

Sermons in Acts: Salvation in Jesus

It's not very often that you or I will have the chance to preach a sermon in front of a judge, but that's like the setting for Peter's third sermon which comes in Acts 4. When we left Peter and John a week ago they had been arrested and thrown in jail for preaching the resurrection of Jesus.

The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other relatives of the high priest. They brought in the two disciples and demanded, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?" (4:5-7)

Done what? Healed the man who had been lame from birth and who had been begging at the Gate Beautiful. But more than that, these men had proclaimed that the Jesus who had been crucified was now alive, that God had raised Him from the tomb that these same leaders had ordered guarded day and night. These men knew that Jesus' body was gone and they had paid off the guards to make sure they didn't spread the story. So they knew that, either Jesus' frightened disciples had overpowered the guards and stolen Jesus' body, or that the message they were preaching was true - God had raised Him. I doubt very much that they truly believed the first option - that the disciples had stolen the body - but the second option shattered everything they hoped for and believed in. The resurrection meant that they had killed God's representative, God's Messiah, and that they were therefore, in the position of being enemies of the God they were supposed to be leading the people to worship. This was a position they couldn't accept, a guilt that was too great, a belief that threatened their whole existence - so, despite the evidence in front of them, they denied the whole thing and attempted to shut it down.

One more thing about the religious leaders who were present that day. The ruling Council of the Jews, called the Sanhedrin, was composed of both Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees were descended from the leading families of the Jews and were generally fairly wealthy, being the largest landowners of the time. They also did not believe in any resurrection. They believed that when a person died, that was the end of their story; there was no afterlife. The Pharisees were a newer movement, rising after the return of the exiles from Babylon, and they were the popular interpreters and teachers of the law. They did believe in an afterlife and, therefore, a future resurrection for those who have died. I mention that because this meeting seems to be stacked in favor of the Sadducees with Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other relatives of the high priest being in attendance. The high priestly family was from the party of the Sadducees.

Their opening question couldn't have been more inviting for Peter: "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?" That was the opening for Peter to preach a short but pointed message. But before he even opens his mouth, he receives a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit. The verb tense in Acts 4:8 should read something like this: "Then Peter, having just been filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them ..." and we read on:

Leaders and elders of our nation, are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says:

*"The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone"
There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them. (Acts 4:8-12)*

There was nothing Canadian about this message. There was nothing polite, self-deprecating, or cautious about these words. Peter was filled with the Spirit and with that came a boldness to speak the truth with authority and directness. "Did you drag us into jail and now before this council because of a kindness, a good deed, that we have done for a crippled man? Is that what your business is? No, you want to know how it happened, where the power came from, who acts with authority over physical suffering." And, although he doesn't say it here, I think Peter is suggesting to the minds of the Council that they have known someone, very recently, who acted with authority over sickness and over demonic powers and even over death. And so he leads right into the next part of his response: "Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel ..."
Peter has an answer for their question, but it isn't just to the leaders who represent God's people, but is directed to all the people of Israel, to all the Jews ...

And here it is - the cripple who has been seen begging at the gate for years and who is now dancing and doing jumping jacks in the streets of Jerusalem, was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ, Jesus Messiah, from Nazareth. And then Peter delivers the heavy blow, as it were: "the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead." Just a couple of months earlier, these men whom Peter is speaking to successfully plotted Jesus' execution. Now they are being told that Jesus is not only alive, but is still doing the kind of miracles that He performed before they arranged His crucifixion. It is in His name and with His power that the blind beggar of Gate Beautiful has been healed. Yes, this good deed, this act of kindness, has happened in the name of the One you killed.

But Peter is not quite done - he has one more final explanation. He needs these religious leaders to understand their own Scriptures, the ones that pointed to Jesus for hundreds of years. To do this he quotes from Psalm 118, and I'll read part of that psalm:

*Open for me the gates where the righteous enter
and I will go in and thank the LORD
Those gates lead to the presence of Yahweh and the godly enter there.
I thank you for answering my prayer and saving me
The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone
This is Yahweh's doing and it is marvelous to see
This is the day the LORD has made We will rejoice and be glad in it
Please, LORD, please save us
Please, LORD, please give us success*

Bless the one who comes in the name of Yahweh

We bless You from the house of the LORD (Psalm 118:19-24)

Notice what the psalm is talking about - one of the central themes is salvation. "I thank you for answering my prayer and saving me", "Please, LORD, save us!" The response to God's salvation is thanksgiving and amazement. The psalmist is thankful and wants the gates opened so he can go in and thank the LORD, but there is this other element, the surprise part, that seems to open the writer to an experience of joy. "The stone rejected by the builders has now become the corner-stone - this is Yahweh's doing and it is marvelous to see!

And from there, the praise and thanks are mixed with a feeling of joy - "This is the day Yahweh has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." And then, in what seems to be a reference back to the rejected stone that has now become the cornerstone, he concludes, "Bless the One who comes in the name of Yahweh; we bless You from the house of the LORD!" And this is the passage of Scripture that Peter quotes in his defense before the Jewish Council. He starts by saying that Jesus is the one that the psalmist was referring to when he wrote those words, then he quotes the couplet:

"The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone."

Well, it's almost a quotation. Peter inserts the word "you" right before the word "builders" - "the stone that you builders rejected" - a slight change that makes its point very clearly.

Now, look at what he says in the following verse:

There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them. (4:12)

The psalmist was grateful for the salvation God had brought him, and the psalmist and the people with him were very aware of both their need for salvation and of God's love and power that would bring them through. And Peter picks out those themes from Psalm 118 and applies them all to Jesus: He was rejected by the builders, or at least by those who were in charge of the building (Herod's temple), but God made Him into the cornerstone, the starting point for everything that would follow, and God grants salvation through Jesus, and no one else.

The members of the Jewish Council are not moved by Peter's speech, although they're surprised by it.

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. But since the man who had been healed was standing right there among them, the council had nothing to say. (4:13,14)

When the evidence is all against your view of things and you've run out of words to explain it all, it's probably a good time to call a conference and the religious leaders of the Jews did that and decided the best solution to their problem was to threaten Peter and John and order them to stop talking about Jesus and the resurrection.

Before we look at the disciples' response to these threats, let's take a look at what the council members noticed about Peter and John:

1. Ordinary men who had no special training. In other words, they hadn't interned under a rabbi, they hadn't learned the law in the same way that the Pharisees would have. Their training would have been attending synagogue services and learning from Jesus, the man the council is trying so hard to discredit.
2. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. Think of Jesus' last week, debating with the religious leaders, avoiding their trick questions with questions of His own, clearing the temple courts of people selling merch. These men were with Him every day, watching, learning from their Master. And at least some of the Council members had noticed their presence and identified them as men who had been with Jesus.
3. They also noticed that these men were confident and bold. They were bold in their words, in their confident use of the Scriptures and in their willingness to suffer to defend what they were witnesses of - that Jesus had risen from the dead.
4. And they noticed one more thing - there was a man standing with them who had been lame for more than 40 years and who had instantly been made able, not just to stand up, but to walk, even to jump, as if those muscles had not atrophied, as if coordination and balance could be learned in a split second. This was an undeniable miracle and they had to take that event into account before proceeding with any action of their own.

How did the disciples respond to their threats?

But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than Him? We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard." (4:19,20)

Bottom line. There are times in life where we can feel confused or uncertain what we should do next. There are issues that take us awhile to think through before we can make a decision or choose a wise response. But there are also times when we have a clear choice, what should be an easy response. "We cannot stop ... telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard." We who have experienced the love of God, His mercy and forgiveness for our sins, His power in answering our prayers, the comfort and guidance of His Holy Spirit, the confidence He gives us through the promises in His Word and on it goes. These are the things that should guide our thinking and our deciding. So that when someone tells us what's cool and what we should be doing, because everybody else is, we can say, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than Him?"

How does the world respond when we say that we want to follow Jesus rather than follow the self-absorbed and self-destructive patterns that the world has established? We see in v. 21: "Then the Council threatened them further." A few intimidating words, some scoffing, some threats, and they are out of ammunition. Look at the closing verses from this section:

They finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God for this miraculous sign - the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years. (4:21,22)

I get that university professors and liberal media types and cynical bloggers want people to believe that Jesus either didn't exist or at least was not the Son of God. They say all kinds of foolish things, things like miracles don't happen, that we can or will be able to explain everything through naturalism, that Jesus didn't claim to be God, that the gospel writers only made it look like He had fulfilled prophecy, or that the Bible is out-of-date and irrelevant to "modern times". These are the deceptions that came out of the theology of the nineteenth century when it became the fashion for scholars to be skeptical about everything the Bible said. For example, they found stories in Egyptian mythology about resurrection and so they invented the idea that Jesus didn't rise from the dead but that the people who wrote the gospels somehow knew about these Egyptian myths and so they copied them in writing about Jesus. Out of their powers of imagination, they rewrote the story of Jesus and the early church -- not based on credible reconstructions of history, but on their own biases against things like miracles, like Jesus being anything but a first-century itinerant preacher, or against Him rising from the dead.

When we encounter these new mythologies, usually disguised as "scholarship", we need to take the stand that Peter and John did against the scholars and the power brokers of their day. We don't have to bow down to mockers and cynics and we don't have to assume that they know something that we don't know.

We are actually in the position that Peter and John were in when they stood before the high court of the Jewish nation. They were witnesses of the power of God, not only in the resurrection of Jesus whom they had seen alive, but also in the healing of a man who had lived for 40 years without the ability to walk, who was now dancing for joy. We are witnesses as well -- witnesses to the power of God to change people's lives, witnesses to His power in answering prayer, witnesses to the changes He has made in us and in the lives of people we love. And that's our role in this mission of God on earth - not that we have to answer everyone's questions - although we do try when asked - but to bear witness to the things we know, the things we have experienced, the things we have seen and been a part of. It's a world that many people have not yet experienced first hand, a world infused with the love of God and empowered by the Spirit of God. It is a world where sins are forgiven, where hope is restored, where life finds its meaning and where the human heart finds its healing. Let's be all about inviting people to join us in this journey of grace, praying for them, loving them, and sharing with them the truth of the things we have witnessed.