

They say the gates are pearly. They say that St. Peter stands there to let in the good and turn away the bad. We don't know much more about those gates. Are they higher than the ones at Nabil's on the Plaza? Do people demonstrate outside them as they do at the White House? Can children swing on them? We really don't know. Jesus himself used the metaphor, but he doesn't tell us their shape, size, or color, or even if they really are pearly, he just tells us one thing about the gate of heaven. He says it's narrow.

Personally, I'd have preferred to hear more reassuring news about the gates, but this is all we have to work with--the gate of heaven is narrow.

This has led people to the questionable conclusion that if it's hard to get in, we have to try extra hard to get there. For example, some figure they have to pray so hard, that if they're distracted during prayer they've accomplished nothing. Some say you have to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior if you are to be saved. Just being baptized isn't enough, they argue, just going to church isn't enough, you have to be saved in addition to those things. Others worry about members of their family who used to belong to the Catholic Church but don't any more. We think that as hard as we strive through our prayers and good works to get through the narrow gate, surely these others don't stand a snowball's chance in a microwave to get in.

Now, all this isn't completely wrong, but we can get into trouble when we place the burden of salvation on ourselves alone. Suppose you face a sudden death of someone you love: a child dies in a car accident on Rockhill Road, your spouse dies while mailing a letter at the Edmund, Oklahoma post office, or someone you love commits suicide. If your mind races back to this scripture passage, "The gate is narrow," and if your conclusion is, "How hard we have to try," you will begin to wonder, "Did that person repent? Did that person pray? Did that person save himself or herself?"

Did they save themselves? I can tell you the answer to that one. The answer is no. It's impossible for us to save ourselves. The task is too large and the gate is too narrow. It would be like getting a letter from the IRS that read, "To whom it may concern, we regret to inform you that the national debt has reached over a trillion dollars. You have been selected from among your peers to pay off the debt." It can't be done. The sum is too great.

The gate is too narrow. Now stay with me because this is not easy: the narrowness of the gate should not lead us to think that good works will buy our entry. The gate is too narrow even for that. Rather, the narrow gate leads us to reflect on God's mercy, because he alone knows how to get us through. Our good works show God how much we love Him, but He alone pulls us through.

Therefore, there is hope for those who have wandered away from the Church, for those who die suddenly without confession, without anointing--yes, there is even hope for a suicide, because it is not our deeds alone, but the hand of God which yanks us through heaven's gate.

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