

Know What You Are Talking About (Acts 7:1-53)

YouTube Clip of *Oh, You can't get to heaven*

So how do you get to heaven? People in the time of Acts had their thoughts on the way to heaven and if you thought differently you were charged. Stephen, one of the six who were appointed to work in the distribution of food to the needy was charged and brought before the court. They ask him

“... "Are these charges true?"” (Acts 7:1 NIV)

And so he goes into a speech which carries on for over ten minutes and begins in Acts 7:2, page 1099 in the Church Bibles. You might like to turn to it. We cannot this morning, in the time we have, look at all the complexities of the speech he made. It is astonishing, but it is like the speech that Peter makes on the Day of Pentecost, that first Christian sermon where three thousand people are saved, we tend to look at the first and last lines only and miss so much. We are going to read a little more this morning, but we will be missing pieces as well, due to time.

So imagine the scene. You are the judge and jury in this case. This man before you has been accused of rubbishing the very things that will get you to heaven. And so the accused man stands up and begins

“... "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’ "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterwards they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.” (Acts 7:2-8 NIV)

All those who were listening, you, would be either outraged at this man telling them their history, they knew all this. Or they would be pleased to hear their glorious history being told. But imagine someone talking about your history, the history of your ancestors. How would it sound? Would you be pleased to think that a fellow-countryman is leading you through your own history, or would you be frustrated because you knew it all ready? ‘Get on with it man’.

So Stephen continues with the life of Joseph and the time that the family of Joseph had to go to Egypt to escape the famine. This was after the brothers of Joseph

“... "were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him” (Acts 7:9 NIV)

Even though the brothers did it for harm, God was with Joseph and because of that Joseph was able to save his family from the famine, but it meant that they had to leave the land that God had promised to Abraham that they would have. Let us pick up the speech in verse 17

“As the time drew near for God to fulfil his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child....” (Acts 7:17-20 NIV)

The promise of the land was always there and in Moses it was fulfilled. The land is one of the themes through the speech of Stephen. The people thought that they were safe because they were in the land that had been promised to them. Today we replace land by possession, which may include land, a house, car etc, etc. People think that maybe the way to heaven is

Being Wealthy

But this is not the case. It may help a person make what they think is heaven on earth, but this too rarely happens as with wealth comes responsibilities and also it seems the desire to have more and more.

A person may also give lots of money to worthy causes. A very admirable thing to do. In the history of this country there were philanthropists who would put money into a local charity that would help out the poor of the parish by giving them food. At times, not always, but the philanthropist would sit on the committee to decide who was the deserving poor and many of those coming in front of the committee were their own workers whom they paid so poorly that they still could not feed their families on what they earned!

Being Wealthy and even being generous with one's wealth does no get you to heaven.

So Stephen continues with the life of Moses and we pick up his speech in verse 37

“This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’ He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honour of what their hands had made.” (Acts 7:37-41 NIV)

“...‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’” (Acts 7:37 NIV). This is a reference forward to Jesus, a prophecy that Jesus would come. Some even said when Jesus was on earth that he was one of the prophets come back to be with them.

Moses gave the people the law, that is the reference in verse 38 to Moses being on Mount Sinai and he was receiving the Ten Commandments. This leads us to another way that people try to get to heaven.

Being Good

People try to be good, to follow the law. Stephen was standing in front of some of the best law-keepers, par excellent! Some of those sitting the room were keeping the law. They would not walk further than a certain distance on the day of rest. They would wash in the right way when they had been out, just in case they had touched anything they should not have done and so rendered them ‘unclean’ in their eyes.

There are people today who think that the way to heaven is to be good. 'I don't go to church, but I am always kind to people and try to help people out if I can.' But sadly no-one is able to keep the all of the law and with God there an absolute. Keep all of the law, nothing else will do.

I can remember in French lessons, our teacher whom we all called 'Banger' had an unusual system of marking verb tests. This was when the first lesson was the verb 'to be' 'être' which went:

- Je suis
- Tu es
- Il est
- Elle est
- Nous sommes
- Vous êtes
- Ils sont
- Elle sont

We went sent home to learn the verb for a test the next day and after the test we were introduced to his marking scheme for verbs. He only had two marks. For that test I would have received zero because it should be *Nous sommes*. You received zero for any number of mistakes, even one, but a ten if you got them all right! Harsh, but it made us learn the verbs!

With God there is all right or all wrong, even if only one law is broken. But some still believe that by being good, the best that they can be that they can get to heaven. You cannot do it that way, just as Being Wealthy was not certain either. Not that either of those things are wrong in themselves, but they do not get you to heaven.

So we move on in Stephen's speech, verse 44

"Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favour and asked that he might provide a dwelling-place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him. "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men...." (Acts 7:44-48 NIV)

Here Stephen is reminding the people of the tabernacle, a tent that moved with them that was then turned into the Temple, the place where God lived. Or so they thought! They assumed that as the Temple was there in the centre of Jerusalem, that they were safe and secure. But God does not live in a building, he was with Abraham and Joseph and Moses and there was not a temple in sight. But this is another way that people think they can get to heaven.

Being Religious

By coming to church and being religious. Apparently the attendance at services held in Cathedrals has increased. People are going back to religion. Is this the route into heaven? Sadly it is not. No amount of attendance at church will guarantee a place in heaven.

So we cannot get to heaven by

- Being Wealthy – even being generous with our wealth
- Being Good – that doesn't work
- Being Religious

So how do we get to heaven? Back to Stephen's speech, verse 51 where he begins his summing up and gives a challenge.

“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”
(Acts 7:51-53 NIV)

Not words to endear you to one's listeners! But he told them straight "**You always resist the Holy Spirit!**" (Acts 7:51 NIV). Maybe this morning you realise that this is you. You have tried so many ways to get to heaven, but you have forgotten and missed the only way. What does Stephen say

“Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—” (Acts 7:52 NIV)

We are all responsible for the death of Jesus. He died because of our sins, the wrong things we did and do. But he died as an innocent man and it was this innocence, this not breaking any law that meant we can have ht slate wiped clear. It meant that he did come back from the dead and one day he is returning to collect those who are trying to get to heaven by

- Being Wealthy – NO
- Being Good – NO
- Being Religious – NO

Following Christ and accepting him as Lord and Saviour, as Brother and Friend. That is what is needed, this is the only way to heaven.