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CHRIST, THE ONLY WAY.

The Apostolic gospel in Acts 3 and 4.

By David Phillips

In Acts chapter 3 the writer Luke describes an incident in which two of the Apostles, Peter and John, were used by God to heal a man who had been born lame over 40 years earlier. It is not surprising that this incident caused a stir in Jerusalem and the Apostles used the interest it aroused to speak about the Lord Jesus.

The religious authorities, however, were far from happy with all this. Luke tells us how they had Peter and John arrested and brought before them. Their action was no idle threat, a few months earlier the same body had taken similar action against the Lord Jesus culminating in the crucifixion. On that occasion Peter and John had stood nearby in the courtyard and they could easily have been cowed by their situation. Instead, Luke tells us, under the influence of the Holy Spirit Peter answered their accusers with great boldness. Peter concludes in verse 12 speaking about Jesus: *“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*

Peter speaks here about salvation and about being saved, but what does he mean by this? What is it that we have to be saved from?

Salvation

One answer might be to look at the man who had just been healed. He had in a sense been saved from his life of suffering, from the consequences of his condition. But that is not what Peter and John focused on.

In chapter 3 verse 15 we hear them speaking about Jesus as the one who leads to life and in chapter 4 verse 2 they speak of the dead rising through Christ. Therefore one thing that is clearly in view is that through Christ we can be saved from death.

Further, in verse 19 of chapter 3, they call on people to repent and turn to God so that their sins can be blotted out. This calls to mind the instruction given to Joseph – *“she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”*. The very name, Jesus, meaning Jehovah saves, shows that Jesus saves us from our sins.

Then again in chapter 3 verse 23 we find the apostles warning everyone who does not obey the voice of Jesus that they *shall be utterly destroyed from among the people*. The word translated ‘utterly destroyed’ is unusual and some translate it as ‘be cut off from the people of God’.

These things therefore go together, because of sin, both our sin and that which is ours as children of Adam, we stand under the curse of God; we are doomed to die and left to our own devices to die not only physically but spiritually, to be cut off, destroyed.

This is what salvation means and unless someone can grasp the seriousness of the human predicament they cannot truly understand why Jesus is the only means of salvation. But if someone does understand what we are saved from then that ought to increase our sense of thankfulness and our desire to praise God for His grace and mercy. The lame man went walking and leaping and praising God, we should do no less.

The Only Saviour

The claim of Peter in verse 12 is not simply that Jesus saves, but that He is the only saviour and this point is driven home: *nor is there salvation in any other for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

This message has always been controversial and it is no wonder that it remains controversial today. For example when the gospel was preached in Ephesus the people understood that it amounted to a claim that their goddess Diana (Artemis) could not save. Likewise Christians came into conflict with Rome because their allegiance to Christ meant that they would not worship Caesar as Lord. In the same way wherever the gospel has been preached people have reacted against it because the fact that Christ is the only way of salvation means that other ways, other religions, do not and cannot save.

Later in his first letter the Apostle John would write: He who has the Son has life, *he who does not have the Son does not have life.* (1 Jn 5.12). It is not hard to see how John could assert this because he had received it from the Lord Jesus who said of himself. *I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me.*

This is the apostolic faith, once delivered to the saints.

A common response to this is for people to say that they believe that Jesus is the saviour, but that people of other religions can be saved through him, even though they do not know him. To answer this we must ask how Jesus saves (that is the application of the work of redemption).

How does Jesus save?

We see in chapter 4 that the community of disciples was growing and they are described as those who having *heard the message believed* (v4). This was part of the message recorded in chapter 3, they quote the Old Testament (v22) explaining that Jesus is the one who was promised and saying *“Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you.”* We are reminded that faith comes by hearing (Rom 10.17) but moreover that faith means taking Jesus at His word, believing what He has said (cf. Jn 14.10-11).

We also see the Apostles calling people to *repent ... and be converted* (turn back) (3.19).

Here in the preaching of Peter and John we see the great couplet that is the heart of the Christian message *“repent and believe the gospel”* (Mk 1.15).

John would later record in His gospel why it is only through faith in Christ that we can be saved: *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* (Jn 3.18)
He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (Jn 3.36)

Again this is Apostolic faith which Paul would summarise:
by grace you have been saved through faith (Eph 2.8).

So there are two aspects to the uniqueness of Christ in salvation. The first is that Jesus is the only means by which we can be saved and the second is that we are saved through faith in Him. Though in some respects this may be a deeply uncomfortable truth it must mean that those who do not know Christ, or who do not put their faith in him alone, cannot be saved. To argue otherwise is either to argue that Christ is merely optional for salvation, or that faith is merely optional and Scripture asserts the necessity of both.

What should we do?

Since this is the truth that the Scripture sets before us what should we do? Clearly the first answer must be that we should *repent and believe the gospel*. We should do what many in the crowd did then; hear the message and believe.

But if we are already believers what is our responsibility? We see in Acts how the Christian community was growing by leaps and bounds, but how were people becoming followers of Christ? How did the Christian gospel spread so far and wide in the years and centuries that followed? The answer is that the gospel was proclaimed to them, to the Jews of Jerusalem, the Diana worshippers of Ephesus, to the Romans. The gospel was even preached to the Britons, Celts and Picts immersed in druidism and later still to the pagan Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Norsemen. Many of the messengers were opposed and killed, but the gospel was preached and people believed.

In Acts chapter 4 Peter and John are told to stop preaching and are threatened, but they will not and they respond in those famous words:

Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. (v19,20).

This is our responsibility too, we too can speak of what we have seen and heard of God's work in us and in others. But, supremely we are to declare what they, the apostles, had seen and heard for they were eyewitnesses of the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. Their message is clear; salvation is to be found through Christ alone for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved – repent and believe the gospel.

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