

“Salvation is found in no one else” (Part One)

Reflection 15 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

It’s an awesome thing to say or even think that you’re the only ones saved. It’s a truly awesome thing to say that only you and some small group like you are saved, and no one else. I don’t really think that most people who say this kind of thing realize the full enormity of what they have really said. Well, they sort of realize it, and you can tell they do, because those who feel this way only say it to one another. Almost no one has the nerve to say it to anyone else. So in such circles you end up speaking in code. And there are knowing looks, and raised eyebrows, and conversations that mysteriously trail off when someone else enters the room. There’s something about that isn’t right. It’s all a clue that something’s wrong. I want to be a person who says and thinks only what I don’t mind anyone overhearing. I’m not perfect at this. But this is what I aspire to. Because I think that only saying what I don’t mind anyone overhearing is a measure of truth and integrity – that, in fact, maybe you haven’t quite got to truth if you think and say things you don’t dare say to others (allowing for a few loud, dogmatic types who don’t care what others think as an exception to this rule).

In any case, religious arrogance, in all its many faces, is ugly: the assumption that my view, for instance, is superior to yours and should be forced on you for your own good. And it is true that we, at least most of us, have come to see that truth is so much bigger than any one person or religious tradition can contain. So a reading of Acts 4:1-12 seems at first problematic, because it says of Jesus in verse 12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” And in that name Crusaders rode off to massacre Muslims, Jews and heretics all along the roads to Jerusalem. In that name conquistadors laid claim to much of the Americas. In that name Catholic and Protestant armies left Europe awash in blood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And in that name Christian missionaries swarmed across the globe deep into Africa and South Asia and across Oceania in the nineteenth century with some beneficial results but since many of them had no sense of or respect for those who were different from them some not-so-beneficial results. So how do we make sense of all this?

Let’s begin by considering our text, Acts 4:1-12, more closely. It’s a vignette taken from the life of the church in Jerusalem just after the resurrection of Jesus. It all takes place in the afterglow of the resurrection. Peter and John have just healed a man crippled from birth. This miracle is in itself a great story which has given us the immortal lines, “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give you.” And people in Jerusalem were filled with wonder and amazement. The number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. And now for the first time the early church comes in conflict with the religious establishment of Jerusalem. A new group called the Sadducees come into the foreground and replaces the Pharisees as the chief opponents of the church. Why the Sadducees? Because they very specifically denied the possibility of

resurrection. Our guide in Israel back in '93, though he was Israeli, would say, "That's why they're sad, you see!" It's bad humor. I wouldn't say that. I'm only reporting that he did. The other things to remember about the Sadducees are that they generally were well-to-do; they were collaborators with Rome; they were the voices for reason, control and order; and certainly they were the religious establishment. So they were the ones who first saw in the Christian movement a sense of subversion and a threat to their authority. They did then what all establishments do with those they see as threats; they threw their leaders, Peter and John, in jail. The lame man had been healed. It had created a sensation. A crowd had gathered. Peter had preached the resurrection. And so he and John were arrested.

Now the next day Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. The whole Sadducean party was there, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, wealthy, educated and powerful. They ask (in verse 7), "By what power or what name did (notice the scorn) people *like you* do this [healing]?" Notice that it they who raise the issue of name: "By what name did you do this?" Peter answers, "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple" – he's not exactly intimidated – "then know it is by the name of Jesus of Nazareth whom people *like you* (Peter returns the favor) crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed." It is then that he goes on to claim boldly, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." It's all pretty amazing.

The Sanhedrin doesn't know what to do with these unschooled, ordinary men. They can't deny the miracle. So they warn Peter and John not to speak in this name anymore. It's what a threatened establishment always does – it controls or tries to control the flow of information. Peter and John answer clearly, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God." Now, as we begin to make application, let's look again at who the opposition is. Who are these Sadducees? Essentially they're those who deny the supernatural, who deny resurrection and angels and the Spirit, and now with no spiritual foundation, they collaborate with whatever the forces of law and order are, in this case, Rome – it's all they have – and settle for getting ahead in this life – again, it's all they have – and making sure that people like them stay ahead. And it's all in contrast to the believers, the disciples, whom angels liberate from prison, who are filled with the Spirit of God, and who witness to the risen Jesus. The strongest opposition to faith is often in some sense those who are purely rational, or think they are, and are therefore skeptical and therefore settle for, put all their energies into, getting ahead in this life.

So now we come to verse 12 – "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." At first this seems so sectarian. At first it seems exclusive, that is, until we do two things: first, until we realize that this absolute claim is being made for the most inclusive person who ever lived – more on that later; and second, until we again understand salvation in its biblical sense, until we remember that the Greek word for "salvation" always means more than we think it does. It's the Greek word for healing. Salvation

and healing are the same word, so “Your faith has saved you” and “Your faith has healed you” are the same thing. And then we remember maybe that this verse, the one under consideration right now, is not an abstract formula to be lifted out of its real-life context and used for whatever purposes we have. This verse has a context. It begins with and rises out of the healing of the crippled man, in Peter’s word, out of “an act of kindness shown to a cripple.” And when the assembled believers right after this (in 4:30) prayed together, they prayed to God to stretch out his hand to “heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” So it’s not just deliverance from apocalyptic flames. It’s not even primarily that. Certainly not in this context. In fact, in the New Testament with Jesus, and the way Peter uses it here, salvation has a more holistic meaning, a larger meaning that includes: to deliver, to rescue, to bring safely through a difficult situation, to snatch from danger, to save from illness or harm, to cure, to heal. In this holistic, broader sense, salvation/healing/wholeness is found in no one else (other than Jesus).

Now, yes, this at first still sounds sectarian. And it may have persuaded our grandparents who, after all, in most cases never knew that there really are Hindus and Buddhists, Jews and Muslims, even people completely unaffiliated from religion, who are more devout and pious than many of us are. But today it still seems small-minded, to claim that there is one absolute against which everything else is to be measured. It seems wrong-headed, maybe mean-spirited. But I would submit that the reason it sounds this way is because Jesus has been so badly misrepresented by his own church. He has not been taught, understood or revealed, as he really was and is: the most inclusive person who ever lived. And this one large mistake, this one large misunderstanding, has blown the whole Christian movement off course.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.