

The Unconverted “Believer” (4): The Narrow and Wide Gates

Introduction:

In this series in which we are addressing the unconverted “believer”, we must consider what the Word of God teaches about the conversion event itself. We do so today. Much nominal Christianity would be confronted and corrected if a proper understanding of this subject was taught and understood.

Conversion takes place when the guilty sinner, due to his deep desire and determination, commits to believe wholly upon the Lord Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior, resolving to submit his entire life to do His will. In short, conversion is the experience when a sinner becomes a true Christian, a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. Conversion is transformative. Upon conversion a whole new life begins, so much so, that the apostle Paul calls the Christian life “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4), “newness of the Spirit” (Rom. 7:6), “the new man” (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24), and even a “new creation.” But it is critically important for us to understand that true conversion can only be experienced through the life-transforming grace of God.

Conversion takes place only when God effectually calls a sinner from his life of sinful independence from God unto a life of love for God and His people, a life of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ His Lord. And so, on the one hand, conversion is the result of the sinner’s desire and pursuit to obtain salvation. You are commanded to become converted. Peter proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem these words: “Repent therefore and be *converted*, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...” (Acts 3:19f, NKJV). The English Standard Version (ESV) renders the meaning of being converted in this way: “Repent therefore, and *turn again*, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19f). This is a command. This is what God would have you do. But on the other hand, conversion is the result of God’s work of grace upon and in a person. Salvation is the result of God effectually calling the sinner and enabling him by His grace to come to Christ in repentance from sin and faith. Multiple verses of Scripture could be cited to show forth this truth. We must pray to God to create in us a new heart so that we might be willing and able to turn from sin and to place our faith wholly and solely in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, for unless and until He does so, we are forever lost and damned.

The Lord Jesus declared that conversion was essential to salvation for everyone. We read in Matthew 18:1ff these words of Jesus:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:1-3).

It is the universal need of every person to be converted in order to escape God’s judgment and His eternal punishment for sin. It is the individual responsibility for everyone everywhere to desire and to purpose to be converted unto the Lord. But this willingness and ability for the sinner to be converted will take place only due to the grace of God working within his soul, for it is “by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:5). Conversion is due to a miracle of God’s grace.

Conversion is an event that takes place suddenly. It is transformative. Granted, there is a work of God’s grace in a person’s life that precedes and prepares the sinner for his conversion. The length of time and the nature of that pre-conversion experience varies from person to person, but the end is the same for everyone—true and lasting conversion that signals the onset of the new life that is in Christ.

God’s work of grace in preparation to the conversion of a sinner unto Christ may be seen in the Apostle Paul’s conversion. The Lord Jesus personally brought Paul to salvation while Paul was traveling to arrest Christians as far as the city of Damascus. When the glorified Lord Jesus appeared to Paul, the Lord

said to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). This reveals that the Lord had been dealing with Paul before this event, perhaps at different times over time. And later Paul wrote of His conversion, “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood” (Gal. 15f). God determined the time and place when Paul was converted unto Jesus Christ. But in preparation to his conversion, the Lord had dealt with Paul’s soul in order to show him the foolishness and uselessness of the way he had been living and the way that he had thought he could attain salvation. The Lord Jesus brought Paul to realize that he was hopelessly lost unless and until He--Jesus Christ--set him free.

Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) was the pastor of the congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, who was recognized as perhaps the greatest pastor/theologian that God has raised up in America. Stoddard published a book in 1729 entitled, *The Nature of Saving Conversion*¹. He wrote of God’s work of preparation with view to the conversion event. After stating that saving conversion is wrought at once by God—it is a single and sudden event, he described God’s preparation of the sinner for his conversion that takes place over time.

There is wont (the need), ordinarily, to be a great deal of time spent in a way of preparation for this change. In order to this change, there is wont to be (a need for) a work of contrition and humiliation; and though in primitive times we read of men passing through the work in a very little time, yet ordinarily we find that much time is consumed in the work of preparation. There are many temptations to overcome, flatteries and discouragements to be removed. Men lose a great deal of time falling into slumbers, by backwardness to reform some evils, by trying to establish their own righteousness, by fearing they are not elect, of that God has given them up to hardness of heart, by imagining their hearts to be better than they are, by their own unwillingness to own the justice and sovereignty of God. So that commonly several months are spent and sometimes years, before they get through the work of preparation. Yet conversion itself is wrought at once in the hearing of one passage in a sermon, by the remembering of one Scripture.²

We see that in this matter of biblical conversion that there is much to understand respecting this great work of God’s grace in saving us.

Let us begin this morning by reading a portion of our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount in which He called forth people to enter into the life of being His disciples, who are true Christians, to whom He has promised everlasting life. Here is Matthew 7:7 through 14.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! ¹²Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

¹³“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. ¹⁴Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matthew 7:7-14)

These are the words of our Lord Jesus as He was concluding His great Sermon on the Mount. On the day that Jesus had delivered this sermon He had gathered before Him all of His disciples along with a great multitude of curious listeners and observers. The Lord proclaimed to them the message of the kingdom of God. He described to the crowds who kingdom citizens were and how they were to think and behave. He proclaimed to them the blessedness of being a citizen of God’s kingdom, both in this life of difficulty but

¹ Solomon Stoddard, *The Nature of Saving Conversion* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1919, [orig. 1719]).

² *Ibid*, pp. 1f.

also in the blessed life yet to come. Jesus also set before the crowds the righteous demands that He, the Lord of the kingdom, expected of those who claimed to be a part of His kingdom. Here in verses 7 through 13 Jesus exhorts His hearers to respond decisively and fully to all that He had set before them. The time of decision was upon them to begin to order their lives according to His teaching.

The Lord first encouraged His listeners to seek and pray for the Father to open to them the “gate” that was before them. We read in verse 7 that they were to ask, to seek, and to knock for entrance. He assured them that God would open this gate to everyone who did so (vs. 8-10). Entering this gate would then give them access to the way of life governed and directed by the Lord according to the Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets. Upon God opening the narrow gate before them, the Lord commanded them to enter and to begin their journey on this difficult way that would lead them unto everlasting life.

In pressing upon them the importance of their decision, Jesus spoke in advance of the relatively few who would choose such a course of life. Few would find this small gate (v. 14). This would not have been popularly received by the Jewish people before whom He was speaking. His teaching was in direct conflict with what they had always been taught. The Jews thought that they were all to be citizens of the kingdom of God for they thought it had been promised to all Jews, for they were the physical descendants of their ancestor Abraham to whom God gave His promise of salvation. They thought that their citizenship in the promised kingdom of the Messiah was secured to them by birth. For them, their circumcision was the badge of their relationship with God. But throughout this sermon Jesus proclaimed that something more was required. There was the individual need to respond to Jesus as the king, if entrance into the kingdom were to occur. The way that would lead sinners to eternal life could not be entered on the basis of being of Jewish descent. There was a way, a course of life, to be observed and lived that was much narrower, more restrictive, more narrowly prescribed than that which had been set before them by the scribes and Pharisees. Only those true children of Abraham would be allowed into the kingdom. These promised children of Abraham would have the same faith as their forefather (Rom. 4:16). They would do his works (John 8:39). The people listening to Jesus would have known instinctively that what He was teaching was radically different than what they had been accustomed to hearing.

Things have not changed in 2,000 years. “If the teaching of Christ was radically different from that in which the Jews of His day had been brought up, it is in equally sharp contrast with most of the concepts which now prevail in Christendom”, wrote Arthur Pink³ The Jews were ignorant of the ways of God though they attended their synagogues and were taught weekly from the Bible. So it is today, there are many “Christians”, so-called, who are equally ignorant of the demands of Christ and of the difficult way that leads to eternal life. If the Jews thought that the rite of circumcision secured for them their salvation in their infancy, so today multitudes of people would confess themselves Christian because they were sprinkled as a baby, born into a Christian family, or because they “accepted” or “received” Christ and were baptized into a church. They believe that their profession of faith alone is their passport to heaven. There is for them no narrow gate to enter, and certainly no difficult way that must be traversed in order to enter eternal life. The way of salvation is viewed as an easy thing--“Believe only and you are safe.” Salvation is offered in a manner that requires no repentance and no obedience. It is offered on much easier terms than what the Son of God presented before His hearers in this Sermon on the Mount, a sermon that everyone says they love and follow.

Most today view Christianity as the Jews once did: it is very broad that encompasses many. As **Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) once expressed,

It is generally assumed, yea, said openly, that many, that “millions,” that the greater part of the human race will obtain eternal felicity. Let any man who “attends church” die, and no matter how worldly his life or how crooked his business dealings, do not his friends say with one consent “he is now at rest,” and is not the preacher expected to declare in his funeral sermon that the deceased is “better off”? If anyone should dare to dissent is he not at once condemned for being “harsh and uncharitable”? Yet our Lord declared that “few” there be that find it for it is a narrow way that appears obscure and insignificant when compared to the broad way that so many choose...

³Arthur Pink, **The Broad and Narrow Way** (International Outreach, Inc., 2014), p.

...The vast majority in Christendom today hold that somehow, in some way, the greater part of our fellows will get there. Hell, if there be such a place, is reserved for arch-criminals and villains, just as our prisons house only a small fraction of the population—the “unfortunates” and “misguided” ones. And why is it that there are scarcely any left among us who really believe that only the *few* will reach heaven? There can only be one answer: because it is now generally held that heaven can be obtained on much easier terms than those prescribed by Christ. The adulterous generation in which our lot is cast are quite sure that heaven can be reached without treading the only way which leads there, that the kingdom of God can be entered *without* passing through “much tribulation” (Acts 14:22), that we may be disciples of Christ *without* denying self, taking up our cross and following Him (Matt. 16:24). They do not believe that if their right eye offends it *must* be plucked out and if their right hand offends it *must* be cut off (Matt. 5:29, 30). They do not believe that if they live after the flesh they shall die, and that only if through the Spirit they mortify the deeds of the body they shall live (Rom. 8:13). They are fully persuaded that a man can serve two masters and succeed in “making the best of two worlds.” In short, they do not believe the gate is as “strait” nor the way as “narrow” as Christ declared it to be. All we have to do in order to be saved (we are told) is to respond to Christ’s gracious invitation and “come unto Him.” Ah, but that “all” is by no means the simple matter that many think and that so many evangelists falsely represent it to be. We have to turn our back upon the world and forsake our cherished sins in order to turn our face unto Christ... Christ is the Holy One of God and will not be the minister of sin. Love for the things of this world closes the heart against Him. (Pink)

Given the danger that we could so easily go with the masses to their ruin, given the fact that Jesus told us that we would be in danger of many false prophets who would tell us that it is not so, let us consider very carefully the words of our Lord as He concluded this most important Sermon. Again, **Matthew 7:13f** read,

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Notice that the Lord described two gates, each opening unto a road, that when traversed will bring the traveler to a certain destination. And it would seem that once a person has resolved to set out on his course, having chosen to travel on one of these two roads, the arrival to its final destination is certain. The first road leads to destruction. The second road leads unto eternal life. It is our intention today not to address in detail the two roads, which depict the way that we live. Rather, we intend to address the two gates that open to these two road ways, the “narrow gate” over against the “wide” gate. Next week, Lord willing, we will consider the “difficult” way that leads unto eternal life in contrast to the “broad”, easy way that brings the traveler unto his final and eternal damnation.

I. The meaning of the “gate”

Notice that our Lord described a “gate” which leads to each road. What does this mean? A gate is designed both to permit admittance but also to prevent admittance to what lies beyond. Here Jesus commands those who desire salvation to enter this gate. Very simply, a gate is a point of entry, which every soul must pass before entering each respective roadway. It is the entrance into the way of life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is the place and point of *transformation and commitment*. It is the place where one is faced with making a choice. “Do I choose the broad way or the narrow way?” “Do I choose the way of ease and sensual pleasure or the way of difficulty and true happiness?” **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote these words:

The great concern and duty of every one of us, in consideration of all this; *Enter ye in at the strait gate*. The matter is fairly stated; life and death, good and evil, are set before us; both the ways, and both the ends: now let the matter be taken entire, and considered impartially, and then choose you this day which you will walk in; nay, the matter determines itself, and will not admit of a debate. No man, in his wits, would choose to go to the gallows, because it is a smooth, pleasant way to it, nor refuse the offer of

a palace and a throne, because it is a rough, dirty way to it; yet such absurdities as these are men guilty of, in the concerns of their souls. Delay not, therefore; deliberate not any longer, but *enter ye in at the strait gate; knock* at it by sincere and constant prayers and endeavors, *and it shall be opened*; nay, a wide door shall be opened, and an effectual one. It is true, we can neither go in, nor go on, without the assistance of divine grace; but it is as true, that grace is freely offered, and shall not be wanting (lacking) to those that seek it, and submit to it. Conversion is hard work, but it is needful, and, blessed be God, it is not impossible if we strive. (Matthew Henry)

The Lord described the one gate as a **“wide gate.”** It is easy to find this gate; in fact, just go with the flow. This is the way most people in the world order their lives. In fact it is the gate through which all people go, unless they find and choose to enter the small gate. It is a wide gate because it is a gate that is easy to enter. No difficulty is required here. It is easy to choose this gate. It is a popular road to travel that appeals to the majority of people. This seems to people to be the logical place to begin. Most people conclude, “This must certainly be the way that will provide me the happiest life that I could experience. I will go this way of the wide gate.” And so, we may conclude that this gate is easily found and easily entered. It is easily the gate of personal choice. The prospect for an easy journey is before the one entering this wide gate. Many have traveled this road before us. It is appealing. It is easy. There is *no humility* required. Difficulty and suffering may be avoided on this road, or at least it is thought so. And further, this way does not require any change of one’s behavior on behalf of those who travel on it. *No faith* is needed, although some may be preferred. *No repentance* is required, although it may allow and even encourage some reform. And certainly, *no obedience* is expected to anything outside your own mind and will. In short, this wide gate opening onto a broad way is the way of the atheist and agnostic, but of the religionist as well. There are people of all religions and all Christian denominations traveling on this road of their own choosing--it is a broad way. It is the way of the world; from which the Lord Jesus was exhorting in very strong terms for His listeners to turn away. For He declared it is a way that leads to certain destruction.

Do you believe this? The Christian does, and therefore has turned from this **“wide gate which opens to the broad way,”** and like a stranger *in* this world and *to* this world, has chosen another course for his/her life.

II. The small gate that leads to the difficult roadway

What is the gate of entry to this road? Very simply, the gate speaks of the entrance of a person into a life of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. Going through that gate is embarking on a life that is governed by Jesus Christ and His teachings. To enter this gate is to repent of sin and to embrace Christ Jesus and all that is entailed by that commitment. Entering this gate is to acknowledge and confess that

He is the Savior, and I am the sinner who needs salvation.
He is the Teacher, and I am His disciple, sitting and learning at His feet.
He is the Leader, and I am His follower, walking in his footsteps.
He is the Master, and I am His servant, busy, going about serving Him.
He is the Lord, and I am His subject, committing myself to obey His every directive.

It is not easy to find this narrow gate. Jesus said, “few there be that find it.” Why is this so? Because, frankly, people are not looking for it. They are quite content with the broad way--the way of self-will, the way of self-ordered existence.

It is not easy to enter this gate. In contrast to the ease with which the “broad gate” may be entered, going through this narrow gate comes with great difficulty. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle for even a rich man to enter this gate.

It is not easy to choose this gate. For you see, with man it is impossible in and of himself to enter this way. To turn from self-willed living to a life ordered by this Holy Book does not come naturally or easily. He doesn’t want to, and further, he really isn’t able to, and further, he won’t do so, unless God in His mercy performs an act of great grace in his heart. For the way that leads to life is contrary to his natural inclinations, contrary to his natural reasoning, contrary to human nature itself--which itself bears evidence

that this gospel has its origin with God, rather than man. And so; this gate is not easily found, not easily entered, and it is not easily or readily the gate of personal choosing.

The prospect for a difficult journey is less than appealing. Most say, ***“I will take the broad way, thank you.”*** For here through this narrow gate ***humility is required***. Here suffering will be encountered. And further, the broad way does not require any change of one’s behavior. But here, ***faith is needed***, it is belief in God’s Word alone about the destination of this narrow road which keeps the soul in this course. ***Repentance is required. Obedience is required***, again, as vs. 24-27 set forth so clearly. And here, most certainly, ***grace is necessary***, for who is sufficient for these things apart from God’s enabling power?

Which course have you, or will you take? The broad road or the difficult road, the wide gate or the small gate? If God has moved you to choose this small gate and difficult road, I would urge you to declare your faith and resolve. The best and biblical way is to declare it in baptism, identifying yourself with your Lord who died and rose to take away your sins. Do whatever the Lord would require of you, and resolve to do it soon, even now. As one wrote:

Be up and on your journey. Enter in at the gate at the head of the way, and do not stand hesitating. If it be the right road, you will find the entrance somewhat difficult, and exceedingly *narrow*; for it demands self-denial, and calls for strictness of obedience, and watchfulness of spirit. Nevertheless, “enter ye in at the strait gate.” Whatever its drawbacks of fewness of pilgrims, or straitness (difficulty) of entrance, yet choose it, and use it. True, there is another road, *broad* and much frequented; but *it leads to destruction*. Men go to ruin along the turnpike-road, but the way to heaven is a bridle-path. There may come other days, when the many will crowd the narrow way; but, at this time, to be popular one must be *broad* — *broad* in doctrine, in morals, and in spirituals. But those on the strait road shall go straight to glory, and those on the broad road are all abroad.

III. Finding the narrow gate

Finding this small gate is not easy. Apart from God’s grace we do not desire it and therefore we do not look for it. Because of our sinful heart and ways we cannot change. It is impossible for us to convert ourselves. Only the Holy Spirit can breathe into a lifeless soul the breath of life to enable him to live unto God. He can do so easily and quickly, even immediately if He so purposes to do so. **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758) once gave a very good sermon on this matter entitled, ***“A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both Scriptural and Rational Doctrine.”*** But true conversion does not always come easily and quickly, in fact, often times it comes through great struggle and that over time. Our Lord said this was so. Again, Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13f). The small gate metaphor suggests the inability of anyone to even find this gate apart from the grace of God. “There are few who find it.”

John Bunyan (1628-1688) sought to convey the difficulty of finding this gate in part one of ***The Pilgrim’s Progress***. Only with difficulty and great effort did his characters enter the wicket (small and secure) gate that gained entrance to the narrow way that leads to life. Bunyan depicted Christian before his conversion living in the city called Destruction. But while there he came under great conviction for his sin upon reading the Scriptures. Graceless, which was his name before conversion, knew he was flee from there, but he did not know where or how. Christian sought the counsel of Evangelist on what to do:

The man, therefore, read it, and looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, ‘Whither must I fly?’ (To where should I flee?) Then said Evangelist (pointing with his finger over a very wide field), ‘Do you see yonder wicket-gate?’ The man said, ‘No.’ Then said the other, ‘you see yonder shining light?’ (Psalm 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19). He said, ‘I think I do.’ Then said Evangelist, ‘Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto: so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.’

Bunyan was showing that a person under conviction of sin may not know to what or where he is to go for his salvation. Graceless, the name of Christian before he was converted, did not know what to do or where to go. He followed the direction of Evangelist and began to run toward the gate, but it took some time and he had to work through several hazards before finally coming to the gate. But then we read what happened when Christian approached this wicket or narrow gate.

IV. Coming to the narrow gate

Bunyan depicted the difficulty involved and the time that it took for Christian to find and to approach the gate, which was the time and place of his conversion. He had been under conviction of his sin for some time, after he had begun reading the Bible. He desired to be eased from bearing the burden of sin on his back. He had even been deceived and diverted to attempt to find another way, another means to rid himself of his sin (Cf. Mr. Worldly Wiseman). But as we read Bunyan's narrative, notice how Bunyan depicted Christian having to knock and request entrance, and had to wait for the Lord inside to open unto him and to bring Christian through this gate. This shows that God must of His own will bring a person into the Christian faith. We cannot convert ourselves, we must desire conversion and then ask and seek, and knock, looking to the Lord to grant us true repentance and saving faith.

So, in process of time, Christian got up to the gate. Now, over the gate there was written, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you' (Matt. 7:7).

He knocked, therefore, more than once or twice, saying 'May I now enter here? Will he within open to sorry me, though I have been an undeserving rebel? Then shall I not fail to sing his lasting praise on high.'

At last there came a grave person to the gate, named Goodwill, who asked who was there? And whence he came? And what he would have?

CHRISTIAN. Here is a poor burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, but am going to Mount Zion, that I may be delivered from the wrath to come. I would therefore, Sir, since I am informed that by this gate is the way thither, know if you are willing to let me in?

'I am willing with all my heart,' said Goodwill; and with that he opened the gate. So, when Christian was stepping in, the other gave him a pull.

Then said Christian, 'What means that?' The other told him. 'A little distance from this gate, there is erected a strong castle, of which Beelzebub is the captain; from thence, both he and them that are with him shoot arrows at those that come up to this gate, if haply they may die before they can enter in.' Then said Christian, 'I rejoice and tremble.' So when he was got in, the man of the gate asked him who directed him thither?

CHRISTIAN. Evangelist bid me come hither, and knock, as I did; and he said that you, Sir, would tell me what I must do.

GOODWILL. An open door is set before thee, and no man can shut it.

CHRISTIAN. Now I begin to reap the benefits of my hazards.

Bunyan showed that the one who would desire to be a Christian must "knock", and "ask", waiting upon God to open the way unto him. Bunyan was alluding to our Lord's words of promise, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matt. 7:7).

In contrast to this manner of coming to Christ, today we are told that we have the power to open the door. In fact, in there is a popular painting displayed frequently of Jesus standing before a door to a dwelling and He is knocking in order to be allowed entrance by the sinner, for there is no door handle on the door. This is the popular but terribly dishonoring belief that Christ has no power to open the door of someone's

heart. It is thought, “You must open the door to let Him in for He cannot do so lest He intrude upon your free will!”⁴ This is not how the Word of God portrays the Lord in our salvation!

In part two of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* Bunyan portrayed Christian’s wife, Christiana, and their four sons coming to this wicket gate, for they had come to desire to begin this life of faith that would bring them eternal life. Christiana’s companion was tender-hearted Mercy, who had doubts about herself as to whether or not she would be received at the gate. Here is Bunyan’s portrayal of them approaching the gate, which, again, Bunyan used to point to their conversion. Take note of the different details, the different depiction of the effort and time involved in knocking and waiting for entrance to be opened unto them.

Wherefore, me thought I saw Christiana and Mercy, and the boys, go all of them up to the gate: to which, when they were come, they betook themselves to a short debate about how they must manage their calling at the gate, and what should be said unto him that did open to them; so it was concluded, since Christiana was the eldest, that she should knock for entrance, and that she should speak to him that did open, for the rest. So Christiana began to knock, and as her poor husband did, she knocked and knocked again. But instead of any that answered, they all thought that they heard as if a dog came barking upon them; a dog, and a great one too; and this made the women and children afraid. Nor durst (dared) they for a while to knock any more, for fear the mastiff should fly upon them. Now, therefore, they were greatly tumbled up and down in their minds, and knew not what to do: knock they durst not, for fear of the dog; go back they durst not, for fear the keeper of that gate should espy them as they so went, and should be offended with them; at last they thought of knocking again, and knocked more vehemently than they did at first. Then said the keeper of the gate, ‘Who is there?’ So the dog left off to bark, and he opened unto them.

CHRISTIANA. Then Christiana made low obeisance, and said, ‘Let not our Lord be offended with his handmaidens, for that we have knocked at his princely gate.’

KEEPER. Then said the keeper, ‘Whence come ye? And what is it that you would have?’

CHRISTIANA. Christiana answered, ‘We are come from whence Christian did come, and upon the same errand as he; to wit, to be, if it shall please you, graciously admitted by this gate into the way that leads unto the celestial city. And I answer, my Lord, in the next place, that I am Christiana, once the wife of Christian, that now is gotten above.’

KEEPER. With that the keeper of the gate did marvel, saying, ‘What, is she now become a pilgrim that but a while ago abhorred that life?’ Then she bowed her head, and said, ‘Yea; and so are these my sweet babes also.’ Then he took her by the hand and led her in, and said also, ‘Suffer little children to come unto me;’ and with that he shut up the gate. This done, he called to a trumpeter that was above, over the gate, to entertain Christiana with shouting, and the sound of trumpet, for joy. So he obeyed, and sounded, and filled the air with his melodious notes. Now all this while poor Mercy did stand without (outside), trembling and crying, for fear that she was rejected. But when Christiana had got admittance for herself and her boys, then she began to make intercession for Mercy.

CHRISTIANA. And Christiana said, ‘My Lord, I have a companion of mine that stands yet without, that is come hither upon the same account as myself: one that is much dejected in her mind, for that she comes, as she thinks, without sending for; whereas I was sent for by my husband's King to come.’

Now Mercy began to be very impatient, and each minute was as long to her as an hour; wherefore she prevented Christiana from a fuller interceding for her, by knocking at the gate herself. And she knocked then so loud that she made Christiana to start. Then said the keeper of the gate, ‘Who is there?’ And Christiana said, ‘It is my friend.’

⁴ I recall my old friend, Leland Davis, who said rightly, “Can you picture the Sovereign Lord Jesus, the carpenter’s son, being unable to open a door?”

So he opened the gate, and looked out, but Mercy was fallen down without in a swoon; for she fainted, and was afraid that no gate should be opened to her.

KEEPER. Then he took her by the hand, and said, ‘Damsel, I bid thee arise.’ ‘Oh, sir,’ said she, ‘I am faint; there is scarce life left in me.’ But he answered, that one once said, ‘When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came unto thee, into thy holy temple’ (Jonah 2:7). Fear not, but stand upon thy feet, and tell me therefore thou art come.’

MERCY. I am come for that unto which I was never invited, as my friend Christiana was. Hers was from the King, and mine was but from her.⁵ Wherefore I fear I presume.

KEEPER. Did she desire thee to come with her to this place?

MERCY. Yes; and as my Lord sees, I am come. And if there is any grace and forgiveness of sins to spare, I beseech that thy poor handmaid may be a partaker thereof.

Then He took her again by the hand, and led her gently in, and said, ‘I pray for all them that believe on Me, by what means soever they come unto Me.’ Then said He to those that stood by, ‘Fetch something and give it to Mercy to smell on, thereby to stay her faintings;’ so they fetched her a bundle of myrrh, and a while after she was revived.

And now were Christiana and her boys, and Mercy, received of the Lord at the head of the way, and spoken kindly unto by Him. Then said they yet further unto Him, ‘We are sorry for our sins, and beg of our Lord His pardon and further information what we must do.’

‘I grant pardon,’ said He, ‘by word and deed; by word in the promise of forgiveness, by deed in the way I obtained it. Take the first from my lips with a kiss, and the other as it shall be revealed’ (Song of Solomon 1:2; John 20:20).

Now I saw in my dream, that He spoke many good words unto them, whereby they were greatly gladdened. He also had them up to the top of the gate, and showed them by what deed they were saved; and told them withal, that that sight they would have again as they went along in the way, to their comfort.

What Bunyan illustrated was that the “wicket gate”, which was his setting forth of the narrow gate of Matthew 7:13, is entered through conversion. But conversion is not easily experienced or acquired as most assume in modern evangelicalism. Many are told that anyone at any time can enter this gate and begin the Christian life with no difficulty and with no hesitation. “Make a decision for Christ.” “Accept Jesus as your personal Savior.” But entering the Christian life is not such an easy feat. It requires a total surrender of one’s heart and will unto the Lord Jesus, which the unregenerate soul neither desires nor intends to do. The Lord will not open the narrow gate of entrance into life unless and until there is total surrender to Him as Lord. Entering the narrow gate involves a willingness for the Lord Jesus to direct you as you walk a narrow and difficult way that leads unto life. But evangelicals have so dumbed-down the nature of salvation itself, and the nature of saving faith, that the straight gate and narrow way have become the “wide gate” and the “broad way”, while promising people they have eternal life. People think that it is an easy thing to enter and an easy way to travel, but in reality for the many who go that way it leads to their own destruction and damnation.

When we say that this gate is small and the way is narrow, we are not saying that if you desire to enter this life that you may fail to do so. The Lord Jesus promised all who desire to come to Him and to enter through this very narrow and specific gate, that He will open it to them. The Lord has promised, “Ask, and **it will be given to you**; seek, and **you will find**; knock, and **it will be opened to you**. For **everyone** who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7:7f). You may not find it

⁵ Bunyan had before described Christiana while in the city, Destruction, had received a personal letter from the Lord inviting her to come unto Him. Mercy did not have a clear sense of an individual call or invitation had Christiana, but had, what she thought) had decided on her own to join with Christiana in her pilgrimage.

easy to enter, but you may be assured that He will enable your entrance if you come unto Him in faith. Asking, seeking, and knocking is not conversion, but it reflects God's work of preparing the soul for conversion. Often God in His grace prepares His elect for the day of their conversion.

V. Entering the narrow gate

Entering this small gate is only possible to them who experience the converting grace of God. What does biblical conversion entail? First it believes and embraces all the teachings of Scripture regarding one's duty and the attaining of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Second, it involves true repentance. Repentance includes a remorse of former transgressions of God's law and the resolve to live in the future apart from sin unto the Lord. And third, repentance involves our complete surrender and submission to Jesus Christ the Lord and to be governed by the Bible alone through life. Arthur Pink wrote, "It is by abandoning our idols and pleasures of sin that we pass through the straight gate."⁶ Similarly Charles Spurgeon said,

"You and your sins must separate, or you and your God will never come together. No one sin may you keep. They must all be given up... You must forsake them, abhor them, and ask the Lord to overcome them."⁷

Entering this gate that opens to the way of living as a Christian can only be done and will only be done by those whom God has caused to be born again. The Word of God commands us to be converted, but we will not be converted unless the Lord in His sovereign grace converts us unto Himself. But conversion is not easily experienced or acquired as most assume it to be in modern evangelicalism. It can only be entered through the transforming grace of God. **Matthew Henry** emphasized this truth:

First, that the gate is strait. Conversion and regeneration are *the gate*, by which we enter into this way, in which we begin a life of faith and serious godliness; out of a state of sin into a state of grace we must pass, by the new birth (John 3:3, 5). This is a *strait gate*, hard to find, and hard to get through; like a passage between two rocks (1 Sam. 14:4). There must be *a new heart, and a new spirit, and old things must pass away*. The bent of the soul must be changed, corrupt habits and customs broken off; what we have been doing all our days must be undone again. We must swim against the stream; much opposition must be struggled with, and broken through, from without, and from within. It is easier to set a man against all the world than against himself, and yet this must be in conversion. It is a *strait gate*, for we must stoop, or we cannot go in at it; we must become as little children; high thoughts must be brought down; nay, we must strip, must deny ourselves, put off the world, *put off the old man*; we must be willing to forsake all for our interest in Christ. *The gate is strait* to all, but to some straighter than others; as to the rich, to some that have been long prejudiced against religion. *The gate is strait*; blessed be God, it is not shut up, nor locked against us, nor kept with a flaming sword, as it will be shortly (25:10).

Understanding this spiritual reality conflicts with the terrible error of "decisionism" that is prevalent in evangelicalism. Where Jesus spoke of a door which He must open in order to allow entrance, evangelicals set before sinners the idea that it is their door that they may open unto Jesus if they are willing. This reflects two completely different understandings and practices of doing evangelism. Most evangelicals see evangelism as securing the sinner's acceptance of Jesus rather than Jesus' acceptance of the sinner. This departure from the biblical and historical means of evangelism emerged in the early 19th century under a new kind of "evangelists", whose primary leader and inspiration was **Charles Finney** (1792-1875). He developed what came to be known as "new measures" which eventually developed into modern evangelistic crusade methods of securing decisions by people to "accept Christ." But at that same time in history God had raised up a reformed evangelist who withstood Finney and his methods, whom the Lord wonderfully used to bring true revival to many places, particularly here in New England. This man was **Asahel Nettleton** (1783-1844). He would preach the gospel, confronting and challenging his listeners with their corrupting

⁶ Arthur Pink, **The Broad and Narrow Way** (International Outreach, Inc., 2014), p.7

⁷ Ibid, pp. 6f.

and damning sin, telling them that unless God delivered them through His converting grace, they would perish and be damned in their sin. He refused to press people to make some kind of decision or commitment, but urged them to seek through prayer and faith for the Lord to convert them unto Himself. Here are a few of numerous accounts of the effects of his ministry:

“R__ H__, aged nineteen years, after a conflict of serious impressions and opposition of heart for about six weeks, was apparently, on the 20th of April, renewed in heart. The first evangelical exercise that she had any knowledge of, according to her own account, was benevolence to her fellow men. She would that all men might be saved, even if she were lost. The divine law appeared to her holy, just, and good. She felt submissive to the divine will — a disposition to resign herself into the hands of God, feeling that the judge of all the earth would do right. She thus continued till Friday the 22d, when returning from a religious meeting, she felt a love to God on account of the excellency of His character. She loved holiness for holiness’ sake. She then hated sin, because in its own nature, it is odious. This was the first time that she had those consolations that the world cannot give nor take away. Here she dates her hope, and rejoices in God her Savior.”

“B__ C__, aged 20 years, having had frequent chidings of conscience at times for more than a year past, hopes that on the 14th of April she was born of the Spirit, and that she is now reconciled to God. Christ appears to her altogether lovely, and the chiefest among ten thousand. Her first gracious exercises appeared to be love to the brethren, love to God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. She hates sin because it is exceeding sinful. She appears to have clear views of her own native depravity, and of the obstinacy of her will. She wonders at and adores the patience and longsuffering of God, that she had not been long ago consigned to everlasting despair.”

“L__ O__ W__, aged 12 years, on the 10th day of May was hopefully delivered from the thralldom of sin and Satan. She experienced a singular conflict and conviction of sin for about a week. Her distress was seemingly too great to be long endured. Her cry was, ‘Oh, what a dreadful hard heart.’ ‘Oh, it seems as if I was in hell.’ Her conflict wore upon her bodily frame like a violent attack of fever. In this youth it was clearly manifested that when the Holy Ghost, the Comforter comes, he will convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. A person who had experienced a change of heart, and who had seen this child through all her trials and conflicts, would be led to conclude that the change in her is a real one. She possessed less guile than those of mature years. There was no dissembling (hypocrisy). And when grace was planted in her soul, she did not seem to know it. The first effect that it produced, was a calm serenity of mind. She did not know why she felt so. She continued so for some hours, not knowing if her dreadful distress would return upon her. She took her Bible and perused it — which the day before, she perfectly hated, because looking into it increased her torments. This calm serenity appeared in the morning when she arose. She thus continued till towards noon, when she informed me that she loved God — that the Bible was a new book to her — that she loved to read it — that the world did not appear to her as it did before — that all was new. She took me by the hand, and said she loved me, and loved all God’s creatures because God made them. She said she knew that she was a great sinner. She wondered how she could so willfully oppose God for so long. God was right and reasonable, and she was altogether wrong in being so stubborn and perverse. She said she was willing to submit herself into the hands of God, for God would do right with her. She knew that it would be just if God sent her to hell here, submission seemed to be her first evangelical exercise, and then, love to the brethren.”

“Widow A__ C__, aged 50, fixes on the 3rd day of May as the time when she hopes that her heart was renewed by the spirit of grace. She had long before entertained a hope, founded on her good works. She had never before believed in total depravity. She believed that to live uprightly, and deal fairly and honestly with mankind, was sufficient to entitle her to salvation. But at this time, she found that her former hopes were nothing, and that her righteousness was but filthy rags. She now feels that all her hope is in Christ. She is full in her belief of all the great doctrines of grace. She places her confidence in God through Christ, relying on the promises.”

“J__ B__, son of E__ B__, aged nearly 13 years. On the last Sabbath in May, or the first Sabbath in June, his mother went to meeting, and charged him and her other child to be good children, and not to play, but read their books. His father went to a distant field to see about his cattle. Before noon, this J__ was struck with a deep conviction of sin. He continued in a distressed state about 24 hours, without food or sleep . His mind seemed to be overwhelmed with a sense of the dreadful nature of sin, as committed against God. Something happened to him at the end of 24 hours, which caused him to wipe away his tears, to wash himself, and cheerfully to partake of some food. It is now about two months since this happened. He has been, from that time to this, remarkably calm and serene in his mind. He answers questions rationally — says that he loves God and hates sin. He does not fail in his daily devotions and reading the Bible, and has altogether a change of deportment. He appears to have a sense of the evil nature of sin. The duties of the Sabbath and the sanctuary appear to be his delight. It is apparent to all who know this youth, that a great change has taken place in him. From being passionate, petulant, perverse, and stubborn, he is now humble, meek, patient, forbearing, and forgiving.”⁸:

Before we close, I would like to say a word with respect to those who grew up in a Christian family and were taught and trained well in the Christian faith from youth. For some like these, they may not experience (but some do) the deeply moving work of the Holy Spirit and great transition of conversion that may take place in one who lived in the world or in defiance of his or her Christian parents. You may be a believer in Christ today. You are committed as a disciple of Jesus Christ to live for Him as your Savior and Lord. That is the essence of the matter. You may be like the young sons of Christiana who came through that “small gate” together, for you give evidence of your new life in Christ. What you are to do is to stand forward and confess your faith and commitment to Christ in baptism. But let us say that you are a young person, and you have grown up always believing the faith as your dad and mom have taught you. They had taken you in hand from youth and have led you in the way you are to go. You have believed them and obeyed them because you love and honor them and desire that you please them with your faith and life. I would urge you to make the conscious decision to continue in that same faith and walk, but consciously in faith place your hand into the hand of the Lord Jesus, purposing that you will believe and walk to please Him primarily. You continue to love your parents and follow them, but now you do so because Jesus Christ would have you be so and do so. And I am sure that is what your parents would delight to see you do.

May our lord be merciful and gracious to each of us and all of us that our conversion be confirmed to us, that we have abandoned all intention to live according to our own will, but we have walked through that narrow gate resolved to live and obey Him.

The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace. (Num. 6:24-26)

⁸ Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, **Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton**, The (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, first published in 1854), pp. 72-78.