save. I need his approval before I can be saved.

So when I ask, "Lord, are only a few going to be saved? What are you going to do with this or that group of people?" Jesus answers, "None of your business. You're not the Judge of the earth. God is. Just make sure you enter at the narrow door, and tell as many other people as you can about the narrow door. Then leave the rest to God. Let God worry about the statistics." "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25)

Divine Surprises

It's a tricky thing to guess how the Lord will judge any particular person or class of people. Just look at how Jesus reacted to the most admired and respected people of his day, the people everyone expected to be in heaven. Jesus denounced them as filthy sinners. And how did Jesus respond to those who were the most corrupt and despised, the people nobody expected to make it? He welcomed them with words of pardon and friendship and a new beginning. Because Jesus is who he is, heaven will be full of surprises. Many who ate with Jesus and heard him with their own ears will be missing from heaven, while unlikely people from east and west and north and south be welcomed to the feast in the kingdom of God. "Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."

Ultimately, all our arithmetic and predictions are useless, simply because God is who he is. On the one hand, the Lord is so holy and just that he cannot put up with any sin at all. He hates every kind of sin more than you or I can imagine. God is utterly and eternally opposed to evil of every kind. We might ask, "What will happen to all those poor, innocent people?" But in the blazing light of God's holiness, there are no "poor, innocent people." The Bible says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Even those who impress us as the finest people around are still filthy sinners who have no right to demand anything from God. God's absolute purity means he can take the very best people on earth and send them straight to hell and be perfectly just in doing so.

On the other hand, God is so loving, so compassionate, so merciful, so kind, so gracious, and so forgiving that he can pardon and embrace even the most horrible of sinners. God is so holy that he can condemn even the best of us, but he is so loving that he can save the worst of us. The Lord Jesus Christ laid aside his glory to live among sinners, and he sacrificed his life to save his enemies. That's why every Christian can echo the apostle Paul: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). That's what it's all about: seeing yourself as the worst sinner and turning to Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

When you come to Jesus, when you stand at the narrow door, it is both terrifying and thrilling. You can't hide in a crowd. You stand alone in the presence of a Judge whose holiness shows you your sin in all its disgusting dreadfulness. At the same time you stand in the presence of a Savior so loving that he poured out his life's blood to wash away your sins and fill your life with love and joy and peace. At this narrow gate, in the presence of this Jesus, leave the crowds behind. Leave all your own baggage and qualifications behind. Go in, depending entirely on the ticket Christ purchased for you with his blood.

Are only a few people going to be saved? Only God knows, and he's not saying how many will be saved. What God is saying is that no matter how good you think you are, you need to be saved; and no matter how bad you think you are, you can be saved. So make every effort to enter through the narrow door, the door that lets people in one at a time.