

Text: Acts 10:1-48 (Pew Bible pg.1088)

Title: “Many Ways to Heaven”

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles please to Acts 10. I’m in a series of messages entitled “Hazmat ... The Most Dangerous Ideas in Your Culture.” And every one of these lethal ideas is an outgrowth of the most hazardous material of all ... the idea that there is no such thing as absolute, objective truth ... just your opinion and my opinion. And so everyone simply does what is right in their own eyes. Today I want to challenge the hazardous material, the dangerous idea, that there are many ways to heaven.

If you and I have any contact with people outside of church we are going to be challenged by someone saying, “How can you Christians believe that the only way a person can get to heaven is through Jesus Christ? Do you mean to tell me that the billions of people in the world who are sincere Hindus or Muslims or just non-religious good people are going to be sent to Hell by God because they didn’t receive Jesus?” You’ll hear that.

ILLUSTRATION – Several years ago I was on a mission trip to Brazil. One day we visited the site of a famous church outside of Rio de Janeiro. The church set high atop a hill and there were several hundred steps leading up to the church. And the belief was that if you crawled up those hundreds of steps on your hands and knees that your sins would be forgiven. I stood at the base of the stairs watching people crawling up those stairs. I wanted to see the church, but I didn’t want it to appear that I was taking a shortcut by crawling. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a sign that said “Elevator to the Top.” That’s my answer. So I rode the elevator up and skipped the stairs.

And that’s the way people view this whole issue of how does one get to go to heaven when they die. There’s a hard way for those who have been really bad. Then there’s another way for those who haven’t been as bad. And, who knows, there are other ways that we don’t even know about.

Many Christians today have a Christianity that is so watered-down that, truthfully, it isn’t all that different from the other religions of the world. Many sincere church-goers claim they believe in Jesus, but are not ready to say that people who don’t believe in Jesus, but who are really trying to live a good, moral and generous life, are not going to heaven.

Well, believe it or not, this challenge existed in New Testament times as well. Now here in Acts 10 we have an amazing account of an encounter between a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ (Peter) and a man who was not, but who wanted to be (Cornelius).

Acts 10:1 - At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.

Acts 10:2 - He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

Let me just stop here and ask, “Is there anything missing in this man’s life? Is he going to heaven? If we stopped the story right here many outside the church, and even some inside the church, would say, “Yes, I think a good man like this is surely going to heaven.”

What we’re going to see here in this portion of Scripture is that this man Cornelius, as good and sincere as he was, was not on the right path. He was not going to heaven. His sins were not forgiven. He did not possess eternal life. Something needed to change. And God was at work bringing about this change in his life.

Now the story goes on to tell how Cornelius has a longing in his heart to know God. He realizes that something is missing. And God told him to send for a man named Simon ... Simon Peter, the apostle of Jesus. Simon Peter would tell him what he needed to know. So Cornelius sent some of his servants and a soldier to ask Peter to come to speak to Cornelius and his household. When they arrived at Joppa where Peter was staying...

Acts 10:22 - The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.”

Now remember, Cornelius is...

- Righteous – at least from a human perspective
- Religious – “God-fearing” and he prayed
- Respected by Jewish people, even though he is a Gentile.

Surely this is enough for a man to get to heaven. How could anyone say to this man, “You’re not going to heaven”? Well Cornelius was close. He was almost in, but the most important thing was still missing in his life. He needed to hear what Peter had to say.

So Peter arrives in Caesarea and Cornelius and his household are all there eagerly waiting for what God’s messenger had to say. And Cornelius explains...

Acts 10:33b - Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

And what was Peter going to say to them? Would he say, “Cornelius and family, you are so righteous, religious and respected. You’re just fine. There’s nothing else you need. I wouldn’t dare be so arrogant to say that you’re not going to heaven. Who am I to say that what I believe is any more true than what you believe.”

Peter did not make that mistake. But that is exactly what is happening in our culture today ... and sadly even in some evangelical churches. In academic circles this is what is called “postmodernism.” It’s a worldview that says that there is no such thing as absolute truth, just your opinion of what is true and my opinion of what is true. And what has grown out of this is the idea that we should be tolerant of everyone else’s viewpoints.

But “tolerant” has been redefined. It used to be that tolerant meant that you respected other people, even if they were wrong. But now, tolerance is means that you must not just respect other people, you must agree that their point of view is just as valid and true as anyone else’s.

And this becomes really hazardous material because a person’s eternal destiny is at stake. If we get this wrong, it doesn’t matter what else we believe, our eternal destiny is at stake.

This morning I’m not here to speak to the hard-core skeptic, agnostic or atheist. Instead I want to speak to someone here today, or to someone you know, who claims to be a Christian, but doesn’t want to say that other religions are wrong when it comes to knowing who gets to go to heaven, whose sins are forgiven or who has a relationship with God.

Let’s go back to the “chain of truth” that I have used to help us in dealing with the hazardous material that is out there in our culture. If you say you truly believe in the existence of the One True God and that what He thinks about any matter is the truth and that He has revealed what he thinks about everything in His Word, the Bible, then you have to believe what this Bible says about Jesus and the salvation that comes through Him. Then we must live our lives in obedience to that truth.

Let’s talk about this third link in the chain of truth ... that truth has been revealed in a personal way in Jesus Christ. In theological circles this is what is called “the exclusivity of Christ.”

John 14:6 - “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

So if you believe in the existence of the One True God whose thoughts about any matter are the truth. And if you believe that that One True God has revealed Himself in a perfect way in the Bible, then you have to accept what Jesus and the Bible claim as truth. And here is what Jesus and the Bible claim...

1. GOD LOVES ALL PEOPLE (Acts 10:34-35).

Let’s get back to the conversation that Peter is having with Cornelius in Acts 10.

Acts 10:34-35 - Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

You see, Christianity is exclusive when it comes to *how* a person can be saved. But it is inclusive when it comes to *who* can be saved. We are exclusive in our faith. The Bible teaches there is only one way to eternal life. But we are not exclusive in our love, for God is all-inclusive in His love.

John 3:16 - “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.

John 3:17 - For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

So we accept the claim of Jesus and the Bible that God loves all people. But we also accept the claim that...

2. ALL PEOPLE NEED TO CHANGE (Acts 10:36).

Something was missing in Cornelius' life. Cornelius needed to know that he wasn't on the right path and that God had a plan to change his life. Peter said to him...

Acts 10:36 - You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

So Christ is Lord of all. He is Lord over every human and over every culture. He is right and we are wrong. We are separated from Him because of our sins and we need to be brought near. So God sent the message of the Gospel proclaiming the good news that a way has been made to have peace with God.

Peter was speaking to a Gentile here in Acts 10. One day Jesus encountered a very devout Jewish man named Nicodemus who was just as humanly righteous, religious and respected as Cornelius. But Jesus told Nicodemus...

John 3:3 – “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

That's the radical change that needs to happen if a person is to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus made it even more clear when He said in...

Matthew 7:13-14 - “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Yes, that is very exclusive. But if you truly believe that Jesus is who He said He is, you cannot disregard these words. You can't soften it. Either Jesus meant what He was saying, or He was a lunatic or a liar.

Human beings are estranged from God because of their sin. This message of “good news of peace” that God sent to Israel was also for all people.

1 Timothy 2:5 - For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

So we take seriously the claim of Jesus and the Bible that all people need to change. But we also accept the claim that...

3. CHRIST LIVED, DIED AND ROSE AGAIN TO BRING ABOUT THIS CHANGE (Acts 10:37-41).

This is what Peter came to announce. READ ACTS 10:38-40.

People cannot save themselves by just seeking after God. They cannot save themselves simply by believing that God exists. They cannot save themselves by doing good things. It required a unilateral act of God to overcome the eternal consequences of our sin by the sinless life, the sacrificial death and the supernatural resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:12 - Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Exclusive? Yes, but it’s the truth.

1 John 5:11-12 - And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

If you claim to believe that Jesus is who He says He is, you must accept the claim of Jesus and the Bible that only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can a person go to heaven.

We must also accept the claim that...

4. CHRIST ALONE WILL JUDGE ALL PEOPLE (Acts 10:42).

You see, everyone will have to answer to Jesus. There’s not some part of the world that will answer to Mohammed or the Allah of the Muslim faith, and another part of the world that will answer to Moses of the Jewish faith, and another part of the world that will answer to who knows who else. No, Jesus and the Bible claim that every human being will have to answer to Christ.

Acts 10:42 - He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

In Matthew 25:31-45 Jesus spoke about the confusion that many people will have. Jesus taught that one day He would come to sit upon a throne in heavenly glory before which all people who have ever lived will have to stand. All the nations will be gathered before Christ and He will separate the people the way a shepherd separates sheep from the goats. And what will be the determining factor in this separation? It is true faith in Jesus Christ. And where do they go?

Matthew 25:46 - “Then they (the unrighteous) will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

And there are many today who look at that statement and it offends them. Surely God would not act that way toward people who have tried to be good people, even if they haven’t received Christ. But this is the unmistakable claim of Jesus and the Bible. Christ alone will judge all people.

But there’s another claim made by Jesus and the Bible.

5. CHANGE IS ONLY POSSIBLE THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (Acts 10:43).

This is what Peter says to Cornelius and the others who were listening.

Acts 10:43 - All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

It's not enough to hear this. One has to believe in Christ ... to put their trust in Christ. And this is what Jesus taught...

John 3:36 - Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.”

John 5:24 - “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

And this is the message that Peter proclaimed to Cornelius. And the results were amazing. Even while Peter was speaking the Spirit of God began to move on the hearts of Cornelius and the other Gentiles who had gathered. They were saved and later baptized.

You see, when God sees someone who genuinely wants to know the truth and who wants a relationship with Him, He will move heaven and earth to reveal Himself to that person, and to make sure that they get a chance to hear the Gospel. But no one is ever saved unless they hear and accept that exclusive message.

CONCLUSION

My motivation in preaching this message today is two-fold. First I want to challenge you who are weak in your faith ... you have been reluctant to tell your friends that Jesus Christ is the only way for them to have eternal life ... you who have been embarrassed by the exclusive claims of Christ. I want to challenge you that you cannot claim that you believe that Jesus is who He said He was, but not take seriously the claims that Jesus and the Bible make about the exclusivity of Christ.

Second, I want us all to cherish Christ more than ever. Why? We realize that all I needed to be saved Christ did. I want us to love and cherish Him more than ever as I realize all He did to make it possible for us to be saved.