

BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
"STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN"
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Text: Genesis 28:10-19

[Play Led Zeppelin's opening lines from "Stairway to Heaven"]

"There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to heaven. When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed, with a word she can get what she came for."

These are the opening lyrics to the number 1 most requested rock and roll song of all time by the rock group Led Zeppelin. The name of the song is, of course, Stairway to Heaven.

In our lesson for this morning, Jacob—who had deceitfully stolen Isaac's blessing from his brother Esau—was now on the run from his brother who had determined to kill Jacob. This was an unsettling time for Jacob. He had left home as a fugitive, and when he reached Bethel he was tired.

So...he lay down to go to sleep and while asleep he had a prophetic dream. "He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. Suddenly the Lord was standing on it and saying, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac...' ...When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it."

Have you ever been on the run, or in an unsettling situation? Maybe you were having trouble with your faith...maybe you were going through a time when you thought to yourself, "I have gone too far...I have sinned too much...surely God is not with me..."

Then suddenly, God made Himself known to you...and you saw that indeed...God was right there with you all along...ready to forgive you and love you! "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn't even know it." This is God with us! This is Emmanuel! This is Jesus Christ!

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has promised, "I am with you...I will not leave you..." and this is a promise we can all bank on!

Unlike the gods of the pagan religions of Jacob's time, in which the gods were merely local deities who gave protection only within their own territories, the One true God assured Jacob that He would always be with him wherever he went.

Only One Staircase

Some people wonder if perhaps there are not many ways to God. If we were to ask the average America today what the difference is between the major world religions, many people might mumble something about all religions being pretty much the same. People assume that all religions have nearly the same moral teachings and ideals. They might have different names for God, but it is the same God. These religions, many people believe, may travel different roads, but they all lead to God. As long as you believe in something, as long as you believe in God, it really doesn't matter what form your belief takes.

In fact, these religions are all very different and even contradict each other at crucial points. All religions are not the same...all roads do not lead to the same end...in fact, there is only one way to heaven! There is only One Stairway to heaven, and this Stairway can neither be bought nor sold!

Jesus is the Stairway

Jacob's dream was an offer from God—the Lord offered to be Jacob's God. And this is what God does for us through Jesus Christ. In John chapter 1:51, Jesus tells Nathanael: "I assure you that you will see heaven open and God's angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human One."

Sound familiar? Jesus Christ is the Stairway to Heaven that Jacob dreamed about. Jesus Christ is our only access into the very presence of God: Jesus is the Door to heaven through whom we must enter.

In John 14:6, Jesus declares: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

And in 1st Timothy 2:5-6 the Bible makes it clear: "There is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the human Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a payment to set all people free."

There is only One God—not the many gods of the many world religions, and there is only one way to God...there is only one way to reach Him...and there is only one way to be saved!

But what about Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism?

Buddhism is basically an atheistic religion. Most Buddhists do not believe in the concept of an ultimate God. In fact, Buddhism is not about finding God or even finding His will at all. Buddhism's central teaching is how to arrive at the ideal state where there is no longer any craving, in fact, where there is no longer any kind of desire or feeling at all. That state is called Nirvana. It is the state of disinterest toward all that is around you. In a nutshell, the way to avoid unhappiness and suffering is not to care or feel anything. You form no earthly attachments.

Now, instead of withdrawing from life and any emotional attachment to it, Jesus taught that we are to enter into life in the fullest sense! We are not to escape from life, but to take it on with enthusiasm because, as difficult as it may be, He is with us!

There are many people who are practical Buddhists. They withdraw and shield themselves from emotional attachments and others so they will not be hurt.

But Jesus taught us to even love our enemies, and to do good to those who spitefully use us—and these are the people who have the power to hurt us the most!

Salvation for the Buddhist is not salvation from sin, but salvation from suffering. But without salvation from sin—there is only death!

What about Hinduism?

In college and in seminary, I was required to take courses on various world religions, Hinduism being one of them. And although a few branches of Hinduism are atheistic, most branches of it have thousands of gods.

According to Hinduism, there is no One God whose creation is separate from Himself. In fact, everything is a god; we can all be a god. Hindu gods like Krishna and Shiva are depicted as violent and erotic. Shiva is usually represented with having several arms and legs, his fierce image wears a necklace of skulls, displays sexual imagery, and is surrounded by demons. This is hardly the same deity as Jesus Christ!

Hinduism promotes the caste system which says that people are predetermined to live in either luxury or poverty according to their karma—and nothing can change this. In fact, it would be detrimental to ease the suffering of others. This belief system has held India in poverty and bondage for hundreds of years!

How about Islam?

Islam is the religion which is practiced largely in the Arab world, but is gaining converts in America at alarming rates. Islam has its roots in Judaism since they both see their patriarch as Abraham. The Arab world traces its lineage to the firstborn son of Abraham, Ishmael. The Jews trace their lineage to Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah who had been promised by God. The war in the Middle East today can be traced back to this biblical story of who really is the rightful son of Abraham.

For Muslims, salvation is something which must be earned. It is not graciously given by Allah. Islam does have a high standard of morality which must be strictly kept. Women are thought of as possible temptations which could lead men astray, so women must be veiled and wear clothing that completely covers them.

One sure way of earning salvation is to die as a martyr for the faith. They believe that—just as Mohammed was whisked immediately to heaven and given several maidens—the same will

happen to them who die for the cause of Islam. The people who flew planes into the World Trade Center and have been involved in other acts of terrorism were acting in full accord with the tenets of Islam.

The followers of Mohammed have been the most violent people in the history of the world, and continue to be. But Jesus teaches that we are to love the sinner. Mohammed taught that the infidel must be killed if they refuse to convert.

What about Judaism?

It's the mother of Christianity. Our God is the same God. Our history is the same history. The Jewish Scriptures are part of our Bible, we have the same moral code and commandments. We see history and the world through the same eyes.

The only difference is that orthodox Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. We believe that He has already come in the person of Jesus Christ! Many Jewish people are fascinated by Jesus, and within the Christian Church we have many Jewish persons who see themselves as completed Jews—who have found new life in Christ!

There is One Stairway!

There are so many voices shouting at us from many different directions today. Therefore, it is important to know something about them in order to be able to discern one shout from another...because there is only One Stairway to Heaven. There is only One Mediator between God and people, and we must have this Mediator in order to be saved.

God Himself has to handle our sin, condemnation and death. God Himself has to conquer sin. God Himself became the Ideal and Perfect Man, in the form of Jesus Christ, our Mediator.

If we really believe and trust that the death of Jesus Christ is for us...then we realize that God accepts us as being free from the guilt and condemnation of sin...because Jesus has already paid the price for sin and death!

And how did Jesus pay the price?

He paid the price by the shedding of His blood, and the Bible says: "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."

Jacob had sinned. He had deceived his brother...he was on the run for his life...he was scared...he was unsettled...then he saw the Stairway to Heaven, and everything changed!

"The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it."

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!

Amen!