

“There is No Other Name”

April 22, 2018

Based on Acts 4:5-12

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” This claim made by Peter has been a source of hope and hostility. There is hope because we are told by what name we can be saved. We know that salvation is possible and this alone gives us hope. But this claim has also been a source of hostility. There are a lot of different religions in the world. There are many paths to salvation for many people. To say that there is salvation in no one else but Jesus comes across as a rejection of all other religions. You can see how those who believe in their own religious tradition would have an issue with the claim that salvation only comes from Jesus. What’s worse is how Christians have turned to this claim to convince Jews that they need to convert to Christianity, overlooking the fact that Jesus was a Jew. If you are a Christian, this claim is hopeful. If you are not, this claim prompts a degree of hostility.

As I thought about this passage, I knew right away that I was going to have to deal with this verse. It almost overshadows the whole passage. We are going to look at this verse today to try to understand it and, perhaps, redeem it from how it has been misused. There is no doubt, the claim that salvation only comes through Jesus is an exclusivist claim. It suggests that when it comes to salvation, Jesus is uniquely involved in the salvation process. What is needed is a clear understanding about what Peter means and why he made this claim. Why did he say it? Does answering that question help us understand what he meant by it?

First, let’s get some context. When you want to interpret scripture it’s important to get the context out of which the scripture comes. For us to understand why Peter makes this claim that salvation only comes from the name of Jesus, we need to get at the context so we can better understand why Peter makes this claim. So let’s take a look at the situation.

Peter and John were standing before the religious rulers, and I mean the top people. Annas and Caiaphas were there. These are the ones who were responsible for pressing charges against Jesus and arranging for his crucifixion. These are the heavy hitters. And you can imagine they had some bias over how this was going to go. This trial that Peter and John were about to undergo wasn't exactly fair and balanced. In fact, you may even call it a show trial.

The rulers wanted to know by what power or in whose name Peter and John healed the man who had been born crippled. This was the issue. Peter and John had healed someone, which was a big deal. This did not happen every day. And they did it publically. Everyone saw what happened. It was no secret as this formally crippled man jumped up and down and praised God. So who do these guys think they are, doing such a thing on their own? They had no right to do this. So the rulers wanted Peter and John to explain themselves.

Now if they had heard Peter's sermon, they would have already known the answer to their question. Peter had already said that it was Jesus of Nazareth, God's servant, God's child, whom they had killed but God had raised up and honored, it was this name that healed this man. Peter, who had been given the faith to use the name of Jesus to heal someone, used that faith, speaking healing into this man's life.

So when Peter says, "There is no other name," he is answering the question put to him by the rulers. By whose name? By the name of Jesus of Nazareth. But even more, there is no other name that God has given us by which we can be saved. And this was a name that the rulers were not using. This claim Peter made must have made them angry. What Peter did was awesome. There couldn't be any arguing of that. A man was healed after all. But Peter and John had no authority to do this. The rulers were in charge. But Peter and John didn't ask for their permission. They just went ahead and did it, using the name of a man that the rulers had condemned.

Here is the thing. Peter and John were threatening the authority of the rulers. This is a power struggle that is going on. The rulers were challenged, perhaps even threatened, by Peter and John. The rulers were doing what rulers always do, which is try to protect their power. If they

lost power, they couldn't be rulers anymore. That's one of the main reasons why they saw to it that Jesus was crucified. He was a threat to their power. And so you have Peter looking at them and saying that the one they had crucified, it is his name and no other that can heal. The one they had crucified is the only one who brings salvation to the world.

There are two points I want to make. First, note the boldness of Peter as he speaks to these rulers. The story goes that Peter was full of the Holy Spirit, so he spoke with boldness. And he was bold, being just an average guy talking to the most powerful religious leaders that existed. I mean this was like Joe the plumber talking to the pope. We have some guy talking to the people who represent the tradition given by God to Moses and handed down from generation to generation. This is David and Goliath territory. This point is further stressed in vs. 13 where we are told what opinion the rulers held of Peter and John. In one version we read that Peter and John were considered to be uneducated and ordinary. That's too soft a translation. The Greek there is actually illiterate idiots. So you have this illiterate idiot named Peter speaking with boldness before the most powerful religious leaders of the day. No fear. No hesitation. Of course, this is Peter. What would we expect? After all, he occasionally told Jesus to knock it off so he's not known to be restrained when he has something to say.

But also, look how Peter does not boost his own power and authority. He is not posturing. He gives all the credit to Jesus. He didn't say "I did this." It was not in the name of Peter that this healing took place. Nor was it the name of Moses. It certainly wasn't in the name of Annas or Caiaphas. It was in the name of Jesus. More specifically, it was God who healed the man through the name of Jesus, the name that God has given for salvation.

And that's the second thing I want to say about this. What does Peter mean by saved? That word translated "saved" can mean two different things. It usually means being delivered from danger. But it also means to be healed or made well. Back in Acts 2, Peter explicitly says that we are being saved from "this corrupt generation." Now, we don't know what Peter means by that. He doesn't list all the ways their generation was corrupt. But we can guess that he is saying they were

living in a time where there was a lot of corruption, a lot of oppression and injustice, a time when there was a lack of honesty, morality, and beauty, a time where the world was not how God wanted it to be. Which is interesting, because the truth is the world has always been screwed up. This corrupt generation has been around for thousands of years. But anyway, this is what Peter said we were to save ourselves from.

But in this context, in which a man was physically healed, Peter talks about him being saved from his ailment. Here, being saved means being made well. He is talking about healing, not about being delivered from danger. In one place he uses one definition of saved and in another he uses the second definition. So, when Peter makes the claim here that there is no other name given by which we can be saved, what does he mean? Is he referring to the first definition or the second? It seems to me that he is talking about being healed, not about being delivered from danger.

But can we say that physical healing is the only thing that Peter had in mind? Could he be thinking about healing more broadly? Perhaps he was also thinking about deliverance from danger, that is, the danger of all that diminishes life. I'm not 100% sure of what Peter means by salvation, but it is clear that it is Jesus that makes salvation possible. More accurately, it is God who saves through the name of Jesus. This is what Peter is saying when he makes the exclusive claim that God has given no other name by which we can be saved, whether that salvation means deliverance from danger, being made well, or both. God saves only through Jesus and there is no other name through which God does this. That is what Peter is saying. It is an exclusivist claim and there is no way around it. So what are we supposed to do with this in our time where we are surrounded by people who have different faiths or increasingly have no faith at all? How can we claim this without coming across as arrogant and dismissive of the cherished beliefs of others?

Here's the first thing I want to say about this. Peter is not arguing one religious path as true and all the others as false. There is only one religious tradition being discussed here. Peter is a Jew talking among Jews. They all believe the same things about God. They practice the same tradition. Christianity as a world religion doesn't exist yet when

this conversation is taking place. Islam doesn't yet exist. So no claim is being made that one religion is true and all the others are false. Only one religion, Judaism, is in this space.

Here's the other thing I want to say, and it has to do with how the crippled man was healed. To remind you how it happened, Peter and John walked past the man as he sat near the Temple door, his hand outstretched, hoping for some shekels. He didn't ask to be healed. He didn't confess belief in Jesus Christ. He didn't indicate he even knew who Jesus was. He literally didn't do anything. It was Peter, using the faith he had, that made this man's healing possible. It was Peter's actions that healed the man. We don't even know if the man knew who Jesus was!

So what does this tell us about how God through Jesus is at work saving, that is, healing the world? It seems that there is need for joint action. What I mean is, Peter could have easily walked by the man and done nothing for him. Peter and John could have gone into the Temple to pray and then left. The man would have remained sitting there crippled. It was not automatic that this man would be healed. God didn't just act through the name of Jesus to heal this man out of the blue. No, it took somebody with faith to act. Peter had to do something on behalf of this crippled man so that he could be made well. It was the faithful action of *Peter* that made this man's healing happen. It was not about the faith of the crippled man. For all we know he had no faith whatsoever. But Peter had faith. And for some reason he was moved to look upon this man and say to him, "We don't have any money, but what I do have I give to you; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk." God did the healing, through the name of Jesus, by the action of Peter. It was a joint action that saved this man from his ailment.

So, where does that leave us? Having said all this, and forgive me if it seems I have been belaboring the point, what are we to do with the claim that there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved? Well, I wonder. Perhaps we can hold on to this claim that salvation only comes through the name of Jesus as hopeful rather than as a cudgel to beat people with?

The funeral for Barbara Bush was held last Saturday. It was a beautiful and uplifting service. The priest who gave the homily has been a friend of the Bush family for many years. He said that Christianity was Barbara's path to salvation. He told us that Barbara would say something like, "I don't know about what other's believe. But I believe in Jesus, and I believe that when I die I will go to heaven." When it came to what others believed, she didn't seem to have a strong opinion. She didn't smugly, or even sorrowfully, say that those who didn't believe as she did were doomed to hell. She was only willing to affirm what she believed for herself. And so, is it possible for us to claim what we believe, that there is no other name by which anyone can be saved, while acknowledging that not everyone can make that claim and just let that lie? Can we make our truth claims and give room for people to hold their own truth claims without being hostile or demeaning to those who hold other views? I would hope so. I know that we can hold to our beliefs as Christians, acknowledge that there are different perspectives, and be ok with that.

But I wonder something else, and I close with this. I wonder if, using the gift of faith that God has given us, we, like Peter, can call on the name of Jesus to save others? And by others I have in mind those who do not believe in Jesus, who do not have faith, or just people who we don't know what they believe. Just as Peter called on the name of Jesus to heal someone whose faith we have no knowledge of, can we do the same and trust that by our own prayers God can work through the name of Jesus to save others? Is it possible that we can take the faith given to us and offer it back to God so that God can work through Jesus to save others? I wonder if we can use our faith *on behalf of* those who have no faith. I submit to you that by faith in the power of the name of Jesus we can ask God to bring salvation to others and that God can do this, even for those whose faith in Jesus we know nothing about. If this is true, then this is one of the most hopeful possibilities I know.