

Hard Truth on Heaven

✦ Where's the door? (vv.18-21)

✦ Who's going in? (vv.22-24)

In the name of Jesus, Friend of sinners – all, dearly redeemed of God:

Today's last verse, the ending of Isaiah, is so jarring that many Christians want to ignore it. Even Jewish rabbis try to make Isaiah sound better by reading verse 23 twice, and not the last verse 24 at all. But God warns everyone in writing not to add to God's Word and not to take away from it. So who's the last verse for? In today's Gospel Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem's cruel cross. Why does Jesus warn His Jewish listeners that they should *"strive to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able"*? (Luke 13:24 EHV) The Jews were God's chosen nation. They thought they were first in line for heaven, and that all of us Gentile nations were last, and maybe not even in line. The Holy Spirit through Isaiah strengthens and encourages Jews and Gentiles with some really Good News, then sets the record straight with **Hard Truth on Heaven**. We all need to know this!

✦ Where's the door? (vv.18-21)

The LORD God is speaking: *"As for me, because of their works and their thoughts, the time is coming for me to gather people from all nations and all languages. They will come, and they will see my glory."* Can you hear echoes of Jesus' Great Commission already 700 years before Christ? Shortly before ascending into heaven, the crucified and risen Christ told His disciples: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you. And surely I am with you always until the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20 EHV) Who are those *"nations"* being brought right to heaven's door?

More clues: *"Then I will set up a sign among them...."* This *"sign"* which the Lord promises to set among the nations is Jesus Christ Himself. His messengers declare God's glory in the Savior's Name. God's *glory* is to love sinners. At the beginning of Isaiah 66, the Creator assures us, *"For my hand made all these things, so all these things came into existence, declares the LORD. Yet this is the person I will watch over: the one who is afflicted and whose spirit is crushed, the one who trembles at my word."* Not your pedigree or your place in society, not your number of *followers* or *friends* or *likes* in social media, not your portfolio or the lack of one in your poverty – everyone has an equal chance at heaven because all are loved by God. He spotlights the *sign* in the middle of history (BC...✦...AD). And when that *sign* came in the person of God's own Son, Jesus said, *"I am the door,"* and *"no one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 10:7; 14:6) Everywhere messengers are proclaiming: Jesus is **the door**.

A Christian layman was pleasantly surprised on a fishing trip deep into the Amazon jungle. Along the Rio Negro River he came across a village where a few of the natives found out he was a Christian. They asked him to read from his English Bible while one of them interpreted. Under the rising moon in one of the most remote places on earth he was suddenly trying to remember what he learned in Catechism and Bible Class, praying God would bless his feeble efforts. God promises: *"Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it."* (Psalm 81:10 NIV) When he and his friend were ready to leave, the natives came down by the river to hug them and send them off with the faithful farewell: "We'll see you again in heaven!"

The faithful remnant of God's people come from all these distant nations – north, south, east and west, and from the *"distant coastlands"* – including the Americas. Incas, Mayans, Aztecs, Anglo's,

browns, blacks – doesn't matter to God. He loves all humans willing to confess their sins and trust in Jesus. And as Gentiles proclaim God's grace in Christ, members of the fallen Jewish nation hear that their Messiah has come to save them too! The believing remnant, Isaiah says, ***“will bring all your brothers [out of] all the nations as an offering to the LORD...in ceremonially clean vessels.”***

If you've ever been in bed unable to care for yourself, you know how good it feels when gentle, skillful hands clean you up. Hunters, fisherman, campers, hikers – you all know the feeling of that first shower after a long trip. And so will other noses; you smell better too. God enjoys the great fragrance of clean. He had His temple built on Mount Zion in Jerusalem so everyone could see their glorious Savior Jesus. His dear, skillful Holy Spirit with Word and sacrament cleanses us deep inside, right down to the core of our being. No shower or sponge bath will ever feel as good as your soul all clean for all eternity.

✦ Who's going in? (vv. 22-24)

The LORD just said, ***“Even from among these people I will take priests and Levites.”*** Positions previously prohibited, God opens up to Gentile believers. Like God's new heavens and new earth created new on Judgment Day, ***“in the same way your offspring and your name will stand,”*** your *name-reputation* as sinner-saints, cleansed by God. ***“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*** (1 Peter 2:9 NIV) *Pastors* trained to shepherd Christ's flock, faithful *lay workers* and *staff ministers* called by God for glorious proclamation. Gratitude keeps us busy giving thanks by cleaning, mowing, teaching and volunteering for Gospel ministry. Does that make us *first*?

“As often as one new moon follows another and one Sabbath follows another, all flesh will come to worship before me, says the LORD.” The ones **going in** are those who worship the LORD.

God never intended His prophets and spokesmen to tell people only what they want to hear. Your auto mechanic – only what you want to hear? So you break down in rush hour traffic? Doctor's diagnosis always good – and ignore effective treatments to save your life? God's preachers are not lying politicians. God commands preachers to ***“not hold back,”*** but openly ***“declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.”*** (Isaiah 58:1 NIV) So Isaiah 66:3,4!

Atheistic environmentalists saving the planet think it's dismissive to say God will take care of His creation. Sorry, secular humanists, you're too late. God's Son already saved the planet. ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*** (John 3:16 EHV) All who stand on His side by faith will meet on Judgment Day in joy. All who oppose the Lord's Christ will see God's new heaven and the new earth as paradise-denied when God gives them their wish of separation for all eternity. ***“Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they named lands after themselves.”*** (Psalm 49:11 NIV84) No friends outside for fun because in hell ***“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*** (Luke 13:28)

An atheistic scientist won't care about this gross, disgusting last verse. He thinks he's following the science to claim he'll just become dust and ashes in the end. And the *Titanic* was “unsinkable”! They're not listening, are we? Christ Jesus, the only Door into heaven is ***“narrow,”*** too narrow to hold anything in your hand. No money, no position, no pedigree, no volunteer works or paid service. In pure mercy and undeserved grace, by His forgiveness in Christ, God has delivered us from the eternal torment of decay: ***“They will go out, and they will see the corpses of the ones who were rebelling against me, for their worm will not die, and their fire will not be quenched, and all flesh will be horrified by them.”***

Jesus answers **Who's going in?** ***“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*** Because God wants everyone to believe and be saved, Jesus also commands us to ***“go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”*** (Mark 16:15f) Your *world* is where you are! Let your lips and life say, “Thank-you, Jesus, for rescuing sinners one and all, and even me. Bring Jews and Gentiles into your glorious heaven through Christ alone!” Amen.

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