

## How to Get a Camel Through the Eye of a Needle

### I. The Problem

- A. Jesus once encountered a rich young ruler who asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. Christ told him to sell everything and follow him, but the man left sad, unwilling to part with his wealth.
- B. Christ then responded with a proverb: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” This saying is so important that each Synoptic writer records it (Matt. 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25).
- C. The problem we encounter is that Jesus appears to claim that no rich person can be saved—and yet each of us knows at least *some* wealthy believers! Are these people not Christians (!), or could we be misunderstanding what Jesus meant?

### II. Proposed Mistranslations

- A. Change the Camel: One solution to the severity of this proverb is to suppose that copyists confused the Greek words for “camel” and “cable” since they differ only by one letter (*kamelon* and *kamilon*, respectively). In this view, Jesus would say that threading a *cable* through a needle is more challenging than using thread, but at least it is still possible—if the needle is large enough! However, though a few manuscripts read “cable,” thousands of others render it “camel,” including the best and earliest manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>
- B. Change the Needle: The more popular response has been that the “needle” referred to here is not a literal sewing needle but a gate in Jerusalem. The gate was so small that camels had to crawl through on their knees. Many commentaries have followed this interpretation over the years. This second explanation appears to solve the problem, allowing rich people to get into heaven while acknowledging that their riches make it difficult for them to submit to the point of accepting Christ.

### III. Problems with the Needle Gate View

- A. Yet there is a huge problem. No archaeological dig has ever found such a gate, and we also have no sources that mention it as a possibility before AD 1100. While lack of evidence does not disprove the existence of a biblical event, when a literal understanding makes complete sense (i.e., an actual needle), one should reject other unsupported options that arise a millennium later.
- B. The theology of a camel being able to enter a “needle” makes Jesus say precisely the opposite of his intent. The rich man held to the prevailing view of salvation by works (“What good thing must I *do* to obtain eternal life?” in Matt. 19:16). Jesus challenged his obedience to God’s commandments by telling him to give everything away to follow him. This meant that no one can trust his wealth and enter heaven. Another common belief was that riches showed God’s approval and a righteous life (= salvation).<sup>2</sup> However, the “Needle Gate” hypothesis teaches that one can take his riches with him after his possessions are removed from the camel’s back long enough to get the camel through. (Obviously, no one would leave his treasures outside the gate, but he would haul them

<sup>1</sup> The UBS4 Greek textual apparatus cites only seventeen late sources for “cable” (e.g.,  $\epsilon^3$  180 579 1010 1424 ten lectionaries Cyril [AD 444] Arminian [Georgian version]) while “camel” has evidence from thousands of the earlier and better sources, including  $\alpha$  (Sinaiticus, 4<sup>th</sup> cent.), A (Alexandrinus, 5<sup>th</sup> cent.), and B (Vaticanus, 4<sup>th</sup> cent.).

<sup>2</sup> The Pharisees were wealthy, so people reasoned that Pharisees must also be godly, but Jesus taught that people’s righteousness must surpass Pharisaical standards (Matt. 5:20). Becoming right with God came only by hearing and acting upon Christ’s words as a foundation (Matt. 7:24), both of which came by faith.

into the city only to place them on the back of his camel again.) This false theology is well stated by the NT scholar Bruner:

The vice of the teaching that says “the needle’s eye is a low gate in the Middle East that camels must stoop to enter” is that it tells the well-to-do that by acts of humility they can get into the kingdom, that they can keep their comforts and even continue their drive for financial enrichment if they will only be a little humbler in the process. This teaching turns Jesus’ teaching on its head—it teaches how to be covetous and Christian at the same time. “The fact that such minimizing interpretations [as the cable or the gate] have been thought up is itself an eloquent comment on the passage” (Nineham, 275).<sup>3</sup>

- C. Not only was a “Needle Gate” never known in the time of Jesus or discovered later, but this view is not known to be earlier than the time of Anselm, who served as Archbishop of Canterbury from AD 1093-1109. Bruner notes that this medieval gloss by Anselm “lives on still in countless sermons. Luz, 3:128n.59 comments appropriately: ‘More interesting than this misinterpretation is the question, Why has it remained so popular!’”<sup>4</sup>
- D. The NETBible<sup>®</sup> notes, “The *eye of a needle* refers to a sewing needle. (The gate in Jerusalem known as ‘The Needle’s Eye’ was built during the middle ages and was not in existence in Jesus’ day.) Jesus was saying rhetorically that it is impossible for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom, unless God (v. 26) intervenes.”<sup>5</sup> Christians named their newly built gate after Jesus’ saying, though their exegesis was wrong. Sadly, the gate built 1100 years *after* Christ has since been used to *interpret* Christ!

#### IV. Conclusion

Interestingly, a small door within a city wall does exist today in Rothenburg, Germany. It is called the “Eye of the Needle.” One tourist notes,

The town of Rothenburg, Germany, began with the construction of its first castle in 970. In 1142, the imperial castle was erected by King Conrad III.... At night, the town was locked up tight. If you stayed out too late, you had to identify yourself to the guards. If they believed you *were* who you *said* you were, they would let you enter the “Eye of the Needle” for a fee.<sup>6</sup>

However, no such door existed in Jerusalem during Jesus’ time. We must reject this legend and accept Jesus’ difficult saying as it appears—that it is not only difficult but *impossible* for the rich to get into heaven through their money or good works.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, a Commentary: Matthew 13-28*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 305. Also arguing against the needle gate are Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 299; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:1485; John A. Martin, “Luke,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary: NT* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 251; Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:716; Robert L. Thomas, “Needle’s Eye,” *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 4:402; James A. Patch, “Needle,” *International Standard Bible Dictionary*; “Needle,” *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*; Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Bruner, 306; he also cites the Anselm gloss as in C.A. (*Cosmological Argument?*), 670. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:425 notes that this “misguided... conjecture may come from some of Jerome’s allegorizing (cf. Broadus).”

<sup>5</sup> See the NETBible<sup>®</sup> footnote 31 on Luke 18:25 (emphasis theirs).

<sup>6</sup> See the account and picture by Mr. Sedivy (Highlands Ranch High School history teacher in Colorado) at [http://members.tripod.com/~mr\\_sedivy/roth\\_tour.html](http://members.tripod.com/~mr_sedivy/roth_tour.html). This is also noted in the official Rothenburg site at <http://www.romanticroad.com/rothsigh.htm>.