

# No Other Name!

Acts 4:1-22

June 24, 2001

“Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Here is the sweeping, staggering claim of the Christian faith, the same today as when Peter spoke it long ago: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and Jesus Christ alone is savior. These two are parts of the same thing: the one who defeated sin and death is the savior; the savior, once dead, now lives forever. You cannot have one without the other. Resurrection and salvation belong together. In Jesus Christ we have both. Thanks be to God!

It had been upsetting enough that Peter and John’s conversation with the formerly lame man had become the occasion for his healing. That by itself disrupted the normal flow of events. That interfered with time, space, and nature. That caused excitement and confusion among the people. But then, to make matters worse, Peter preached the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis of the healing, and he called for repentance as the appropriate response to the gospel. Such preaching of the resurrection is always disturbing. The occasional healing can be dismissed as a fluke, a coincidence, a trick, or an anomaly. But the resurrection changes everything.

The resurrection relativizes all other claims to authority, including, especially, all claims by the temple. The resurrection undoes all the defeats of history. The resurrection opens a strange new world of love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, justice, and righteousness. So it was that “the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees” were “annoyed” because Peter and John “were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” Imagine that! They were irritated at hearing the greatest good news the world has ever known. Who did those country bumpkins think they were, preaching at the temple in the holy city of the southern kingdom? What gave them the right? Anyone could tell they were uneducated, common men. So, the very preaching of the resurrection, the

proclamation of the gospel, gave the authorities reason to arrest Peter and John. They had to be put away and kept out of sight. The gospel had to be silenced.

You see, the resurrection is the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, we have nothing. With it, we have everything. And the resurrection changes everything in the world. The dead do not stay dead. Death is not absolute. The power of death is broken, destroyed, and exposed as second rate, at best. Those who deal in the power of death have their advantage removed. This world is not all that there is. There is a life beyond this life. And that reality, and the new knowledge and awareness of it, changes this world and this life irrevocably. The authorities understood that then, even as they understand it now. The gospel is always preached into an alien and hostile world. It wins some believers. It confirms some detractors. It divides humanity into those for, and those against, Jesus Christ.

We need to be clear about what is at stake here. Apart from the resurrection, we have no hope. Apart from the mercy of God which raised Jesus Christ to new life as the promise of our own resurrection, we are stuck in the inevitability of disease, decay, decline, and death. Apart from the resurrection, there would be no reason for families, for nations, for life, or for human aspiration and endeavor. There would be no reason to get up in the morning. All of this is to say that the resurrection is not only about the next life. It is also about giving us a reason to live this life. It is about good hope for the future and therefore about courage for today. It is about eternal life and therefore about knowing that the love we share now will go on forever. It is not only a perspective we have on the ultimate but also the ultimate perspective we have on ourselves. The resurrection changes everything. It is the heart of the Christian faith. No wonder Peter and John were arrested.

But in the providence of God, the arrest of Peter and John and their appearance in court, as it were, simply gave them yet another opportunity to preach the gospel. Though Peter had cowered before the inquiry of a servant girl on the night of the arrest of Jesus and had then three times denied Jesus, now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he found the courage and the boldness to preach Jesus Christ even to his accusers. And he hammered it home. After a quick review of the crucifixion and resurrection, he went straight to healing and salvation. Because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, God has also made Jesus Christ savior. The creation of new life beyond death saves us from the tyranny of death and changes everything in this life. Jesus Christ is our savior. He forgives our sin. He takes away our guilt. He promises eternal life. He commands that we love one another. He lifts us out of the depths of despair. He places us upon the path of life. We are grateful for all of this.

But there is an edge to this claim. There is an offense to the gospel. There is an exclusivity recognized by the authorities of church and state two-thousand years

ago just as quickly as it is denounced by the proponents of political correctness and the opponents of the gospel today. The scandal of the cross is that Jesus Christ died for our sins, or more specifically, that Jesus Christ alone died for all our sins. That is offensive to our sensibilities. We do not like being told that we have incurred a debt we cannot repay. We should be glad that it has been paid, but there is always a temptation to be resentful that we cannot make it on our own. There is a temptation to die with our sins rather than live without them. It is hard to realize and to admit that one has paid the price for all and that none other can pay that price even for one. We would rather say that he showed us the way and that we have the capacity to follow. But that is not true. We have neither the capacity nor the inclination to follow. We are running the other way as hard as we can. The truth is that Jesus Christ alone, on the cross, does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We may like that, or we may not, but our preferences do not change the reality. So, while the cross attracts some who cling to it gladly, it drives others away.

Another way of stating the scandal of the cross, that Jesus Christ alone died for all our sins, is to say that Jesus Christ alone is savior. It is not only the case that Jesus Christ is savior, but it is also the case that no one else is savior. This is an exclusive role. He is not a model for others. He is not an example for others. He is not one way of salvation among a thousand. He is the savior. He alone is the savior. He alone is the only savior. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." That is what Peter told the authorities, and that upset them even more. It continues to do so today. What about Allah? What about Buddha? What about self-esteem and self-fulfillment? Is not Jesus just one savior among many? No, he is not! The world tries to tell us that. Some within the church try to tell us that. But that is not true. Jesus Christ is savior, and Jesus Christ alone is savior. By his name we are saved. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Just as the reality of the resurrection undercuts all those who deal in the power of death, the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ undercuts all those who would save us by any other means or in any other name. We cannot be saved by education. We cannot be saved by politics or even by democracy. We cannot be saved by economics, whether capitalist or communist. Good education, politics, and economics are important to the well being of human life and community. We want to support them. But we have to know that they cannot save us. They cannot heal us. They cannot make us whole.

The deepest problem of humanity is not academic. As terrible as ignorance is, it is not the worst thing which confronts us. The deepest problem of humanity is not economic. As terrible as poverty is, there is a greater enemy to human life and well

being. The deepest problem of humanity is not social, or political, or military. We need good solutions to those problems, but they are still on the surface. The deepest and most fundamental problem of humanity is theological. We have become estranged from God. Though God created us for God, we have broken away as if we were to live to ourselves. This is our deepest wound. We cannot heal ourselves. There is only one physician who can heal us, and thanks be to God that God has already sent him to us, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, our only savior.

It has not been lost upon readers of the book of Acts that while Peter's first sermon in Acts 2 to the Jews of all nations led to three-thousand conversions, and while his second sermon in Acts 3 to the people gathered at the temple resulted in five-thousand believers, his third sermon in Acts 4 to the rulers, elders, and scribes, along with the high priest and all of his family, resulted in exactly zero conversions. It was bound to happen sooner or later. But this was not just a bad day. Peter preached the same message each time, but this time it fell on hard hearts. He even quoted Psalm 118 to them, that the stone which they had rejected had become the head of the corner. But even that did not help them to overcome or reverse their rejection. No one there that day came to believe in the resurrection. No one there that day came to rejoice in salvation. They could not deny the healing of the lame man. But they did not have to like it. And they did their best to keep it from happening again. Of course, what they did was not effective. Peter and John kept on preaching. There was no way they were going to disobey God just to obey man. The preaching of the gospel is pleasing to God. God is going to raise it up no matter how hard the authorities try to suppress it. But they tried to stop it, anyway.

The uncomprehending rejection of the gospel on the part of the authorities then raises severe questions for us now. How do we hear the gospel today? How do we hear the good news of Jesus Christ this very day? Are we resentful about the crucifixion? Would we just as soon never have to hear about those gory details again? Are we tired of being told and reminded that Jesus died for our sins? Are we annoyed by hearing about the resurrection? Would we like to hear something more relevant, more contemporary more related to our daily lives? Are we bored by thinking of life eternal? Are we irritated by the exclusivity of the scandalously singular claim that Jesus is the only savior? Would we rather just get along with everyone and let everyone else follow his or her own path to God? Look carefully at the examples, good and bad, set by the crowd and by the authorities in today's reading. "Many of those" in the crowd "who heard the word believed." None of the authorities, though they heard the same word, repented or believed. They may have been more pseudo-sophisticated. They may have been more prominent in the community. But they stupidly and disastrously missed the opportunity of a life time and even the opportunity of eternity. And the important question is, which shall it be

for us? Shall we believe or not? Shall we repent or continue in our ways? Shall we be reconciled to God, or shall we persist in our estrangement? Which shall it be for us?

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*To God be the glory, forever and ever!*

*Amen.*

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