

“Is There A Stairway to Heaven?”

Acts 17:16-34

Series: Wrestling with God Week 3. How Can There Be One Way to God?

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoggund

The Woodside Church

July 21, 2019

It's consistently rated one of the top rock and roll songs of all time. Every high school rock band, including mine, covered this classic masterpiece. The guitar player code of conduct clearly states you cannot call yourself one of the brethren until you can pick those legendary arpeggios. *Stairway to Heaven*. I witnessed Led Zeppelin finish their 1977 Madison Square Garden concert with their most famous hit. It was my first rock concert. It was their last concert tour. I've played the song many times. Once, I even performed it in our sanctuary. When I finished the first few chords someone from the balcony shouted, "Now play *Free Bird*."

After a loud, searing guitar solo, the song ends with a single line: "And she's buying a stairway to heaven." The next question in our *Wrestling with God* series: Is there a stairway to heaven? Are there multiple stairways to heaven? Can you buy a stairway to heaven? How can Christians say there is only one way to God? Isn't it arrogant for followers of Jesus to claim they are right and everyone else is wrong? We live in a pluralistic world, celebrate diversity, and guarantee freedom of religion and no religion. We are broad minded and open minded. In the Age of Amazon every preference is equally good. In fact, there's a grand buffet of belief – choose a little Buddhism, mixed with Catholic mysticism, topped off with a dash of Yoga. To choose just one religion or one way seems unimaginative, unenlightened, even un-American.

Those who charge Christians with being arrogant and judgmental do not realize they are guilty of the same. Here are some popular clichés we often hear.

1. As people become more educated and enlightened, Religion will disappear. This is simply a judgmental prejudice. It stereotypes people of faith as ignorant and uneducated. Many who are wise and educated are also believers. Yet it's also not accurate. All major religions around the world are increasing. Timothy Keller writes,

There are more Presbyterians in Ghana than in the United States and Scotland combined. Korea has gone from 1 percent to 40 percent Christian in a hundred years, and experts believe the same thing is going to happen in China. If there are half a billion Chinese Christians fifty years from now, that will change the course of human history.¹

The opinion that Religion will go away is starting to go away.

2. Religion is the cause of war and destruction. It's better to get rid of it. We should make it go away. Religions inspire holy wars, crusades, inquisitions, jihad, and genocide. There is no doubt all Religions have been used to justify horrific crimes and wholesale destruction. Therefore, according to this view, the absence of Religion will put an end to war, persecution and mass murder. History tells us the opposite. The French Revolution outlawed Christianity and produced

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Riverhead Books, New York: 2008) 6.

a Reign of Terror which consumed its own leaders. The Russian Revolution produced a Purge during Stalin's reign which killed more people than Hitler. The Chinese Communist Cultural Revolution caused up to 2 million deaths. These guys need to get Religion.

Advocates for Communism or Atheism will say the fault is not in the philosophy but in the people who applied it. I would say the same for Christianity. The One who said blessed are the peacemakers, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you would never want us to kill in His name. And I will go further – the fault is not in philosophy, religion or atheism. All these world views will eventually be used by humans to hurt, kill and destroy. The problem lies deeper still: in the human heart and soul. More on this in a minute.

3. All Religions Teach the Same Basic Truths Well if we can't get rid of Religion, why don't we just combine them all or at least the best teachings which they hold in common. Some truths and teachings do appear in many faiths. A golden example is the Golden Rule. Jesus says,

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets Matthew 7:12

Some claim this principle goes back the Code of Hammurabi who lived 1800 years before Jesus. In 1993 143 leaders from the world's major faiths including Baha'i Faith, Brahmanism, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous, Interfaith, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Neo-Pagan, Sikhism, Taoism, Theosophist, Unitarian Universalist and Zoroastrian issued a "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" which endorsed the Golden Rule.²

Yet while some basic truths are universal, it is grossly inaccurate to say all Religions teach the same thing. Zen Buddhism does not believe in a god or deity. Hinduism, by contrast, sees gods and deities everywhere maybe are as many as 33 million gods. Judaism and Islam teach there is only one God and they completely reject the Christian belief in the Trinity and the Deity of Jesus. These are not trivial features but core beliefs for each faith.

Another major difference is what each faith teaches about the way to salvation, heaven, paradise, nirvana. Islam tells us to fulfill the Five Pillars. Judaism teaches us to follow the commandments in the Torah and the Talmud. Buddhism outlines an Eightfold path and Hinduism teaches a variety of ways to freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. While they teach vastly different pathways, it can be said they all teach there is a stairway to heaven. Obey these rituals and rules and you will ascend the stairway to whatever heaven is at the top. This has led some modern people to say, "Religions teach different but equal pathways up the same mountain. Simply choose which stairway to heaven seems best to you and you'll get there."

And now, after spending the last minutes defending Religion, I'm going to throw this sermon into reverse and say Religion is not the answer. Why would I, a Christian minister with a Bachelor Degree in Religious Studies, say Religion is leading you the wrong way? Over the years I've learned Religions are the creations of human beings. Through Religion humans attempt to control their world. Think about it. Many Religions teach you to offer prayers, follow rules,

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule

perform rituals to please the gods or God. Why? So the gods will bless you, protect you, give you fertile lands, freedom from war, large families or at least not bother you. Religion tells you how to please your god. And that's why Religions teach a stairway to heaven. If you try your best to perform the right rules and rituals you'll be allowed to spend eternity with your deity.

This is where Jesus differs with all world religions. As Wayne Campbell found out in Wayne's World – There is no Stairway to Heaven. Sin, the disease which infects and affects every human on the planet, cannot be cured by Religion. Sin is the reason we use every good thing, like Religion, to hurt, kill and destroy others. Sin causes a separation in marriages, families, nations, and, most importantly, between us and God. There are no rules, no rituals, no pathway, no stairway which can overcome the obstacle of Sin. There is no mountain to climb. There is a yawning, gaping, bottomless chasm created by Sin which cannot be crossed by our efforts or our religion.

For God to expect us to climb a stairway to heaven would be as thoughtless and useless as asking a helpless newborn to climb a stairway to the second floor. Just as any loving Parent would do, God comes down to rescue us from the debilitating disease of sin. This is what the most famous Bible verse tells us:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Religions say, "Climb this path, ascend this stairway by your good works." The Bible says God comes down to rescue and save us. Religion says, "Buy a stairway to heaven through your good deeds." Scripture tells us you can't buy or earn it. And you don't have to. Salvation is God's gift.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Jesus does not give us another religion. What He offers is a relationship with God. God does all the work, we receive the gift by faith. Instead of asking us to make sacrifices, Jesus makes the supreme sacrifice by offering His life for ours, by dying in our place for our sins. Scripture says,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)

In Jesus, God came down to rescue us by laying down His life for us. It doesn't take a stairway. It only takes a step of faith.

That's what Paul offered in Athens, the most famous college town in the ancient world. It was the most intellectually advanced city of its time. You can tell it was a typical college town:

All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas (Acts 17:21).

The only thing he didn't mention is the beer they drank. Now you would think such a sophisticated town would have no use for religion. The exact opposite was true.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16).

The first truth is **Everybody's Got gods**. Those brilliant Athenians tried to please every god under heaven. Worried they might offend one of the gods they even built an altar to an unknown god in case they missed one. It does not matter how ignorant or intelligent one is, everybody worships someone or something. Robbie Williams, a British pop singer, who often performs before 60,000 people, spoke on BBC Radio about his previous addictions:

I haven't had a drink or done drugs for seven months, and I'm feeling good. I'm enjoying it. Instead of drinking I pray. I ask Elvis to look after me. I've got the tattoo on my arm: "Elvis grant me serenity." Before the gig we all get in a huddle and pray to Elvis to look after us while we're onstage.³

He also believes in UFOs which must be where he thinks Elvis went. There are plenty of gods to worship: power, popularity, pleasure, possessions, piles of money. That's why I say there are no atheists. Anyone who claims to be an atheist has simply chosen another god to worship. Whatever you offer the largest amount of your time, money and energy is your god. If you sacrifice your family, your health, your inner peace for something, chances are that is your god.

So what's the problem? **Our gods Let Us Down**. Our gods aren't almighty. After a while they wear out. They can't save us. In some cases, such sex, drugs and drink, they can even destroy us. They leave us empty. There are a lot of people around you who are searching, who are spiritually hungry, who feel an emptiness left by a god or goddess who let them down.

When sharing the Good News about Jesus it's so essential to **Build, Not Burn, Bridges**. Paul did not hide his faith in Jesus. He simply shared what he believed. He gave his testimony in the house of worship and the marketplace. He created curiosity. Why? God made us to have a

³ Quoted in Heat (7-21-01), p. 62.

relationship with Him and when our gods let us down we become hungry for our Father's voice. After listening to Paul, the Athenians said,

May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean (Acts 17:19-20).

When Paul stood before the Areopagus – their great council of wise leaders, he did not attack the people for worshiping idols. Instead he built a bridge by describing the good he saw in them.

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you (Acts 17:22-23).

He affirmed them for seeking to know God. Most people today believe in God and would like to know God better. That is a great place to start building a bridge. Paul begins with God's creation:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-25, 27).

God is looking for you. In fact, He is very near you right now and you can know Him. To build a bridge Paul doesn't quote Scripture. The Bible is essential but Paul knows his hearers have never read the Bible. So instead, he quotes lines from Greek poets in the same way you and I might quote from a current movie or song.

“For in him we live and move and have our being” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring” (Acts 17:28).

Once the bridge is built, **Lead Them to Jesus and Let Go.** Paul concludes:

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17: 29-31).

‘We didn’t make God,’ Paul concludes. ‘He made us. He is not an idol. He is the Lord. We can’t climb a stairway to heaven. So God sent Jesus down to die and rise for us.’ Why do we share our faith? Not to say we are superior because we are not. Not to say we are right because we’ve all sinned and gone wrong. Not to say we are holier than anyone because we aren’t. We do not point to ourselves in any way. We share our faith to lead them to Jesus and then, most importantly, let go. When Paul finished, their reaction was mixed:

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” A few became followers of Paul and believed (Acts 17:32-34).

Don’t expect everyone to believe. If they didn’t for Paul they won’t for you and me. But do expect this: the Holy Spirit will change lives. You and I can’t save anyone. That’s the Holy Spirit’s job. All we do is lead them to Jesus and then we let go so He can do the rest.

That’s what Steve did. Steve Yeschek is a pastor in Crystal Lake, Illinois. His sister Judy was not a believer in Jesus. She was a good person, passionate, joyful, full of life – the kind of person everyone loves to be around. She was also a party animal, a big drinker leading a self-contented lifestyle. She really had no reason to change. When Steve tried to share Jesus with her over the years, she would laugh it off and keep partying.

But at the age of 44, her world caved in and her gods let her down. She found out she had breast cancer. She later learned her husband had cancer, too. If this double blow wasn’t enough, it turned out husband was having an affair. He announced he didn't love her anymore and left.

Suddenly Judy started asking eternal questions. Ultimately she prayed to receive Jesus as her Savior. Jesus and his Word were now her top priority. She approached her new life in Christ with the same gusto she once pursued partying. Her greatest aim was winning others to Christ. She boldly shared her faith even as she was undergoing surgery after surgery, praying for a miraculous healing from the Lord. Judy ultimately came to see the greater miracle would be for her friends and family to come to know Christ. Struggling for every breath, she talked her way out of the hospital so at her baptism she could proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation.

Judy invited everyone she knew to come to her baptism service. Under the Spirit's anointing, she powerfully and urgently shared her testimony. Her 84-year-old father came to faith in Christ that night and was baptized—along with her ex-husband, a number of nieces, a college roommate who was a New Age cultist, her aunt, her sister, and others.

Ten days later, Judy died. When Steve read the message she had prepared for her own funeral service, another 100 people prayed to receive Christ that day.⁴ Judy didn’t buy a stairway

⁴ From a sermon by Pastor Bob Page, Crystal Lake, Illinois (used by permission).

to heaven. She bowed down and received God's gift of heaven. She used her death to lead people to Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Why don't you use your life?