

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH HIS CHURCH ALONE**

## **Acts 4:1-22**

### INTRODUCTION

In Acts 4 we are witnessing the first recorded confrontation between the church of Jesus and the powers of this world. In this case the powers of this world are the duly constituted rulers of the Jewish nation and religion. A group of priests, the captain of the temple police and a group of Sadducees come upon Peter and John as they are teaching the people in Solomon's Colonnade following the healing of the lame man. At the center of this confrontation is the issue of authority. It is the question of who has the right to speak for God. Look at v. 2. The Jewish rulers are upset because Peter and John are teaching a growing crowd of Jewish people in the temple precincts. Peter and John are acting as though they speak for God. The Jewish religious leaders are confident that they alone speak for God and so they have the right and indeed the duty to protect the people from these intruders. They are upset not only because the apostles are teaching the people but also because of what they are teaching. Peter and John are teaching the people that in and through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ humans can be resurrected from the dead. This is upsetting because most of the Jewish rulers are of the Sadducees who taught that the OT did not say anything about the resurrection of the dead and thus to teach there is a resurrection is to teach a heresy, a falsehood. (We know the Sadducees felt this way because of Jesus' argument with them over this exact subject as recorded in the gospels: Luke 20:27-40). Thus they are disturbed because Peter and John are authoritatively teaching the people and, according to their understanding of the OT, they are teaching falsehood.

The apostles by their proclamation of the resurrection of the dead in Jesus are claiming that God's authority, his power to save people is no longer connected to the Jewish nation but rather to the people of Jesus. The church, that collection of people who have called on the name of Jesus, is now the people of God and the sole authority regarding the salvation that God promises. These questions of who speaks for God and where God is exercising his power to save are not only questions that interested a group of Jewish people living 2000 years ago but are questions of enormous importance in the modern world as well. In fact, it is not saying too much that many of the controversies and conflicts in our modern world relate to these questions. The clash between Western culture and Islamic fundamentalism is a clash over who speaks for God. Many of the ethnic conflicts around the world have roots in the question of who possesses the truth from God. Much of the political debate that rages in America has its source in different people's understanding of what God is saying and through whom he is speaking or not speaking.

In recording this first confrontation between the apostles of Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities, Luke is seeking to demonstrate that God is only exercising his power to save through the church as founded by and upon the apostles. The message about Christ, who he is and what he has done is God's word to the world and through this word alone can salvation be obtained (v. 12). This message comes only through local churches that are devoted to the teaching of the apostles because they alone have been commissioned by Jesus to bear witness to him and his saving work. It is this claim of exclusivity as so forcefully declared in v. 12 that is the source of most of the hostility and animosity towards the church in our culture. Our culture is willing to tolerate every kind of religious belief except the belief that one religion is right and all others are wrong. Yet, as the church of Jesus, we have no alternative, if we are to remain faithful to our Lord than to say, as humbly as we can, on the basis of passages like the one before us today that God is only speaking in and through those local churches where the teaching of the apostles regarding Jesus is being faithfully replicated. God's power to save humans is only being exercised through the faithful church of Jesus. In our passage Luke offers three evidences for the truthfulness of this fact.

### MAIN POINT

**God's power to save is only known in and through the church because...**

## I. The word of Christ causes it to grow (vv. 1-4)

While Peter and John are teaching the people about Jesus and all the benefits that come to those who trust in him, chief of which is to be resurrected at the last day, this group of authorities come upon them. After listening long enough to understand they did not like what they were hearing they interrupt Peter and John's teaching. As I mentioned they are greatly disturbed both because they are teaching the people in the temple without their permission and because they are teaching that people can be resurrected through faith in Jesus. This group of Jewish officials, while they have the authority to detain anyone in the temple whom they deem to be a threat to the holiness of the temple or a destroyer of the peace, does not have the authority to make a judicial determination about the guilt or innocence of those they arrest. As daylight hours are almost gone they put Peter and John in prison until they can be put on trial the next day before the entire Jewish ruling council.

In v. 4 Luke interrupts his recounting of this confrontation by informing us that as a result of the preaching of Peter and John on this occasion the church grew to number about 5000 men, excluding women and children. This means, that in the few months since Jesus' ascension the church has grown from a group of 120 people to a group close to 10,000 if we assume that an equal number of women and children have been converted as men. Why would Luke record this fact at this point in his story? We already know from 2:47 that the Lord was daily adding to the church those who were being saved. But why tell us that the church had grown to number about 5000 men right after telling us that the apostles were thrown into prison?

He is showing us the power of the word of Christ, the gospel. It's one thing for people to become Christians and join the church when doing so results in many immediate positive benefits like friends, economic support, a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself, etc. However, it is entirely a different matter when joining the church puts you at odds with the governing authorities and exposes you to potential harm. The fact that so many people joined the church even as they watched John and Peter be dragged off to prison shows the greatness and the glory of Jesus as he was revealed in the preaching of Peter and John. The power of the word of Jesus is most clearly revealed in our embracing him and openly identifying with his church even when we know that doing so will potentially bring us harm and difficulty. My children love to go to the amusement park, "6 Flags", down in Gurnee, IL. Without fail, when they return and I ask them how it went they will tell me about the long lines they had to stand in and the heat and the outrageous cost of food and water. When I express shock that they would put up with so much suffering just to go on some crazy rollercoaster they tell me with great enthusiasm that it was worth it. They would do it again in a moment because the glory of the ride is more than worth the pain endured to obtain it. That is what we are seeing in v. 4. The glory of Christ as revealed in the gospel is infinitely greater than the cost of belonging to his church.

I've never really understood how people can think that joining a church that promises you health and wealth through Jesus shows off the greatness of Jesus. When you tell people that Jesus came to give you money and health or "your best life" and people flock to your church all you are doing is showing off how great money and health and a meaningful life are to people. However, when a church grows through a gospel which simply promises God's love and presence forever through Christ, along with trouble and persecutions; that shows the power and glory of Christ. When people trust and love Jesus and freely associate with the church, even when doing so exposes them to harm and loss--that is when the glory and power of the gospel is most clearly revealed. Luke shows us the power of the gospel in his recounting that the arrest of Peter and John did not limit the growth of the church but the church grew significantly even after people know two key leaders were arrested.

At this point, belonging to our church is most likely not going to bring you into conflict with the authorities in Janesville. However, if you knew that belonging to the church could potentially get you thrown into jail or expose you to the insults of your neighbors, would you openly identify with us? Does Christ appear so glorious to you that you would be willing to risk the loss of possessions in order to belong to his church? Verse 4 is a challenge to consumer Christians like us. You don't join a church where the leaders are being arrested because

the church has good music or great programs or a nice building or a friendly pastor. You join the church because you have discovered the glory of Christ through the teaching of the church. The evidence that the church is the place where God is exercising his power to save is seen when people embrace Christ and join his church even though doing so will result in harm coming to them now.

*God's power to save is only known in and through the church because...*

- *The word of Christ causes it to grow*
- *And because...*

## **II. The authority of Christ is its foundation (vv. 5-12)**

The next morning the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin convenes to examine and pass judgment on Peter and John. You need to remember that this is the same group of 71 men who, some 3-6 months prior to this, condemned Jesus to death and handed him over to Pilate to be crucified. These are the same men who only a short time prior to this stood around the tortured Jesus while he hung on the gruesome cross suffering and mocked him. These are the men who run Israel and who are in charge of what is taught in Israel and who will brook no competitors and tolerate no one who threatens to upset the status quo. This is an incredibly powerful and hostile audience in whose midst Peter and John are placed. What the Sanhedrin wants to know is by what power or in whose name did they perform the miracle and thus obtain the right to speak to the people. Simply put they are asking them, just who do you think you are that you can do and say these things in our temple? This is the same question they posed to Jesus on a number of occasions as well.

The first thing to notice is that Peter is "being filled with the Holy Spirit" and then he speaks. Luke is letting us know that what Jesus promised to his disciples is, at this very moment being fulfilled. Jesus promised Peter and the other apostles in Luke 12:11-12, "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." While the authorities are unwilling to acknowledge the authority of the apostles, we know that it is God himself, the Holy Spirit, who now speaks through Peter to them. The same Holy Spirit who filled Moses and Samuel and David and Elijah and the prophets now fills the fisherman, turned apostle. He does not fill the Jewish religious leaders. God the Holy Spirit is speaking only through the church that is formed by the teaching of the apostles and nowhere else. God himself is addressing these formidable Jewish leaders through this "ignorant" fisherman.

Notice the irony in Peter's response to these powerful men. If you really are examining this "criminal" act we performed, this act of kindness by which this man has been saved then you need to know that it was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the one whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed. Then Peter quotes a verse out of Psalm 118, changing it in several significant ways to apply it directly to these men and this Jesus whom they crucified. The verse is a metaphor. During the construction of a building made out of quarried stone the builders examine each quarried stone and then decide where to use each one in the building. The metaphor pictures a situation where the builders examine a particular stone and decide that it is not useful at all in the building and they cast it aside. However, someone else with greater authority comes along later and discovers the abandoned stone and recognizes it as best suited to be the main stone in the building, the capstone or the cornerstone of the building. In the Psalm the metaphor is used of David. He was rejected as Israel's king by Saul and many others but then God installed him as the chief and highest king of Israel. Clearly, the metaphor applies most completely to Jesus who was rejected by the Jewish nation when they handed him over to Pilate to be crucified but has now been made the chief stone, the head stone, the cornerstone in God's temple, the church by the resurrection.

This fact then leads Peter to make one of the strongest statements in the Bible as to the supremacy of Jesus. Since God has installed him as the cornerstone of his church, by raising him from the dead, salvation cannot be found anywhere else than in and through Jesus. Only Jesus has the authority and the power to save people. It is only those joined to the building of which Jesus is the cornerstone that are being saved by Jesus. In our culture

this assertion is viewed with hostility because the majority view of our friends and neighbors is that there is no "one way" to God. No human can possibly know that what they believe is the only true way to believe. However, the people to whom Peter said v. 12 were hostile because they were convinced that salvation could only be found in the name of Moses. They would have believed that only through obedience to the OT law and identification with Israel could a person be saved. Peter is asserting that just as the crippled man was "saved" from his "lameness" and made completely whole through faith in Jesus so the only way to be saved from the wrath of God and to obtain life with God forever is through faith in Jesus..

Jesus is the only one who has the authority and the power to save people because he is the only one whom God raised from the dead. He is the only rejected stone that has become the cornerstone. He is the cornerstone of the church. Thus it is only in and through local churches where Jesus is exalted and preached as God's cornerstone that God's power to save is made known. The authority of local churches is due only to the fact that Jesus is God's authoritative savior. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 Jesus is the only foundation of the true church. He alone has the right and the power to save and he is the head of each and every local church that is formed by and in accordance with the teaching of the apostles.

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### **III. The obedience of Christ fills its people (vv. 13-22)**

The Jewish religious leaders are confronted with two incontrovertible facts. First, Peter and John are theologically untrained lay people who yet speak with absolute confidence and eloquence. They ought to be, as good Jewish laypeople, intimidated and overwhelmed by this council but instead they are making a clear argument, using the OT Scriptures for their right and authority to heal and teach. These rulers knew Jesus and many of them had been in a number of disputes with Jesus. They realize that these men are speaking just like Jesus did and thus they must have been trained by him. They recognize in Peter and John the presence of Jesus. The second fact the leaders must deal with is that the lame beggar who has been healed is standing right next to them. This was a well known beggar who sat daily at the temple gates and so these men knew him by sight. They knew that for forty years he had been unable to walk and now they can see that he is mobile. They are unsure as to what to do and so they ask everyone but council members to leave while they have a consultation.

The remarkable thing in the discussion that follows is that they cannot deny that the lame man has been healed. They cannot disprove the fact of this man's healing and they cannot disprove the claim of the apostles that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Yet, rather than see the reality that the sign points to, i.e., Jesus is the cornerstone of God's church and thus God is speaking through the church, not through Israel; they decide that the apostles must be shut up. Rather than repenting of their error and sins and turning to God and so embracing Jesus as the glorious savior that he is, they discuss how to get the apostles to stop spreading the message of Jesus among the people of Israel. Since they cannot dispute the fact of the healing and the fact of the resurrection they resort to the only option left to them, threats of violence if the apostles do not stop talking about Jesus. They cannot legally do anything to the apostles because it is not a crime to heal a man and it is not a crime, yet, to say that only through Jesus can you be saved. The threats they make are not vain threats. This council is the law in Israel and so they are making legal threats. They are informing the apostles of what will happen to them if they continue to speak and to teach in the name of Jesus. In a very real sense they are establishing the legal precedence to punish these men in the future if they do not obey them.

Notice how Peter and John respond to their threats. They ask them to judge for themselves whether it is right to obey men or God. Again, here is the point of the controversy. The Jewish rulers assume they are speaking for God. They are in charge of the temple which God commanded Israel to build. They are the ones performing

the daily sacrifices and teaching the people of Israel to obey the law. They are the ones appointed by the law to be the leaders of God's people. From their point of view they would argue that the apostles would be obeying God if they did what they commanded. However, the apostles assume that it is only men speaking to them. These men, these priests and the other duly appointed Jewish leaders no longer represent God because they rejected God's stone. Israel is rejected by God because Israel rejected God's Messiah. God's saving work is no longer connected to the Jewish people but only to the church. God raised Christ from the dead and the apostles have seen him and been commissioned by him to bear witness to him and thus they must obey him. He has told them to bear witness about him and so they are not going to listen to anyone who tells them otherwise as that would mean that they would be disobedient to God. They are not able to not speak about what they have seen and heard.

In this radical obedience to the will of God they are following in the footsteps of Jesus who said that his food was to do the will of the one who sent him and who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will but yours be done" and who taught us to pray to our Father in heaven, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This radical obedience to the will of God in spite of the suffering and hardship that such obedience may bring into our lives is to be the hallmark of the Christian church. God uses our obedience to extend his salvation into the lives of others. Obviously, if our obedience is in proclaiming the gospel to others, God will use that preached gospel directly to give his salvation to others. But there are many other ways that God uses our obedience to extend salvation to others. When you refuse to retaliate against or gossip about the co-worker who is sabotaging your work but instead seek to be kind and thoughtful to that person even as they continue to harm you; your obedience will be used by God to further his work in you, in the co-worker and in your work place. When you persist in loving and spending time with your sullen, sulking teenage son in spite of how hurtful is his disrespectful demeanor; God will use that obedience in your life, his life and the life of your family. When you give money to the church instead of buying a newer car or updating your wardrobe or buying more video games or getting a flat panel TV; God will use your obedience to extend his saving work into the lives of others through the ministries you are supporting.

What we are observing in Peter and John is the suffering of love. There is no way to love God and people without risk. We follow a Savior who suffered and died for the sake of his love for God and for us. In the same way we joyfully, enthusiastically embrace a life of suffering love. The obedience of Peter and John is not a half-hearted, begrudging obedience. They enthusiastically embrace the risk and the suffering of their obedience. The pleasure of pleasing Jesus far outweighs any loss or cost they might incur in following Jesus. This is the testimony of all those who are saved by Jesus. There is no sacrifice when it comes to obeying him. It is in our suffering, obedient love that God extends his salvation into the lives of others.

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- *The authority of Christ is its foundation*
- *The obedience of Christ fills its people*

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