

The Stairway to Heaven

How do we reach God? How does God reach us?

Every faith tradition that I have studied and teach has at its foundation a system of beliefs that work to transcend this life... to live on a higher plane of consciousness, to defeat the temptations that threaten to ruin our lives. For example, the desire to defeat greed or lust; and the desire to muster one's greatest effort to conquer base human appetites.

Salvation for all religions is based upon self effort, upon practicing certain rituals, proving oneself to God or gods and goddesses through prayers, dances, observances, worship, and sacrifice... or in the case of Buddhism, to work toward non-attachment, because suffering is rooted in desire and attachment, and salvation for a Buddhist is completely based on self effort, following 8 noble truths, which include: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches there are three paths to salvation-- one path is to devote oneself to a particular god or goddess, one path is good works-- another is the path of knowledge....

Hindus believe that their good works, known as karma, determine the constant cycle of birth, death and rebirth, --the endless cycle of reincarnation. Each person will live millions of lives before reaching liberation or Mecca, which is ultimate non-existence, or absorption into the one great reality.

Islam teaches there are two ways to get paradise:

1. Your good deeds are weighed against your bad deeds.

If you have done enough good deeds when compared to your bad deeds, you will eventually get to paradise, after spending some time burning in the fires of hell.

1. Or, if you die as a martyr defending Islam, then you go directly to paradise.

Islam teaches that all people are sinners (Quran 16,61) and that salvation can be attained through observing the Five Pillars of Islamic practice:

- 1) the belief that Allah is the only god and that Muhammad is his messenger;
- 2) performing the five daily prayers;
- 3) fasting throughout the month of Ramadan;
- 4) charity, giving to the poor;
- 5) the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, if one can afford it.

By performing these works, a Muslim hopes that at the judgment day the recorded good deeds will exceed the bad ones, and so he or she will reach the paradise of material and sensual delights (56,16-41).

Faith in Allah and belief that salvation is by his grace and mercy is also encouraged. Yet, despite all one's deeds, Allah reserves the absolute right to send the deceased

to wherever he pleases, paradise or hell.
Those who do not conform their lives to the demands
of Islam will surely be thrown into hell, a place of extreme physical pain (56,42-45; 94-95).

But one question always intrigues me when it comes to all religions.
Where did the sense that we human beings are essentially flawed
derive from, that seems to be the foundation
upon which all religion is based--and the need/desire to
be in mystical communion with the invisible, spiritual world?

Every religion has its story as to how "sin"
came into the world.... every religion has
its story as to how things came to be as they are.
Turn with me, if you would to Genesis 11,
as I read about the Tower of Babel--
here we are given an insight into an ancient
culture that is not much different from our own.

Genesis 11:

1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.
2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.
3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.
4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."
5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.
6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.
7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."
8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.
9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Why did the Lord want to scatter the people?
Some say this is just a theological story to explain
why we have a diversity of languages.
Yet, archeologists have discovered such towers in their
excavations...called ziggurats,
and the intention of the people--the rulers--
of the Tower called Babel was to make a claim,
to make a name for themselves,
to reach the heavens, and God, by their own efforts;
to be as gods themselves.
This is history that continues to repeat itself.
God intervened.
I believe,too, that this tells the story of all religions--
from the beginning of time--the story of salvation
through self effort.

But, if we are to reach the heavens by our individual
efforts, are we all not doomed?
Jesus said if we think about doing something sinful,
we are guilty of it.... does any one good act
we commit, undo, or outweigh the bad acts?

If you drop a few droplets of poison into a glass
of water, does it not contaminate all the water?
Another word for sin could be poison;
we might think of sin as anything

that hurts, wounds, ruins us or others...

The 10 commandments fit this understanding--
If we steal, we poison others.
If we kill, we poison others and those who love us--
think of the gunman of the Arizona shootings.
If we live a lie, or live lies, we are poisoning ourselves
and others, aren't we?
The greatest lie of all, according to Scripture,
the poison that has been infecting humanity since
the beginning of creation, is that we can win God's favor,
that we can achieve salvation by personal effort,
that we, in our own strength and will, can reach the heavens.

Did you ever wonder why it is that God
always seems to promise those whom we would
consider the least likely candidates to show compassion,
mercy, and righteousness?
Including, some might say, the Hebrews themselves.

The Bible tells us that God uses the weak
to show forth his power;
and none of us are good enough to win
God's favor--all have sinned and fallen short of the
glory of God... we are faithless as human beings,
we cannot achieve salvation through good works.
It is through love and an act of God that his justice
was satisfied and we are offered salvation.

Now let's look at Jacob--
the one who would be named Israel,
as a great example of God's reaching out to us.
Let's turn to Genesis 28 starting with verse 10--
and let me first give you a bit of background--
Jacob is a trickster by all accounts.
He is fleeing his brother Esau after
deceiving their father Isaac, and stealing Esau's
birthright, that means that Esau, the first born
twin, would now not inherit his father's estate and blessing.

Jacob is running for his life when he encounters God during a dream.

Genesis 28:10 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

11 When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

13 There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

16 When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

17 He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!
This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

It is in this passage that God reveals Himself to Jacob

and reaffirms the covenant God made to Abraham, promising Jacob that his offspring will be many and that the Promised Land will one day belong to his descendants.

In this vision Jacob sees a ladder or a stairway *which signifies a connection between God and humankind.*
In this instance, it was God who provided the means necessary to link Himself to us as opposed to the men of Babel in who tried to reach heaven by their own actions, aside from the help of God.

As Christians we see this dream of Jacob's as highly symbolic, representing the Mediator, Jesus Christ, who came to earth and became that ladder or stairway for us to reconnect the relationship with God that was severed because of sin.

Romans 5:1-2 says:

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."

According to the Bible, Jesus was our "Jacob's Ladder" who came to earth, from the line of Jacob, through the provisions of God, and redeemed us so that we may live in heaven for eternity.

God has come to us...
none of us really desires God.
We only desire to be as God--
answering only to ourselves,
being masters of our own destiny,
builders of towers that will make a name for ourselves.

For us who believe Jesus was the Christ,
the cross is the ladder upon which God has
descended and ascended.
God comes to us.
The stairway to heaven is not built from stones
or bricks or good deeds. It is not us who ascends
the stairs to enter into God's presence.
No, it is God who descends to us,
who by grace, love, mercy and compassion,
carries us up Jacob's ladder,
each rung a promise to be with us always,
to hold us firm as we hold our faith firm,
to be with us, even to the ends of the earth. Amen