

Enter By the Narrow Gate

One of the most frequently quoted sections of the Sermon on the Mount contains Jesus' famous teaching regarding entering by the broad gate or the narrow gate.

Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

This simple entry saying, when considered more carefully, raises a number of questions. Is this exhortation addressed to regenerate people or only those who are somewhat interested in Christ's teaching? What are they being exhorted to enter: personal salvation, heaven, or a kingdom way of life? When does this entrance occur, immediately or in the future? What is meant by "life" and "destruction?" Is the gate at the beginning or end of the disciple's journey?

A Challenge to Accept the Gospel?

A popular view of this parable is that it is a warning to non-Christians that they must choose the narrow gate if they ever hope to enter the kingdom of heaven, that is, final salvation. In other words, entering the gate is conversion and acceptance of the gospel. Those holding this view have understood the means of obtaining personal salvation in two different ways.

By Means of Self-Denial and Obedience

Two writers describe it this way: "To enter by the narrow gate, one must strip himself of many things, such as a consuming desire for earthly goods, the unforgiving spirit, selfishness, and especially self-righteousness. The narrow gate is therefore the gate of self-denial and obedience."

This is compared with the effort and struggle that Joshua undertook to conquer the land.

Another insists, "We have to turn our back on the world and forsake our cherished sins." We cannot become Christians "without denying self, taking up our cross and following him."

One of the most beloved preachers of our era, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a popular expositor of Experimental Predestinarian ideas, presents a confusing view of the gospel in his interpretation of this passage.

He understands the call to enter the narrow gate as "the gospel of Jesus Christ."

But is there any mention of the gospel here? Where is the teaching that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead? Where is the New Testament teaching that eternal life is obtained by faith apart from works? According to Lloyd-Jones, the gospel is a complex affair involving several steps. He says we must leave behind all worldliness, breaking with the crowd and the "vast majority of people." This is the "first step in becoming a Christian." He also says we must leave outside "the things that please the world."

Next, we must leave ourselves "outside." Here, he cites a passage addressed to Christians and applies it to the gospel, "Put off the old man" (Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:8). According to Lloyd-Jones, it is extremely difficult to become a Christian. In fact, "It means living like Christ Himself."

Furthermore, to become a Christian, one must be ready for suffering and persecution.

This may be the gospel according to Lloyd-Jones but is this the gospel according to Jesus and Paul?¹ Becoming a Christian is not a matter of self-denial and obedience. Salvation costs us nothing. It is a gift. "*I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost*" (Revelation 21:6; 22:17). The route to salvation is by faith alone, apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). This is a serious problem for those who say that this parable tells how to find personal salvation. However, the condition of works for entrance strongly suggests that the entrance in this parable is not into heaven, but instead into a way of life—the experience of kingdom life now, the

¹ Paul tells us some ingredients of a gospel message, "I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Neither is Lloyd-Jones' gospel consistent with what Jesus taught, "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." The parable of the broad and narrow way makes no mention of any of these things. See Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971).

kingdom way of living as explained throughout the sermon. One must enter the narrow gate and the narrow way every day, not just once!

By Means of Faith in Jesus as the Way

Another Experimental Predestinarian writer, James Montgomery Boice, views this parable as a challenge to nonbelievers to accept Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life.” He says that entering through the narrow gate is entering through Christ for salvation.²

Those entering by the broad gate believe there are many ways to God, a view consistent with postmodern pluralism. There were many religions promoted in first-century Palestine, and the person entering the broad gate refuses to enter by the only way (John 14:6).

This solution is much cleaner and avoids the works salvation into which Lloyd-Jones is led. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest this interpretation. Furthermore, it begs the question, “What is meant by the word ‘way’?” Is it a way of salvation or a way of life? We will address this question below.

A primary objection, however, to understanding both of the above viewpoints (the narrow gate as the way of salvation) is the fact that the sermon is addressed to those who are already saved! As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 20), Matthew explicitly states that the sermon was addressed to believers, his disciples.

The gospel is never presented in the Sermon; instead, a way of living for the redeemed is outlined. When we come, therefore, to the warning about the narrow and broad gates, we should keep in mind that true believers are being warned. But what is the nature of this warning?

A Challenge to Be Sure You Are Born-Again

A second way of understanding the exhortation and warning in the parable is that it is not a challenge to *become* a Christian, but rather a challenge to ensure you are one. As pointed out above (Chapter 19), this “assurance” view of this passage leads to the conclusion that salvation is achieved through works of obedience.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones addresses the issue directly. “Does this teach that a man saves himself by his decision and action?” Good question. In a radical departure from the text, he proposes a solution grounded in his Experimentalist theology. He says, “I do not save myself by entering in at the straight gate, but by doing so I announce the fact that I am saved.”

He further clarifies the issue (or confuses it?) by saying that entering the gate does not mean going to heaven; instead, it means that a person who will go to heaven has entered the gate and is currently pursuing the narrow way. A person does not save themselves by entering through the straight gate, but by doing so, I announce that I am saved. It is only Christian people who are to be found along the narrow way, and you do not make yourself a Christian by entering in. You are entering and walking upon it because you are saved.³

In other words, all true believers will choose the narrow way. However, it is clear that Solomon, Saul, Amaziah, the twelve sons of Jacob, the carnal Christians in Corinth, the Christians whose works will be burned up at the Judgment Seat of Christ, the carnal Christian who committed incest with his mother-in-law, the Christian who draws back in shame when the Lord returns, the Pharisees who “believed on him” (a technical term in John for saving faith) yet refused to confess their faith publicly, the Christians at Corinth who refused to turn from their impurity, Demas, Phygelus and Hermogenes, Hymenaeus and Alexander who made a shipwreck of their faith, and many others in the Bible did not. None of these believers chose the narrow gate and entered the narrow way. The text does not hint at the idea that entering the gate either announces or proves one’s commitment. Additionally, this appears to contradict what Lloyd-Jones himself has stated in the preceding pages of his book, as quoted above. Earlier, he wrote that self-sacrifice was “the first step in becoming a Christian.” This illustrates the labyrinth of qualifications and “clarifications” necessary for those who hold that this is a gospel passage.

Of course, another question necessarily follows, “How can I know for sure that I am in fact on the narrow way?” Lloyd-Jones, realizing the difficulty into which he has led his readers, asks, “Does a failure to live the Christian life fully prove that we are on the broad way [the way to eternal separation from God]?”⁴ Notice the word “fully.” Earlier, he said that to determine whether a person is a Christian, the “ultimate test” is this: “Have I committed myself to this way of life? Is it the thing that controls my life? Is it the governing and controlling issue in our actual

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972).

³ Ibid., 237-38.

⁴ Ibid., 238.

decisions and practice?” He says, “I must give myself to it, come what may ... it is going to be my life.”⁵ Most would understand him to be saying that this is the test that would “fully” prove that one is a Christian.

Now, in typical Experimental Predestinarian fashion, the qualifications begin. He begins to sandpaper the rough edges. “The picture,” Lloyd-Jones says, “must not be pressed in detail.”⁶ He tells his readers that failure does not “fully” prove we are on the highway to eternal separation from God, after all. Earlier, it was the “ultimate test.” In the final analysis, his pastoral heart retreats from the previous statements and reduces the “ultimate test” of actually doing the will of God to “hungering and thirsting.” If one has hunger and thirst, he says, “I can assure you that you are in it.”⁷ Of course, Lloyd-Jones is a thorough evangelical. As such, he holds firmly to justification by faith alone. Others of a more liberal persuasion sometimes adopt an Arminian view of this passage, which suggests that salvation can be lost.⁸

Lloyd-Jones’s difficulties arise from the fact that he knows this is addressed to disciples. Furthermore, he assumes that “life” means “go to heaven,” “destruction” refers to final separation from God, and “entering” the narrow gate means entrance into the kingdom of God, that is, being saved. Given these premises, this text patently teaches that disciples must do good works to go to heaven. Lloyd-Jones and other interpreters who share his view may believe what they want, but the text itself says nothing about one’s choice proving that he is saved or lost. That is a theological notion that would certainly perplex a first-century fisherman.

A Challenge to Live as a Disciple?

The final option for understanding this parable is that both of the travelers are true believers. What is in view is a call to true believers to make a decision: a decision to follow Christ as a disciple and to live out the Sermon on the Mount in their own lives.

To correctly choose between these interpretive options, one must come to a correct answer to three questions.

What is being entered into, soteriological salvation or a way of life?

What is meant by “destruction,” final separation from God or spiritual/psychological ruin in this life?

What is meant by “life,” heaven when one dies, or a rich life now?

What Is Entered Into?

What then is “entered”? Entrance refers to entering a “way,” either “broad” or “narrow.” Because they are disciples, they have already entered into personal salvation and are already guaranteed physical entrance into the millennium. What is at stake here is whether or not they enter into Christ’s **way of life** as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount on their journey to this future kingdom.

“In the NT *hodós* [“way”] primarily refers to the way of life, the manner of life demanded by God (Acts 14:16; Romans 3:16f.; James 1:8; 5:20; 2 Peter 2:15, 21, etc.), a meaning usually found in Matthew. This is parallel to “entering the kingdom” in Matthew 5:20: “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Possession of an inward ethical and spiritual righteousness is necessary for entrance into the narrow way, the kingdom way of life that leads to “life” and honor and avoids “destruction.” The parallelism between entering the kingdom in 5:20 and entering onto “a way” in 7:13 suggests that the aspect of the kingdom in view in the Sermon on the Mount is a way of life—a way of life that leads to an abundant entrance into the future millennium.

There is nothing here about entering into a way of salvation. Moral righteousness is the condition for entering the *kingdom way of living* in Matthew. Thus, the traveler is not entering salvation when he enters the gate; he is entering into the kingdom way of life, which, if pursued, will result in “life” and greatness both now and in eternity. Those described were already “in” the kingdom when they were being exhorted to enter it (Matthew 5:19-20).

⁵ Ibid., 230.

⁶ Ibid., 238.

⁷ Ibid., 238.

⁸ Luz and Koester, for example, tell their readers, “Salvation depends upon this way.” They believe that the passage is addressed to believers in Jesus but that believers should not assume they have assurance of salvation. They could fall away and only those believers who follow the narrow way will ultimately be saved. Luz and Koester, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*: 373. They attempt to insert the idea of grace into their works-salvation by claiming that salvation in Matthew is a synergism between works and grace and that grace is provided in that the Sermon gives “the impulse and direction for action.”

One can see parallel thoughts in Psalm 119. The psalmist spoke of this entrance into a way of life when he said, *“I have chosen the faithful way; I have placed your ordinances before me”* (Psalm 119:30).⁹

While many commentaries understand “way” to mean the way of salvation, the text does not appear to suggest this. A believer enters the narrow way when he chooses to follow the path of discipleship throughout his life;¹⁰ following the narrow way is not a one-time thing, like entering into salvation. The two ways are presented to him daily. When he chooses the narrow gate in the various decisions of life, he proceeds along the narrow way of perseverance. When he shuns the call to discipleship, he proceeds along the broad way. Entrance through either gates or ways ultimately will lead him to the millennial kingdom at the Second Advent. Still, the one who chooses the wide gate and way will find that his life is spiritually ruined in the interim. He will suffer loss at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Mark 8:35). He will experience spiritual impoverishment, that is, he will “die” spiritually (Romans 8:12-13; cf. 7:24, “this *kind* of death”). One choice leads to a life of enrichment, reward, and fulfillment, and the other leads to destruction.

What Is Meant by “Destruction”?

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction [Gr apōleia], and there are many who enter through it (Matthew 7:13).

These travelers face two destinies: life or destruction. If they choose the broad way, they face destruction. What does this mean? There are two possibilities.

- (1) “Destruction” means final damnation. Those who believe that the gate and the way refer to entrance into initial salvation followed by a life of sanctification naturally understand *apōleia*, “destruction,” to mean damnation. This is supposedly proven by the fact that a “true” believer would never follow the broad way. Those who believe that salvation can be lost also understand the “perishing” as eternal separation from God.¹¹
- (2) A second view is that “destruction” means to experience **temporal** spiritual impoverishment and ruin as well as the lowest status in the **future** Davidic Theocracy. Those who experience “destruction” are believers who do not persevere under persecution and hence will not receive the reward mentioned in 5:12 or store up treasure in heaven (6:21-20). These are believers who have become “saltless” (5:13). Their temporal spiritual lives are certainly ruined, but their eternal destination, heaven, is not in question.

Which view is correct?

⁹ He asked God to make him “walk in the path” of God’s commandments; “revive me in your ways” (vv. 35, 37). He wanted God to grant him a rich “life” (v. 77), just as Jesus promised “life” to the man who entered the narrow gate and followed the narrow way. Additional parallels are found in the psalmist’s statement, *“Before I was afflicted, I went astray”* (v. 67). The psalmist says that he will keep his feet from every “evil way” (similar to the broad way of Matthew 7:13) and hate every “false way” (Psalm 119:104). As Jesus put it, the broad way leads to “destruction.” When God’s compassion comes to the psalmist, he will “live,” that is, live richly; he will flourish. The gate that is entered is the entry point into a path, a way of life. In what appears to be a particularly glaring example of importing one’s theology into the text, Carson writes, “Jesus is not encouraging committed disciples, ‘Christians,’ to press on along the narrow way and be rewarded in the way marked by persecution and rewarded in the end. Jesus’ ‘disciples’ are therefore not full-fledged Christians in the post-Pentecost sense,” D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 189. What is a “full-fledged Christian” in the “post-Pentecost sense”? Carson argues his case on bare assertion and circular reasoning about the nature of entering the kingdom and gives no proof for his tenuous view that only professing believers are being addressed.

¹⁰ One of the earliest commentaries on this passage is the Didache (late first or early second century). Known as “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” this small document opens with a discussion of the “two ways.” The way of life is not the way of obtaining justification but is defined as, “Now this is the way of life, ‘you shall love God, who made you’; second, ‘your neighbor as yourself’; and whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do to another” (Didache 1.1-2). Conversely, the way of death is not hell nor does it say it leads to the lake of fire. Rather, it is an ungodly manner of life. Such a way includes things like “You shall not covet your neighbor’s possessions; you shall not commit perjury; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not speak evil; you shall not hold a grudge.” The way of death is “evil and completely cursed” (Didache 5.1). The reason it is “cursed” is not because it sends one to damnation but because the justified saints are in danger of becoming ones “from whom gentleness and patience are far away, loving worthless things, pursuing [earthly] reward, having no mercy for the poor, not working on behalf of the oppressed, not knowing him who made them, murderers of children, corrupters of God’s creation, turning away from someone in need, oppressing the afflicted, advocates of the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor, utterly sinful. May you be delivered, children, from all these things!” Throughout this document, the assumed readers are justified saints. They are referred to as “My Child” (Didache 4.1), and he warns those who already possess the fear of God that they might lose it (Didache 4.10). It is a way of life or a way of death that is set before the already believing and regenerate disciples (Didache 6.1-2). Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 249.

¹¹ Arminian interpreters argue that the parable teaches that if true believers fail to obey or otherwise fall away, they will lose salvation. However, as we shall see, this is inconsistent with the meanings of the words “perish” and “life” as found in the gospel of Matthew. Furthermore this is difficult to harmonize with Jesus’ specific statement elsewhere, *“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me, I will lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day”* (John 6:39; see also 10:27-29).

Those who hold that entering the broad gate means choosing a path leading to eternal separation from God face an obvious problem. If this is addressed to non-Christians, they are being exhorted to secure final entrance into heaven by means of works, that is, to persevere through trials to be saved. In other words, Jesus never gives them the gospel and yet warns them of damnation.

On the other hand, if this text is addressed to Christians and if “life” means heaven and “destruction” means eternal separation from God, then another problem arises. Jesus would be warning true believers about a fate which He knows will never happen to them, eternal separation from God. Realizing the problem this presents for his gospel view of the passage, Lloyd-Jones assures us that “every illustration has its limits.”¹²

What do the broad gate and the broad way signify? Broad gates are easy to enter. They lead to something most people would desire. They are spacious, well-protected, roomy, and lead to things like the king’s palace or somewhere else useful and frequently visited.

But are those who follow the broad way on the highway to hell?¹³ While it is common to understand “destruction” as a reference to eternal separation from God, and that use of the word is indeed found elsewhere,¹⁴ it has a range of meanings.

The Gr word *apōleia* is used 18 times in the New Testament. It is used eleven times of damnation,¹⁵ four times of temporal ruin and possibly physical death,¹⁶ twice of ruin or physical waste,¹⁷ and once in Matthew 7:13. Therefore, while the sense of damnation is possible, Matthew himself only uses the word one other time, and there he uses it in the sense of waste or the “needless squandering of a resource”¹⁸ (Matthew 26:8; cf. Mark 14:4). Its variation in meaning elsewhere should give us pause in automatically assuming it means damnation in Matthew 7:13.

Perhaps the verbal form “to perish” (Gr *apollumi*), which is found ninety times in the New Testament and often in Matthew, will give us more to work with than the one reference to the noun, *apōleia*. The verb, *apollumi* does mean “suffer damnation” in several places outside of Matthew, but it has only one clear instance of that meaning in the Gospels.¹⁹ What is of interest is that the verb is used nineteen times in seventeen verses in the Gospel of Matthew, and Matthew never uses it in the sense of damnation. It is used seven times for physical death.²⁰ For example, Peter was afraid of “perishing” by drowning (Matthew 8:25). In one place it means “to ruin,” where Jesus says that putting new wine into old wineskins “ruins” them (Matthew 9:17).²¹ Perhaps the best translation in this context is “to fail to obtain what one expects or anticipates, lose out on, lose.”²² A parallel to Matthew 7:23 is Matthew 10:42, where *apollumi* means to “lose reward.”

The verb is commonly used to describe a temporal destruction or psychological and spiritual ruin of believers: “Do not destroy [Gr *apollumi*] with your food him for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15); “For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined [Gr *apollumi*], the brother for whose sake Christ died” (1 Corinthians 8:11). When Paul speaks of being “struck down but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:9), he is referring to “not despairing” (v. 8) or losing heart in v. 1.

Thus, it is clear that true believers can be “destroyed” in a spiritual or psychological sense. Paul discusses this possibility elsewhere when he says, “Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers” (2 Timothy 2:14). In this passage, he uses the word *katastrophē* instead of *apōleia*. It refers in this case to “a state of being intellectually upset to a ruinous degree.” For a more complete discussion of “destruction,” see the excursus on “destruction” at the end of this chapter.

¹² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 237.

¹³ Citing Opeke, Carson asserts that the perishing in Matthew 7:13 refers to the plunge into hell. Opeke says, *apōleia* “is definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death” (A. Opeke, “*apōleia*,” in TDNT, 1:396). However, Matthew does not use the term this way.

¹⁴ John 17:12, Romans 9:22, Philippians 1:28, 3:19; 1 Timothy 6:9.

¹⁵ John 17:12; Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Peter 2:1, 3; 3:16 (twice); Revelation 17:8, 11.

¹⁶ Acts 8:20; 1 Timothy 6:9; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7.

¹⁷ Matthew 26:8; Mark 14:4.

¹⁸ James Swanson, *A Dictionary of Biblical Languages: Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: Logos Research Systems, 2001), s.v. GK724.

¹⁹ E.g., John 10:28.

²⁰ Matthew 2:13; 8:25; 12:14; 21:41 - he will “destroy those wretches” probably a reference to the judgment in time of AD 70 on the nation and not final damnation; Matthew 22:7; 26:52; 27:20.

²¹ See also Matthew 10:6; 18:13-14, “to go astray;” 12:14; 15:24; 22:7; 26:52; 27:20, etc.

²² BDAG, 116, 2

The wide gate leading to the broad way was the main thoroughfare into a city, the main avenue (Revelation 21:21; 22:2). It was the route followed by the merchants and was lined with shops. It was like entering a modern shopping mall. It was the way of ease and pleasure. Jesus warns his listeners to avoid the broad gate despite its worldly attractiveness and to seek the narrow gate. His point is that the broad way, while attractive and lined with shops and entertainment, can be expensive in the sense of spiritual loss. He is using this as a metaphor for the loss entailed by the choice of the broad way.

The narrow way is costly in a different sense as well. It will cost the follower radical discipleship, but this loss has a positive outcome, a rich life now, and an abundant entrance into the Kingdom at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Peter 1:11). Jesus is saying that just as men in this world will do everything reasonable to find a way into the city that would avoid financial ruin (they know that if they take the main gate, the broad one, they will be “ripped off”) so the believer in Christ must avoid being damaged eternally by taking the wide gate. Instead, he must seek a way of entrance and a path to follow that will lead to true life, which is costly as well. But the broad and narrow gates are both choices set before the redeemed. These are not one-time choices; they are daily decisions that confront believers throughout their lives.

So, what does it mean in Matthew 7:13? The use of words for destruction and life, along with the broader context of the sermon as a call to discipleship (rather than salvation), confirms the interpretation given above. The narrow gate leads to the way of life, and the broad gate leads to the path of “destruction,” that is, spiritual/psychological ruin.²³

A Christian who takes the “broad way” is avoiding committed discipleship. What he will find, however, is the loss of his final significance and purpose for living. This is what happened to the prodigal son. His father said of him, “*For this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found*” (Luke 15:24). He was once alive in the sense of intimacy with his Father, but due to his carnality, he became dead. When he was with the pigs, he was “lost” (Gr *apollumi*), not unsaved; he was still a son. He was lost in the sense that his life was in ruins; he had gone astray; he was spiritually and psychologically damaged. The Prodigal Son had taken the broad way, and as a result, he was “destroyed.” But he came alive “again” (Gr *anazaō*, from *zaō*, “to live” and “*ana*” again, thus “be alive again.”²⁴)

Based on this evidence, it is much more likely that the road leading to destruction is the road leading to the ruin of one’s temporal and spiritual life and loss of reward (cf. Matt 10:42; 2 John 8), as was the destruction which came upon the prodigal son. It refers to a Christian who has strayed, not to one who has been cast into the lake of fire. Those Christians who repeatedly choose this broad, roomy, and comfortable way are saved, but they will die spiritually in the sense of spiritual impoverishment and carnality (Romans 8:12); their temporal life will be ruined.²⁵

What Is Meant by “Life”?

The narrow way leads to “life.” Does this refer to eternal life in heaven or a rich and fulfilling life here on earth? If the wide gate leads to the ruining of one’s personal life as argued above, then the opposite “leading to life” would

²³ Additional evidence from the Old Testament supports the interpretation that “destruction” can mean the psychological/spiritual ruin and possible physical demise of one’s temporal existence. The words “destroy” and “destruction” occur 512 times in the NKJV and represent 50 different Heb and Gr words, and none of them refers to perdition. See Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984), 109., quoted by Jeff Spencer, “The Destruction of Hell: Annihilationism Examined,” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 19. The Hebrew word behind this Greek word *apollumi* is *abad*, which means, “become lost,” “to go astray” (Psalms 2:12; 119:176; Jeremiah 50:5) “*abad*,” in HAL, 2-3 (e.g., 1 Samuel 9:3; Psalms 119:176; Proverbs 6:32; Jeremiah 50:6). The verb is a common word for “to die,” or, in the case of things or reputation, etc., “to pass away,” TWOT, 1:34. It means “to be lost, to perish, or to lose.” See J. Duncan Derrett, “The Merits of the Narrow Gate,” *JSNT* 15 (1982): 23. It sometimes means “be in a state of wandering, in which the whereabouts of an object is unknown.” See Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew* (Old Testament), DBLH 6, #3. It is often found in Old Testament passages referring to the physical destruction of a life (Psalms 9:5; 143:12; Proverbs 11:10). For example, we are told that the “wicked will *perish* and vanish like smoke” (Psalms 37:10) and that they will be totally “**destroyed**” (Psalms 37:38). This Hebrew word is most commonly translated by the Greek word *apollumi* in the Greek Old Testament. See EDNT, 1:135.

²⁴ BDAG, 62.

²⁵ Throughout the New Testament, Christians are exhorted not to love the world (1 John 2:15) lest they end up feeling “shame” at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 John 2:28; Mark 4:24). The desire to gain the world will result in the loss of one’s spiritual significance (Mark 8:36). Christians are to be in the world but not “of” it (John 17:16). Even though the Corinthian Christians were attracted to the world’s wisdom, Paul declared it to be foolishness (1 Corinthians 3:19). The Christian is to “lay aside” any encumbrance that would keep him from his goal of Christlikeness and faithfulness (Hebrews 12:1). All those encumbrances will not fit through the narrow gate. Like a traveler with much extra baggage, he cannot squeeze through the opening. The broad way is the way of the world and its accoutrements. The narrow way shuns all this and pursues true life. But does the word “life” refer to “going to heaven when I die,” or does it refer to a rich and abundant life now?

probably refer to a rich and meaningful life in the present, issuing in an abundant entrance into (2 Peter 1:11) the kingdom and not entrance into heaven. The biblical evidence confirms that initial impression.

What is this “narrow” way? There are two different Greek words for the narrow (Greek *stenos*) gate and the way that is narrow (Greek *thlibō*). The latter is a verb. Its noun form, *thlipsis* (“tribulation”), almost always refers to persecution. *Stenos* means “squeezed or pressed” and often refers to persecution or inner stress arising from external pressure. Both the verb and the noun, when used of the present experience of believers, almost invariably refer to what comes upon them from outside. The Greek word *thlibō* means “to squeeze together,” “to press,” or “to crush.” The image depicts a traveler between two walls that “press together” on him, causing affliction. Paul described his experience of passing through the narrow [Greek *stenos*] gate and walking on the narrow [Greek *thlibō*] way like this: “we are afflicted [Greek *thlibō*] in every way, but not crushed [Greek *stenochōreō*], perplexed, but not despairing” (2 Corinthians 4:8). These phrases describe the experience of a genuine believer, not of someone who has only professed faith but does not truly possess it.

Suffering for Christ is a common theme in the New Testament, and Christ’s disciples are frequently called upon to endure persecution.²⁶ It is also a common theme in the Gospel of Matthew.²⁷ This is hardly an appropriate call to an audience that includes unsaved people (without clarification to them).

Of particular interest is Acts 14:22, where Paul was “*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations [Gr *thlipsis*, cognate to the verb *thlibō* in 7:14] we must enter the kingdom of God.’*” That believers must go through tribulation (the narrow gate and way) on their way to entering the eschatological kingdom is clear from this passage and may explain Matthew 7:14.

If they choose this path, paradoxically, they will find “life.” Jesus may well have had His Hebrew Scriptures in mind, where “life” commonly refers to flourishing spiritually in this life. For example, in the book of Proverbs, it sometimes refers to the flourishing of one’s affairs (Proverbs 15:15). In another place, it seems to mean “*to enjoy harmonious family life*” (Proverbs 15:27).²⁸ Wisdom and discretion will result in “life to your soul and adornment to your neck” (Proverbs 3:22). Kidner notes, “The second of these phrases, pointing to a person’s outward bearing, suggests that the first refers to the vitality of his whole being. This, he says, is clearly the meaning in Proverbs 14:30, where a “sound heart” (i.e., a tranquil mind) is “the life of the flesh, but envy is rottenness of the bones.”²⁹ Similarly, Torah teaches that one can have an abundant life now by obeying the Law (Deuteronomy 4:1; Leviticus 18:5; cf. Ezekiel 20:11, 21).

For a fuller discussion of “life,” see the “Excursus on ‘life’” at the end of this chapter.

The “Two Ways” in the Old Testament

For an Old Testament model of the “two ways” doctrine for the people of God, the close parallel to Deuteronomy 30:15-16 is relevant.

*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and **destruction** (Heb. *ra’* “misfortune,”³⁰ or “evil, misery, distress”³¹). For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will **live** and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*

When Jesus was teaching on the “two ways” (Matthew 7:13-14) he very likely had this passage, as well as many similar verses in Proverbs, in mind. And if so, life and destruction refer to temporal experiences of the saved and not the eternal destinies of the unsaved.

The two-ways doctrine is also found in Jeremiah:

*Furthermore, tell the people, “This is what the Lord says: ‘See, I am setting before you the **way of life** and the **way of death**. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; he will escape with his life’” (Jeremiah 21:8-9, NASB).*

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 1:6; 4:8, 7:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:4; 2 Thessalonians 1:6, etc.

²⁷ See Matthew 5:10-12, 44; 10:16-39; 11:11-12; 24:4-13.

²⁸ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), 53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁰ HAL 1252.

³¹ BDB, 949.1

This passage obviously speaks of outcomes of physical death or physical life.

Jeremiah calls upon the nation to walk in the “ancient ways.”

*Thus says the LORD, “Stand by **the ways** and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it’” (Jeremiah 6:16).*

Unless Matthew 7:13-14 is an exception, there is no place in the Bible where the ways of life and death are associated with heaven or eternal separation from God. In every case, when life or death this side of the grave are in view, they refer to either physical or psychological/spiritual conditions. Eternal destiny is never in view.³²

Hear Solomon once more,

He who is steadfast in righteousness will attain to life, and he who pursues evil will bring about his own death (Proverbs 11:19).

To be “steadfast in righteousness” is to enter the narrow way daily and attain a rich life in the present. To “pursue evil” is to take the broad way that ends in “death.”

The disciple of Christ, when faced with inevitable trial and persecution, can be assured that if he “counts it all joy” and allows himself to be “trained by it,” that the outcome will be a rich life indeed. This is what it means to follow the narrow way.

How many believers in Christ actually find this way of living? According to Jesus, there are “few” (ὀλίγοι) who find it (7:14). John Nolland and Leon Morris both suggest that this word might be better translated here (and in 22:14) as “fewer.”³³ If they are correct, then our Lord’s teaching is not that only a few will choose the path of discipleship, but that fewer will choose this path than those who choose the broad way.

Summary

When Jesus challenges these regenerate disciples to enter by the narrow gate, he is not speaking of entrance into salvation. Entering is not a one-time event or a gospel invitation. Instead, He *speaks of entering into a way of living, a way that will ultimately result in a rich life now and in the future, as well as greatness in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:19-20). This way of living has been the subject of the Sermon on the Mount in the preceding two chapters. The two ways refer to the path of discipleship or the path of ease. In each day of a disciple’s life, he is confronted with decisions to choose the broad or narrow way. These people have just heard an earth-shaking sermon. They are now exhorted to apply it, even though our Lord knows that doing so will lead to persecution and affliction.

As we repeatedly choose the way of discipleship—that is, as we daily choose to enter the narrow way—we will obtain not only a rich and meaningful life here but also a rich welcome when we enter His kingdom when He returns. Conversely, to shy away from this demand, as did the lukewarm believers at Laodicea (Revelation 3:15-16) or the believers at Sardis who were “dead” and who had not “completed” their deeds (Revelation 3:2), will result in spiritual ruin in this life and the loss of reward at that future day (cf. *apollumi* in 2 John 8).

³² Finding “life” in this sense is impossible apart from divine assistance. Elsewhere, Jesus told His disciples that it is as difficult as getting a camel through the eye of the needle (Matthew 19:24). Apart from abiding in Him, this cannot be obtained. When Paul said to the Thessalonians, “*for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord*” (1 Thessalonians 3:8), he did not mean that if they continued to stand firm in the Lord then Paul and his companions would go to heaven when they die! Rather, he means that they would find true satisfaction knowing that their labors had not been in vain (v. 4). In the midst of their afflictions, it was a great encouragement to know that all their suffering was worth it. Their beloved disciples were doing well. This was “life” indeed. As Gene L. Green puts it, “For him and his companions the good news about this church was like a resurrection.” See Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 170. F. F. Bruce says, “The news of your unwavering faith and love is the very breath of life to us.” Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 67. Jesus also spoke of “life” in two senses elsewhere, “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (John 10:10). Faithful endurance and proper response to persecution or trial may lead to a rich life. 1 Peter 3:9; Mark 9:45; and Matthew 18:18 teach that one can find true life now only if he is willing to do whatever is necessary to follow Christ. Note 2 Corinthians 4:6-11 where persecution, properly responded to, results in the “life of Jesus” being manifested in the apostles (see also 2 Corinthians 1:6). “*All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness*” (Hebrews 12:11). “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*” (James 1:2-4).

³³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 891. Leon Morris says, “It is possible to understand this passage [Matthew 22:14] to mean that the elect are fewer in number than those called; the actual number of the elect is then not in mind. Jesus is not saying whether the elect will be a tiny remnant or not; he is saying that not all the called will be finally chosen.” See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 552. These writers, being Experimental Predestinarians, relate the broad and narrow ways to pathways to hell or eternal life.

The command to “*enter by the narrow gate*” is similar in meaning to the command to take up one’s cross *daily* (Luke 9:23) and follow Christ or to become “*fit for service*” (NIV) for the kingdom of heaven (Luke 9:62). It is a command to live out the way of life taught in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not a command to accept Christ as Savior or to confirm that one has already done so.

Our Lord echoes the teaching of the Sage,

*Now therefore, O sons, listen to me, for **blessed are they who keep my ways**. Heed instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, **watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts**. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me **injures himself**; all those who hate me **love death** (Proverbs 8:32-36).*

To make this concept crystal clear, it is best that I flesh it out with flesh and blood.

Collette faced an agonizing decision about her failing marriage. After twenty-five years of marriage, she discovered he was someone very different from the man she had loved and trusted.

Collette’s marriage had been shattered, and for three years she felt destitute. She desperately needed God’s wisdom. She decided it was time to write a marriage purpose statement to help her enter the narrow way.

She said to my wife, “In fear and trembling, I pick up the shattered pieces of my heart that have sat dormant for these agonizing years, and I ask you, Jesus, to write on my heart new words that I can commit to. I cannot even begin to project a lifetime marriage statement, though my face is resolutely set toward a long obedience to my God, therefore, to my husband. But I can commit to three months of purposeful, prayed-over, ‘I wills.’ ”

My Marriage Purpose Statement. January-March 2010.

- I will forgive, and will ask for forgiveness, purposefully and prayerfully, each day. “As far as the east is from the west,” I will not bring up forgiven hurts again. In my forgiving, I will release my husband of his “debts,” so that he may walk in freedom and grow toward light.
- I will relinquish all judging, self-righteous attitudes, and my prideful heart. God alone is the righteous and Holy Judge. It is not my job.
- I will be present in body and spirit to my husband, actively engaging with his needs. I will not manipulate him with the absence of spirit, lack of attention, or withdrawal.
- I will be respectful and accept his leadership.
- I will not dwell on the darkness in him, nor fear it. Instead, I will live out Philippians 4:8:
“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, pure, lovely, whatever is of good repute, in my husband, excellent, worthy of praise, these are what I will discipline my mind to dwell on.”
- I will be merciful to my husband, remembering the truth that my Father’s mercies are new to us every morning.
- I will recognize and celebrate each decision for Life and Light my husband makes.
- I will not give up hope, for my hope is in God Himself, who is caring for me and protecting me.
- These things, my Lord, I commit to You, fully understanding that it is only through Your Holy Spirit and by Your incredible grace to me that I can even pen these words. May You be praised!

She chose to enter the narrow gate and follow the narrow way. If you think the words Collette wrote flowed easily, you’ve never been in gut-wrenching pain. In her grief, this woman of faith stripped off her old clothes of anger and resentment and put on her beautiful new wardrobe of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

Collette said she could not imagine committing to her “I Will’s” for a lifetime. There is a P.S. to Collette’s three-month Marriage Purpose Statement:

May 15, 2010. Today I declare that this Marriage Purpose Statement is till death do us part.

What happened? Six months later, my wife received an email from Collette.

Linda, you won’t believe this, but my husband and I are back in a relationship and I actually miss him when he is traveling; I am excited for him to come home every day from work; and I am looking forward to a future together.

Collette entered the narrow gate, chose the narrow way, and found life.

Excursus on "Destruction"

In extra-biblical Greek, *apōleia* and *apollumi* never mean perdition or to go to perdition. Instead, they commonly refer to waste by wear and tear or loss.³⁴ It is used over 100 times in the LXX and almost always in reference to a temporal calamity. In the New Testament, three times the verb (*apollumi*) means losing something; once it refers to losing one's reward,³⁵ and once it simply means "to ruin,"³⁶ twice it is used to describe "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."³⁷ And in one place, it may mean "damnation."³⁸

Paul uses the word for the national "ruin" facing the nation of Israel, whom he calls "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction" (Romans 9:22, Gr *apōleia*). The analogy with Pharaoh makes it clear that temporal destruction is in view. Pharaoh's servants said, "*How long shall this man [Moses] be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?*" (Exodus 10:8 LXX: "destroyed," Gr *apollumi*). According to Josephus, one million one hundred thousand people were "destroyed" (Gr *apollumi*) in the judgment of AD 70.³⁹

When Jesus speaks of "destruction" and "life" in the Sermon, He is thinking in terms of Old Testament wisdom. "The consensus that 'teacher of wisdom' is a central category for understanding the teaching of Jesus is the result of two closely related developments in the last two decades."⁴⁰ This is particularly noted in the Sermon on the Mount because of its many proverbial "one-liners," which are similar to the wisdom sayings of the book of Proverbs.

In the book of Proverbs, did *apōleia* refer to eternal condemnation or spiritual impoverishment in this life or physical death? It is found 14-16 times (depending on variant readings).⁴¹ In every instance, it refers to a calamity of sorts that occurs in time, not eternity. For example, "calamity" will come suddenly on the man who devises evil in his heart (Proverbs 6:15). "*He will be broken and there will be no healing.*"

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed [Gr *apōleia*, LXX] by their duplicity (Proverbs 11:3).

In a passage speaking of the "way" of the wicked, similar to Matthew 7:13, we read:

Good understanding wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard (Gr *apōleia*) (Proverbs 13:15).

He who obeys instructions guards his life, but he who is contemptuous of his ways will die (*apollumi*, Proverbs 19:16).

To obey instructions refers to maintaining a "way of life." To "guard" one's life means "to heed scrupulously." A failure to do so severs one's relationship of love and loyalty to God.⁴² One can hear echoes of Jesus' reply to the rich young ruler here. The ruler was told that if he wanted to "live," he must obey the commandments. Eternal life can refer to both a rich life now and to initial regeneration. "Ruin" will come upon those who do not obey the Lord and the king (Proverbs 24:21).⁴³

In some passages, destruction leads to "death." "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death*" (Proverbs 14:12; cf. 28:28). What is death? Is it final separation from God? The parallel with the following verse suggests that it is temporal, psychological, and spiritual ruin rather than eternal damnation. It is "grief" (v. 14).⁴⁴

³⁴ Ibid., 23.

³⁵ Matthew 5:29, 30; losing a reward Matthew 10:42.

³⁶ Matthew 9:17.

³⁷ Matthew 10:6; 15:24.

³⁸ Matthew 10:28. However, this passage is addressed to the regenerate disciples, and it is doubtful that perishing in *Gehenna* is a warning to them that they will go to hell if they are unfaithful. Rather, as argued elsewhere (see pp. 574 ff), *Gehenna* probably does not refer to hell in this passage but instead speaks of the ruin and destruction of the true believer's life work at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

³⁹ Flavius Josephus, "The Wars of the Jews," in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, ed. W. Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), VI, ix, 3.

⁴⁰ Marcus J. Borg, "Jesus (Person)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, and David F. Graf (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 3:806. See also Gary A. Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount: Its Wisdom Affinities and their Relation to its Structure," *JETS* 20, no. 3 (1977): 213-30.

⁴¹ Proverbs 1:26; 6:15, 32; 10:11, 24; 11:3, 6; 13:1; 15; 16:26; 24:22; 27:20; 28:28.

⁴² Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 2:110.

⁴³ "To fear the Lord" does not mean "become a Christian." It means to obey the Lord.

⁴⁴ "By death is meant a broad range of unhappy experiences, from simple adversity to one's (premature?) departure from this world. This saying makes room for the possibility of self-deception, and then the 'way' chosen in wisdom can turn out to be folly." See Roland Edmund Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 104.

One can hear Proverbs 1:20-22 echoing in the background of the parable of the narrow way. As the simpleton approaches the broad gate entering the city, Wisdom cries out with a distinct, ringing plea and with much emotion, “How long, O naïve ones, will you love simplicity?”

Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings: “How long, O naïve ones, will you love simplicity? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, and fools hate knowledge? (Proverbs 1:20-22).

The naïve one is further warned, “I will even laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes” (Proverbs 1:26).

Lady Wisdom greets the wayward believer and issues a warning. Unless the believer seeks wisdom, he will face “calamity” (Gr *apōleia*, Hebrew *ābad*; 1:26). These calamities will come on him in his life like a whirlwind (v. 27). This is the danger facing the believer who continually chooses the broad gate. He is referred to as a “fool” in Proverbs.

The fool is not stupid. Instead, he is uncommitted; wandering, he believes anything (Proverbs 14:15); he is untaught, lacks moral discernment, and is not interested in seeking it. He is like the Christians in Hebrews 5 who have become “dull of hearing,” are still “infants,” who “need milk and not solid food,” and need to have their senses “trained to discern good and evil” (Hebrews 5:11-14). He is, according to Kidner, “no halfwit; he is a person whose instability could be rectified; who prefers not to accept discipline in the school of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:22-32).⁴⁵ He is, in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, a believer who prefers the broad gate.

Among the various usages of *ābad* and *apollumi*, which one is intended in Matthew 7:13-14? The usage of this Hebrew word in Jeremiah 50:6 and its corresponding translation as *apollumi* in the Greek Old Testament are relevant to this discussion and help us narrow the options. There, we learn that “to perish” often means “to go astray.”

I have gone astray [Heb. ābad; Gr. apollumi, LXX] like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant, for I do not forget Thy commandments (Psalm 119:176).

My people have become lost sheep; Their shepherds have led them astray [Heb. ābad, Gr. apollumi]. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place (Jeremiah 50:6).

The fate of the wicked is “death,” which is defined in the following line, not as eternal separation from God, but as going astray.

He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly (Proverbs 5:23).

His folly leads him astray, but not necessarily to eternal separation from God.

Judith Volf cites many instances in the LXX where *apollumi* refers to subjective psychological destruction in this life. An evil wife, for example, “is rottenness to his [her husband’s] bones” (Proverbs 12:4; cf. Proverbs 14:30). The LXX renders this as “destroys” (*apollumi*) her husband.⁴⁶

The motif of God’s people, not unbelievers, going astray like sheep is also found in Matthew:

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray [Gr. planaō], does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? (Matthew 18:12)

In verse 12, we are told that the lost lamb in the parable (Matthew 18:12) has “gone astray (Gr. planaō).”⁴⁷ But in verse 14, this “going astray” is equated with perishing (Gr. *apollumi*). One of the priestly ministries of Christ is to deal gently with those who are “ignorant and misguided” (Gr. *planaō*, Hebrews 5:2).

So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish (Gr. *apollumi*) (Matthew 18:14).

Like those believers who chose the broad way in Matthew 7:13, one of these “little ones” is in danger of perishing as well. Matthew’s context is “pastoral care among believers, and the issue is the sheep of the community that go astray; it is in a set of passages that deal with the behavior of believers (Matthew 18:6-11, 15-18).”⁴⁸ Although

⁴⁵ Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, 39. He is aimless, inexperienced, drifting into temptation, in fact, almost courting it. In the LXX, *apōleia* is used to translate some 21 different Hebrew words. Here in 1:26 it translates *’ed* “distress, calamity.”

⁴⁶ Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990), 96.

⁴⁷ We get the word “planets,” wanderers in the heavens, from this word. BDAG, 643, “to lead astray.”

⁴⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 1300.

some may perish, this is not God's desire ("will," Gr *thelēma*).⁴⁹ This precise parallel suggests that "destruction" in Matthew 7:13 does not refer to eternal separation from God but to the same destruction that can befall a regenerate believer—one of Christ's sheep—who wanders away from the fold. "Perishing in this context," according to Constable, "does not mean loss of salvation but the ultimate result of failing to achieve God's goal for him or her as a disciple."⁵⁰ Such a person loses his "life/soul."

This suggests that the believer who continually chooses throughout his life to enter the broad gate and walk on the broad way is not on the highway to eternal damnation.⁵¹ Instead, he is a carnal Christian who has lost his way. Like the sheep to which Matthew later refers (Matthew 18:12-14), he has gone astray, and his temporal and spiritual life is ruined.

Another parallel to our understanding of "perish" in Matthew 7:13 is found in 1 Corinthians 8:11.

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined [Gr apollumi], the brother for whose sake Christ died (1 Corinthians 8:11).

What is the nature of this ruin/destruction? We are told it involves a negative, subjective, psychological impact, not eternal separation from God! Their conscience is "defiled" (v. 7) and "wounded" (v. 12, literally, "suffers a blow"). This "ruin" causes a "stumbling block" (v. 9) and causes a "brother" for whom Christ died (i.e., a true believer) to "stumble" (v. 13).⁵² In the parallel passage in Romans 14:15, the weaker brother is "made to sorrow." In that passage, we are exhorted, "*Do not destroy (Gr apollumi) with your food him for whom Christ died.*"

Excursus on "Life"

Once again, we must consider the background of the sermon found in the wisdom literature of Proverbs. Lady Wisdom says that if one will follow "my ways," he will find blessing and life (Proverbs 8:32-35). However, one who "hates me" in reality "loves death" (Proverbs 8:36). Both death and life refer to experiences in this life, not eternity.

We are told explicitly that for the believer, the fear of the Lord (obedience and trust) leads to life. "*The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble*" (Proverbs 19:23). "Life" is defined in the second phrase, not as heaven, but as spiritual contentment in this life. The KJV renders it, "*shall abide satisfied.*" Indeed, this quality of life is only available to the regenerate. While that may be assumed, it is the daily experience of the believer, not his eternal destiny, which is in view. One who lives by the Proverbs or by the Sermon on the Mount may find true life, a satisfying life, and the abundant *present* dimension of *eternal life* which Jesus promised (John 10:10).⁵³ As Jesus tells his disciples, the sage tells his son, "*Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil*" (Proverbs 4:26-70, NIV).

According to Solomon, the opposite of a rich life now is "death." He says, "*He who is steadfast in righteousness will attain to life, and he who pursues evil will bring about his own death*" (Proverbs 11:19). To be "steadfast in righteousness" is to enter the narrow gate and attain to life daily. To "pursue evil" is to take the broad way that ends in "death."

"*He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin*" (Proverbs 13:3). The opposite of a rich life is "death" or "ruin" (Gr *ptoeō*, "to tremble, to dismay").⁵⁴

⁴⁹ BDAG, 447, "what one wishes to happen."

⁵⁰ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2003), s.v. "Matthew 18:14".

⁵¹ Contra, Albrecht Oepke, "apollumi," in TDNT, 1:396.

⁵² The nature of this "perishing" is "stumbling" [Gr *skandalon*, Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 8:13], not final consignment to hell. It is "an action or circumstance that leads one to act contrary to a proper course of action or set of beliefs," (BDAG, 926). A *skandalon* was originally a trap to which bait was attached. In a close parallel of ideas, the false prophets of Matthew 7:15 are the "traps" that can derail the true believer as he follows the narrow way, the path of discipleship. In a similar way the puffed-up believers in 1 Corinthians 8:1-2 can become a "trap," and enticement to sin, to the weaker brothers at Corinth. The outcome in each case is not hell, but is, as Volf puts it, a "destruction [which] results from the disintegration of moral or psychological values and poses a fundamental existential threat to a person" (Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 96).

⁵³ Wisdom's ways are pleasant and will "be life for you," and her "paths" as well. The Heb word for path is *netibah* and means "way of life, lifestyle, formally, path, i.e., conduct or behavior, with a focus on continuing behavior (Proverbs 1:15; 3:22)." James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages: Hebrew Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: Logos Research Systems, 2001), DBLH 5986.

⁵⁴ J. Lust et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992), s.v. "πτέω".

The “truly righteous” in Proverbs refers not to a man’s state of justification, but to the fact that he lives well and has character and wisdom. The opposite of life is physical death or “ruin,” that is, “dismay,” which is the proverbial conclusion to a life lived out of fellowship with God.

Like the Sermon on the Mount, the “way of life” in Proverbs is not about reaching heaven but about living a meaningful and whole life now. For example, it is not found in the arms of an adulteress: “None who go to her return or attain the paths of life” (Proverbs 2:19); “She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not” (Proverbs 5:6); “For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life” (Proverbs 6:23); “She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed” (Proverbs 3:18). *Whoever finds wisdom “finds life” (8:35), and the one who does not find it “harms himself” and loves “death” (8:36). “Leave your simple ways,” counsels the father, “and you will live” (9:5). Clearly, psychological/spiritual life and death, not heaven and eternal separation from God, are in view.*

It is clear, says the psalmist, that the narrow way, the way of affliction, has excellent benefits.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes (Psalm 119:71).

The writer to the Hebrews agrees,

He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:10-11; cf. 12:9). To receive goodness from God and to share in His holiness is life indeed!

Excursus on the Two Foundations (Matthew 7:24-27)

Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts responses to his word, v. 24 (Gr *poieō*, do deeds, perform.⁵⁵ Every listener builds his house either on a rock or on sand (v. 26).

*“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and **acts** upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and **does not act** upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand.” (Matthew 7:24-26, NASB)*

When the rains fell, and the floods came, the house of the foolish man, which was built on sand, fell (v. 26). Was the foolish man saved or unsaved? The answer to this question depends on how one answers two others.

- (1) What does it mean to “*act on My words*?” Does it refer to obeying Christ as a disciple by entering the narrow way of discipleship? Or does it refer to believing in Christ for salvation?
- (2) What is the nature of the judgment of the torrent, rain, and floods? Does it refer to a temporal ruin on one’s life leading to a negative consequence at the Judgment Seat of Christ? Or, does it refer to final damnation?

Experimentalists answer the first question, saying it is a call to salvation. However, this is a passage about “acting” (Gr *poieō*), not “believing” (Gr *pisteuō*) in Christ for salvation. It is about obedience to Christ by living out the kingdom way of living outlined in the Sermon on the Mount, following the narrow way and finding “life.”

Regarding the second question, the torrent, wind, and flood obviously do not refer to final damnation; the entire context of the Sermon suggests that these are metaphors for entering the narrow way and avoiding destruction, that is, ruin in this life.

⁵⁵ BDAG, 839