

The Eye of the Needle

And the Non-Existent Gate in Jerusalem's Wall

Summary

The hidden meaning of the eye of the needle in Matthew 19, decoded through the inner meaning of the original Greek, reveals that the needle words ῥαφίς (rhapsis, a small pointed tool made of bone, bronze, or iron, used for stitching cloth or leather) and βελόνη (belonā, a sharp instrument, often a sewing or surgeon's needle, and historically denoting the point of a spear) are literal pointed objects, not a gate. This teaching walks through all three synoptic accounts of the rich young ruler encounter in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18. The Greek word κτήμα (ktāma), translated as "possessions" or "property," carries the sense of acquired property fused with identity. The word περίλυπος (perilupos, meaning to look at with a fixed, intent gaze, often implying special interest, concern, or deeper insight, rather than a casual glance), meaning "intensely sad," "exceedingly sorrowful," or "deeply distressed," is often translated as "grieved all around," the grief that surrounds the man on every side. This is the same word Jesus uses of his own soul in Gethsemane. And the word ἐμβλέπω (emblemō, meaning to look at with a fixed, intent gaze, often implying special interest, concern, or deeper insight, rather than a casual glance) in Mark's account points to a penetrating gaze that precedes the hardest command. The most surprising detail is that Jesus used the same Greek root for both "impossible" and "possible" in a single sentence. Ἀδύνατον (Adynaton) and δύνατα (dynata, the plural) both derive from δύναμις (dynamis, meaning "power," "strength," "ability," or "might"). Therefore, the passage does not describe difficulty. It describes total human impossibility resolved by divine power, and the needle's eye corresponds to any threshold where acquired identity cannot follow.

Introduction

Tradition has erroneously reduced this passage to an outward morality lesson about wealth and heaven. But the Greek tells a different story. The word ῥαφίς (rhapsis) in Matthew means a sewing needle, from the verb ῥάπτω (rhaptō), meaning "to sew," "to stitch," or "to fasten together." Luke the physician chose belonā, whose exact phrasing appears only in medical texts outside the New Testament. No archaeological evidence supports the popular "needle gate" myth, which dates to the eleventh century A.D. The word ktāma, translated as possessions, comes from κτάομαι (ktaomai, meaning "to acquire, get, procure"), and it corresponds to whatever you have accumulated that you now confuse with who you are. A modern equivalent phrase is "He who dies with most toys, wins." The word translated as "grief" is perilupos, meaning a sorrow that encircles on every side, the same word Jesus uses of his own soul facing the cross. The adynaton and dynata wordplay, built from the same root dynamis, suggests that

the mechanism of passage through the needle's eye is not human effort but divine power operating where human capacity reaches zero. The eye of the needle, in this reading, maps to the threshold where one's constructed self cannot follow.

An Examination of the Text

The word your Bible translates as "impossible" and the word it translates as "possible" in the very next breath share the same Greek root. One has a prefix that negates it; the other does not. Jesus used them back-to-back in the same sentence on purpose in Matthew 19:26. The final line of the eye of the needle teaching changes everything about what Jesus was actually saying. The passage never describes something hard; it describes something impossible. And then, in the same breath, it declares it possible through a completely different mechanism.

But before we get there, why did Luke, a physician, replace the word "needle" that Matthew and Mark both used with a term [scalpel] whose exact phrasing appears only in medical texts? And the word your English Bible translates as "possessions," the reason the man walks away grieving, does not mean wealth. It means something much more specific and much harder to give up.

We are going to examine two Greek word forms across three gospels. We are going to debunk the "gate myth," which has NO archaeological evidence. And we are going to decode a single word that changes the entire meaning of this passage. By the end, you will realize that you are standing at a threshold you cannot carry everything through. So let us start with the gate.

You have probably heard the version that there was supposedly a small gate in Jerusalem called the eye of the needle. Camels had to kneel and shed their loads to squeeze through it. Pastors love this reading because it turns the passage into a manageable lesson: Wealth is a burden, so kneel, remove your baggage, try a little harder, and you will fit.

However, there is a major problem with this idea. Such a gate has never been found, not even a trace of it. No first-century inscription mentions it. There are no artifacts, no ancient documents, and no references to it from the church fathers. The earliest known mention of it dates to the eleventh century A.D., by Anselm of Canterbury.

It gained mass popularity in the nineteenth century through preachers and Sunday school materials. A peer-reviewed article published in 2022 in the periodical "New Testament Studies" by Cambridge University Press supposedly confirmed the entire history. So, obviously, the gate is a medieval invention with no ancient support. And the Greek settles the question once and for all.

As noted above, the word in Matthew 19:24 is rhapsis. It comes from the verb rhapto, meaning to sew. This is a tailor's needle, or a sewing needle. It is not a gate, an archway, or a metaphor for difficulty. It's a tool that fits between two fingers; that is the definition of the word. The needle is real. The gate is not! But that needle word is only half of the story. When Luke wrote the same

scene, he changed the word. And when you see what he changed it to, the precision of this passage starts to crack open in a way the English never shows you.

Matthew used *rhaphis*, the tailor's word. Mark used the same word. But in 18:25, Luke changed it, using *belonā*. This word comes from *βελος* (*belos*), meaning "a pointed missile or dart". It could mean any fine needle, but Luke's specific pairing of *trema* with *belonā* appears outside the New Testament only in medical texts. And here is where it gets specific. This pairing appears in only three places outside this verse:

- Galen's glossary of Hippocrates.
- Galen's surgical texts.
- The writings of Oribasius, a fourth-century physician.

All three are medical texts; only medical texts. This makes sense because Luke was a physician. Paul calls him by name in Colossians 4:14. So when Luke sat down to write this scene, he reached for the precise word from his professional vocabulary. Not the tailor's needle, but the surgeon's needle, which is finer, smaller, and more precise.

You know this feeling. You read something in English, and it sounds like a flat statement. Everyone who retells it says the same word: Needle. But then someone shows you that two different authors, writing the same scene, chose two different words for that needle, and suddenly the sentence has a texture that English completely erased. That is what three gospels and two needle words do to this passage. The opening was always smaller than you were told.

Now there is one more attempt to soften this passage. Some late manuscripts substitute the word *κάμιλος* (*kamilos*), meaning a thick rope or a ship's cable, for *κάμηλος* (*kamālos*). The word *κάμιλος* derives from the Hebrew *גָּמַל* (*gamal*), meaning "camel," the animal often used for travel and trade. The idea is that Jesus actually said "rope through a needle," not "camel through a needle." It sounds absurd, but not impossible; difficult, but not unthinkable.

But the manuscript evidence refutes it. No text before the ninth century contains *kamilos*. Every major ancient manuscript, including Codex Vaticanus from the fourth century, Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century, and Codex Alexandrinus from the fifth century, reads *kamelos* (camel). The variant traces to Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth century, who was openly trying to soften the teaching. This is why mainstream New Testament scholarship rejects *kamilos* as a later invention with no place in the original text.

The Babylonian Talmud confirms the original image. In several places, it uses "an elephant going through the eye of a needle" as shorthand for impossibility. That's the same rhetorical structure—the largest possible animal paired with the smallest possible opening. Jesus used "camel" instead of "elephant" because the camel was the largest animal in Judea. The point was never merely difficulty; it was absolute impossibility. Three gospels use two different needle words, but both mean literal needles.

No gate in the archaeological record. No rope in the manuscript tradition. The opening is exactly as small as Jesus said it was. But the needles only tell you the size of the opening. They do not

tell you what is too large to fit through it. The answer to that question is hidden in the one word nobody preaches on. The word for what the man could not release. And it does not mean what your translation tells you. Your English Bible says the man went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. The word translated "possessions" in Matthew 19:22 is κτήματα (ktāmata), the plural of κτήμα (ktāma). Ktāma comes from the verb κτέομαι (kteomai), meaning "to acquire," "to get for oneself," or "to possess."

The ending turns the action into its result. Ktāma does not mean money, nor does it mean wealth in the abstract. Rather, it means the concrete thing you acquired: land, real estate, and the tangible products of a lifetime of accumulation. The Greek New Testament uses several different words for "wealth":

- Πλοῦτος (ploutos) means riches in the abstract, and Paul uses it figuratively when he writes "riches of his glory."
- Μαμωνας (mamōnas) is the Aramaic word Jesus uses in Matthew 6, where wealth becomes a rival god.
- Χρήμα (chrāma) primarily refers to something useful, necessary, or a valuable possession, commonly translated as "money," "wealth," "riches," or "property." It is a neuter noun derived from *chraomai*, meaning "a thing that one uses or needs."

Both Mark and Luke use chrāma when Jesus comments on the man's departure. But for the man himself, for the thing he could not let go of, the text uses ktāma. Not abstract wealth. Not a rival god, nor liquid cash, but acquired property. The specific, physical, nameable things he spent his life building and putting his name on. That distinction rewrites the scene. The text is not saying the man was sad about losing money. It is saying he could not separate himself from what he had acquired; his acquisitions had become his identity. Who he was had merged with what possessed. Mark 10:21 records a detail found only in his gospel. The text says Jesus *looked* at the man. The word is ἐμβλέπω (emblepo), which means to gaze intently at someone, to look with a penetrating, locked-in focus; so, this is not a casual glance across a room. Immediately after that gaze, the text adds one more phrase: "He loved him." The word used there is ἀγαπάω (agapaō), meaning "unconditional love," the deepest register of love in the Greek language.

The penetrating gaze came first, then the love, and next the impossible demand. The hardest words in the entire passage were spoken only after the man was fully seen and fully loved. And the man's response. Luke uses the word περίλυπος (perilupos) in chapter 18:23. Peri means around, encircling on every side. Lupos means grief or sorrow. Perilupos means "deeply distressed," "exceedingly sorrowful," "surrounded by sorrow," or "grief that surrounds you completely." It is a grief with no gap or escape hatch.

Here is what stops you. That same word, perilupos, is the word Jesus uses to describe his own soul in Gethsemane. Matthew 26:38, "My soul is perilupos, even to the point of death." The grief of a man who cannot release his acquired identity uses the same word as the grief of Jesus facing the cross. That is not simply the disappointment about a financial setback. That is existential sorrow. The kind that arrives when you discover the thing you spent your whole life building is

the exact thing standing between you and the next threshold, and your hands will not open. Reading the text as written, that locked grip corresponds to the body's memory of holding on to what you have acquired, carried so long that your fingers have forgotten how to let go.

The needles tell you the opening is impossibly small; ktāma tells you that you cannot fit through it; and perilupos tells you the weight of that discovery. But none of these words explain how anyone actually gets through. The disciples then ask exactly the right question. And Jesus answers with wordplay that most English translations completely soften. The disciples heard the camel; they heard the needle; they watched the man walk away in perilupos grief. Notice that their reaction in Matthew 19:25 is not a calm curiosity. It is shock!

They ask, "Who then can be saved?" Notice they did not ask, "How can rich people be saved?" They ask who. They are thinking that if this man, who kept every commandment and had every advantage, cannot pass through, then who on earth can? Mark records the reaction in two stages:

1. The first one is in verse 24: θαμβέω (thambeō, meaning "to be astonished, amazed, or struck with fear"). It describes a deep, emotional, and intellectual state of being stunned. Absolute amazement.
2. The second appears in verse 26: περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο (perissōs exeplāssonto, astonished beyond measure).

The Greek intensifies their disbelief over two verses because the implication of what Jesus just said is absolutely devastating!

Jesus answers in Matthew 19:26. What he says in Greek is the most important sentence in the entire passage: "παρὰ ἀνθρώποις τοῦτο ἀδύνατον ἐστίν, παρὰ δὲ θεῷ πάντα δυνατά" (para anthrōpois touto adynaton estin, para de theō panta dynata). With men, this is adynaton [impossible], but with God, all things are dynata [possible]. Look at those two words carefully. They are built from the same root, adynaton. The prefix a is the Greek alpha privative, meaning it is the negation particle. It cancels whatever it attaches to, the way "un" cancels "achievable" in English.

Dynatos means "possible, capable, powerful." Attach the alpha prefix, and you get a-dynaton, un-possible. Not difficult, not unlikely, not challenging if you kneel and try harder. But impossible! And dynata, the word applied to God in the very next phrase, is that same root without the negation; it denotes something that is possible, capable, and powerful. Both words come from dynamis, the Greek noun for inherent power. This is the word that gives us the English words dynamite and dynamic.

Luke compresses the wordplay even further in chapter 18:27. "The things adynata with men are dynata with God." This is the same root, the same breath, in the same sentence. The impossible becomes possible. Not through human adjustment but through Divine dynamis.

The gap between what you were taught and what the Greek actually says is massive. You were taught that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom, but with God's help, they can make it. However, the Greek says something completely different. Adynaton means flatly impossible, not

merely difficult. Dynatos means possible through inherent divine power. Jesus is not offering help with a hard task. He is declaring that human capacity to pass through the needle's eye is nonexistent and that divine capacity is total. He delivers both verdicts using the same root word, so you cannot possibly miss the contrast.

You have probably felt this. That moment when you stop trying to force your way through by making yourself smaller. When you stop unloading one more thing, adjusting one more behavior, and working harder to understand this passage. Then it dawns on you that the text never said it was hard; it said it was impossible. Next, a strange relief follows, because if it was never possible by effort, then your failure to force your way through was never the problem. The passage was never asking you to succeed at something difficult. It was asking you to arrive at the place where your own capacity completely runs out. Then you realize that something else meets you there. The needle is real, the possession is identity, and the impossibility is total.

But if the whole point is that humans cannot do this on their own, then what does the passage actually ask of you? The answer has been in the text since the first verse, hidden in a detail that each gospel records slightly differently. Everything converges here. Three threads, three chapters, and one threshold. The needle in chapter two is both rhapsis and belonā. The tailor's tool and the surgeon's tool. Both are literal and impossibly small. There is no gate or rope.

Every attempt to widen the opening was made centuries after the text was written. The opening is exactly what Jesus said it was: an eye of a needle, the smallest possible passage. The possession in chapter three, ktāma, isn't money or abstract riches. It is the concrete things you acquired over your life that have fused into who you are. The text chose the most specific word for "property" it had and paired it with perilupos, a grief that surrounds on every side. The same word for grief that Jesus would use for his own soul in the garden.

What the man could not release was not his wealth but his self-identity, the version of himself he had spent a lifetime acquiring. Then there is the impossibility seen in chapter four, adynaton and dynata. The same root word, one negated and one affirmed. Human capacity to overcome this situation does not exist. But Divine capacity is total. And Jesus compressed both into a single sentence so the contrast would be impossible to miss. The eye of the needle corresponds to any threshold that requires you to arrive without the identity you built from what you acquired. Not wealth specifically, but whatever you accumulated that you now mistake for who you are.

Look at the passage's sequence once more. The man asks a question; Jesus names the commandments; the man claims he has kept them. Then Mark records the ἐμβλέπω (emblepō), the penetrating gaze, immediately followed by agapaō, unconditional love. Only then comes the impossible demand, grief, and departure. Next, the disciples' shock is revealed. Then comes the declaration of impossibility, followed by the divine possibility. Every step escalates; every step narrows. The text puts seeing before asking and loving before demanding.

The hardest invitation in the passage was delivered only after the deepest seeing. Before the man was asked to release anything, he was first fully known and fully loved. A Jewish midrash offers

a striking parallel to this resolution. "Open for me a door as big as a needle's eye, and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels." The human contribution is the needle-sized opening; the willingness to stand at the threshold with nothing. The Divine response is the door through which everything can pass.

That is the architecture of the entire passage. The needle. The ktema. The adynaton. The dynata. An opening too small. A cargo too fused. A human mechanism that does not work and a divine mechanism that does. The passage does not end with the man's grief. It does not end with ktema, perilupos, or the walk of departure. It ends with dynata. The final word is not sorrow. It is power! Not human power, but the kind that meets you at the exact point where yours runs out.

The passage moves from an impossible demand to divine power. The eye of the needle was never a gate or a rope; neither was it a lesson in trying harder. It was the smallest possible opening, and the only way through it was to stop being the largest possible version of yourself.