

“No Other Name” (Acts 4:1-31)

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Acts 4:1-4 (ESV)

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Why would people stake their lives on Christianity?

Every week, we prepare a prayer list for our Wednesday night prayer meeting, and for anyone who wants to use the list as a guide for prayer. On the list, I usually include a prayer request or two from the Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian ministry that helps Christians who suffer persecution. Every week, it seems that there is a request for people who have been imprisoned, beaten, attacked, or robbed because they are Christians. Some weeks, there are prayer requests for those who have had a family member killed for the faith.

And, of course, throughout all of Christian history there have been martyrs. And many others who haven't died have been willing to risk their lives. People have been willing to risk their time, their health, and their money for the cause of Christ. A famous and more recent example of a martyr is Jim Elliott (1927-1956), an American who went with four other missionaries to share the gospel with an indigenous people group in Ecuador. These people were known to be violent, but Elliott and his companions were determined to reach them for Jesus. But after spending months trying to establish contact with them, Elliott and the four others were killed on January 8, 1957. Elliott was only 28 years old. Several years earlier, he wrote in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” Why would someone have that attitude?

The only reason why someone would write such things, and risk his life for Christ, is because he believes that Christianity is true. The person who risks his life for Christ doesn't just believe that Christianity is *a* truth, or one of many true religions. He believes it is *the* truth. In fact, such a person believes that Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Such a

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

person believes that Jesus is our only hope, and that Jesus is more valuable than anything else, including this life.

We see that same attitude displayed by the earliest Christians. Over the last three weeks, we've read the first three chapters of the book of Acts, which tells the early history of the church. We've seen Peter give a couple of speeches, telling others about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. And we're going to continue to see Christians make such speeches. But we're also going to see that these Christians were met with opposition—from Jewish people who didn't believe Jesus was the promised son of David, the anointed king who would come and make all things right. We're going to see that these Christians were opposed by Gentiles, non-Jewish people living in the Roman Empire. And the reason why these Christians were willing to face such opposition and not compromise their faith is because they believed that Jesus is many things. They believed he is the one, righteous King who can bring about justice and peace. They believed that he is the one Son of God who took on human form. They believed that Jesus' death on a cross was the only way that all our sins—our rebellion against God—could be paid for. They believed that Jesus was the only man who rose from the grave in a body that is indestructible, a sign that those sins have been paid for, that he is who he claimed he is, that he will one day return to judge the living and the dead, and that all who are united to Jesus will have resurrected bodies on that day.

What we're going to see this morning in Acts 4 is a continuation of what happened in Acts 3. In case you weren't here last week, I'm going to give us a quick recap: Peter and John, two of the apostles, were going to the temple and they saw a crippled man. When Peter saw the man, he said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3:6). And then Peter helped the man to his feet and the man found that he could walk. He was miraculously healed. The people who saw this man walking were amazed. This must have caused quite a stir. And since Peter had the attention of all these people at the temple, he gave a speech. He told them the reason the man was healed was because of Jesus. He said, "And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all" (Acts 3:16). He also told his audience, Jewish people in Jerusalem, that they killed Jesus and that it was time for them to turn from their sin and turn toward Jesus. He not only told them to repent, but he told them that God

sent Jesus to them first, to bless them even though they had done a wicked thing in killing “the Holy and Righteous One” and “the Author of life” (Acts 3:14-15).

What we didn’t see last week was the response. We’ll see that this week, as we look at Acts 4. So, with that in mind, let’s read the first four verses again:

¹ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

As Peter was speaking, the leaders of the temple, the priests and the captain of the temple. The captain was the head of the temple police. He was the one responsible for maintaining order. He might have thought the crowd at the temple was getting ready to riot. The Sadducees were a group of powerful Jewish religious leaders. They collaborated with the Roman Empire, which occupied the land of Israel, and they also had a lot of power over the temple. Their beliefs were different from the Pharisees, another group of Jewish religious leaders, and their views were different from many Jews. For example, they didn’t believe in immortality, or angels and demons. Most famously, they didn’t believe in the resurrection (Acts 23:8). That’s why they were “sad, you see.” So they were annoyed that the apostles were teaching about the resurrection. The apostles taught that since Jesus rose from the grave, there would be an end-time resurrection.

The apostles, by their teaching and by the healing of this crippled man, were challenging the authority of the temple. So the temple leaders had them arrested so they could put them on trial the next day. But this arrest couldn’t stop the growth of the believers. Many who heard Peter’s message believed, and now there were about five thousand men—or perhaps five thousand people—in Jerusalem who were Christians. Nothing could stop the growth of the church.

On the next day, Peter and John were put on trial. We read about that in verses 5-7:

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

All these leaders mentioned in verses 5 and 6 were the same ones who put Jesus on trial (Luke 22:66; John 18:13). Annas had been the high priest and was now technically the high priest emeritus. His son-in-law, Caiaphas, was the current high priest. These were the senior officials of Judaism. These men put Peter and John on trial and they ask them what power they used to heal the crippled man, and by what authority they preached. These same men had also questioned Jesus' authority (Luke 20:1-2). Now they were questioning Jesus' followers. In whose name were they doing such miracles and making such speeches? Who did they represent? Who gave them power?

As always, Peter answers them boldly. We see this in verses 8-12:

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Peter already had the Holy Spirit in him. That is true of all Christians. But here, he was *filled* with the Holy Spirit. He was empowered by the Holy Spirit to deliver a message from God.² And his answer is clear: This man was healed by the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Generally, when we read about the "name" of Jesus, we mean Jesus' power, presence, authority, and character. When we pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus, we are able to pray because Jesus gives us the authority to pray. We don't have the authority to go to God alone, but Jesus reconciles people to God. Jesus allows people to approach that throne of grace, where they can find mercy and blessings. In the same way, it is Jesus' power, presence, and authority that healed this man.

Peter reminds these leaders, like he reminded people at Pentecost (2:23) and at the temple (3:14-15), that they crucified Jesus. These very people were more responsible for Jesus' death, because they handed him over to Pontius Pilate. But even though Jesus died, he was raised from the grave. Jesus was vindicated. Peter refers to Psalm 118:22, which is quoted often in the New

² On being filled with the Holy Spirit, see also Luke 1:15, 41, 67; 4:1; Acts 2:4; 4:31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9. At this moment, as in others in the book of Acts, Jesus' words in Luke 21:14-15 find fulfillment.

Testament.³ Jesus was the stone that was rejected that has now become the cornerstone of the church. Jesus can't be held down. And the church can't be held down. Not even death cannot stop it.

Peter also says that there is salvation in no one else but Jesus. There is no other name under heaven than Jesus' name in which salvation can be found. Jesus isn't just the savior of Jews, or Christians. He is the only Savior—for the Jewish people who handed Jesus over to be crucified, and for you and me. I'll talk more about this later.

So how did these leaders in Jerusalem respond to Peter's bold words? Let's see. We'll read verses 13-17:

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."

The priests and the elders and the scribes can't believe that laypeople—people who were not formally trained in the law—could speak so powerfully.⁴ But they know one thing: they had been with Jesus. They know that Jesus spoke in such a powerful way, and they can see his disciples following suit. And though they rejected Jesus and they rejected the message that Peter just delivered, they know they can't refute a miracle. They know that the whole city was aware of the healing of the crippled man. They can't deny it. Though they can't cover up the miracle, they try to suppress the apostles' speech, so they decide to warn them not to speak anymore.

The council of leaders, otherwise known as the Sanhedrin, had asked the apostles to leave while they made their decision. Now, the council asks them to come back in, and they give the apostles their decision. How did Peter and John react? Let's see in verses 18-22:

¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." ²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for

³ Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10, 11; Luke 20:17; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:4–7.

⁴ The same was said of Jesus (John 7:15).

all were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

Peter and John basically say, “Whether it’s legal or not to continue talking about Jesus, we simply can’t stop. We won’t stop. We saw him die. We saw him risen. We know the truth. So we’re going to keep on talking, thank you very much.”

What’s interesting is that the council threatened the apostles, but they were too cowardly to do anything more. They were afraid of the crowds, because there were many people who were praising God because of the miracle that the apostles performed. The crippled man was forty years old at the time. The legs of a crippled child might heal on their own, but not the legs of forty-year-old men. No one could doubt that something great had happened, and if the apostles were punished, there might be a riot in Jerusalem. The council didn’t want that, so they let the apostles go with a warning.

In the next several verses, we see what happens when Peter and John re-join their Christian family. Together, the group prays that God would give them the strength to continue preaching. Let’s read the rest of this passage, verses 23-31:

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

When Peter and John told their friends what had happened, they all prayed together. (I suppose one of them led the rest in prayer.) I want to observe three things. First, they acknowledged that

God is sovereign. He reigns over everything—even over those who oppose Christians. This is the God who made everything—the whole universe and everything in it.⁵ The Creator is in such control, that even the death of Jesus was part of his plan. The Jewish leaders and also the Roman leaders, represented by Pontius Pilate, had put Jesus to death, but what they really did was “do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (v. 28). These leaders had sinned in conspiring against the Lord, but Jesus’ death was God’s plan all along. These humans had intended evil and were responsible for it, but God had planned it all along and he intended it for good (cf. Gen. 50:20).

That’s very important for understanding the so-called problem of evil. Some people wonder why there are certain evils, or so much evil, if God is all-powerful and God is good and if God is all-knowing and all-wise. We don’t really have all the answers to such questions, but we do know that God has a plan that includes the evils that people do. Yet God doesn’t intend evil for evil purposes. He intends it for good. That means that even what seems to be a senseless act of violence has some meaning. It’s just that we often don’t know what that meaning is. So we must trust that God is going to bring something good out of it. Jesus’ death was, from one perspective, an evil thing. The Jewish leaders and Pontius Pilate had killed the only human being who was truly innocent. Yet it also brought about incredible good. It’s the only thing that saves us. We deserve death because we have turned away from the Author of life. If we’re going to live, someone else must die. But who can die for a multitude of sinners? Moreover, to be reconciled to God, to be considered his children, we must be counted as righteous. We need a perfect person’s perfect track record to be credited to us. And the only perfect person is Jesus. So Jesus’ perfect righteousness and his death and resurrection are our only hope.

Second, their prayer acknowledges that people rage against God. They quote the beginning of Psalm 2. Again, as in Acts 1:16, we’re told the Psalm is the product of the Holy Spirit speaking by the mouth of David. In that Psalm, we’re told that the nations are raging against God and his Messiah. In the original context, it looks as though the Gentiles are in view. But here, the Psalm is applied to Jews and Gentiles: Herod, the people of Israel, Pontius Pilate, and the Gentiles. They opposed Jesus and killed him. And now they’re still opposing Jesus by opposing his people, his body, his church. To oppose the church is to oppose Jesus (see Acts 9:1-

⁵ The particular word for Lord here is *despovth*”, which is also used in Luke 2:29. The words “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” echo Exod. 20:11; Neh. 9:6; Ps. 146:6; Isa. 42:5.

5). And, of course, this opposition to Christianity continues today. But no one has been able to put it to death. They never will.

Third, these Christians don't pray that this opposition would stop. They don't pray that the leaders in Jerusalem would be replaced by Christians. They pray that God would look upon the threats, but also that God would give them the ability to speak about Jesus with boldness. They pray that God would continue to authenticate their preaching through miracles. And God answered that prayer. The Holy Spirit filled them so that they had the power to speak that way.

So, what does this have to do with Christians today? How do we respond to such a passage?

I want us to consider three things. First, do we believe the way these early Christians did? Are we willing to endure threats and risk our lives for the cause of Christ? Do we feel compelled to tell other people about Jesus because we are sure that he is our only hope?

If we don't have the faith of these early Christians, perhaps it is because we don't really believe that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." And that brings me to my second point: Do we truly believe that Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God, the only way to be saved from eternal death, the only way to have eternal life? The Pew Research Center performed a large Religious Landscape Survey in America in 2007 and 2014. In 2007, 70 percent of people believed that "many religions can lead to eternal life." Fifty-seven percent of those who identified as evangelical agreed with that statement. Seventy-nine percent of Catholics did. In 2014, the numbers declined a little bit: 67 percent of all people agreed that many religions can lead to eternal life, while 52 percent of evangelicals agreed; still, 79 percent of Catholics agreed with that statement. By "religions," the survey included both a variety of Christian faiths as well as non-Christian ones. Fifty percent of all who were surveyed said that some non-Christian faiths can lead to salvation and 31 percent of evangelicals agreed that "some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life." Interestingly, 68 percent of Catholics agreed with that statement.⁶

The point is that it's common for people to believe that all religions are more or less the same, that all roads lead to heaven, that different religions are like different fingers on the same hand, and so on. You've probably heard these things before.

⁶ Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," November 3, 2015: 62-63, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/11/2015.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf (accessed March 6, 2016).

But nothing could be farther from the truth. First of all, not all religions are the same. They may appear, on the surface, to be similar, but they're not. That's something that G. K. Chesterton once observed: People claim that that religions differ in their forms, but are similar in content. But he said the opposite is true: they actually are fairly similar in form, but very different in content:

The things said most confidently by advanced persons to crowded audiences are generally those quite opposite to the fact; it is actually our truisms that are untrue. Here is a case. There is a phrase of facile liberality uttered again and again at ethical societies and parliaments of religion: "the religions of the earth differ in rites and forms, but they are the same in what they teach." It is false; it is the opposite of the fact. The religions of the earth do *not* greatly differ in rites and forms; they do greatly differ in what they teach. . . . So the truth is that the difficulty of all the creeds of the earth is not as alleged in this cheap maxim: that they agree in meaning, but differ in machinery. It is exactly the opposite. They agree in machinery; almost every great religion on earth works with the same external methods, with priests, scriptures, altars, sworn brotherhoods, special feasts. They agree in the mode of teaching; what they differ about is the thing to be taught. . . . Creeds that exist to destroy each other both have scriptures, just as armies that exist to destroy each other both have guns.⁷

It's also true that many religions share similar ethics. That is, they often say similar things about what is right and wrong.

But religions say very different things about God, humans, our condition, and how to be reconciled to God. They say very different things about the afterlife. People say that religions are the same, but they do that only because they are ignorant. If they had actually studied what various religions teach, they would see the differences.

For example, Judaism and Islam that teach that God is unitarian. But Christianity says that God is a Trinity: There is one Being of God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Some religions teach that there are many gods. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God is a personal being. In some forms of Hinduism, there is an impersonal god. In Buddhism, there is no personal God.

The various religions differ on the identity of Jesus. Was he just a man and not God? Was he a prophet, but not the Son of God and the Messiah? Christianity teaches that Jesus is the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, who added a human nature. Judaism doesn't believe

⁷ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 238–240.

that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, or even a prophet. Islam teaches that he is a prophet, but certainly not the Son of God. Islam also teaches that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross.

We could go on about the nature of salvation and the afterlife, but you can see that these religions are different. And they can't all be true. Either God is one Person or three Persons. He can't be both. Either Jesus is the Son of God or he is not. Either he died on the cross and rose from the grave or he didn't. Either Jesus is the only way to be saved or he isn't. If Jesus isn't the only way to be saved, and the only way to God, then Christianity is false.

So it's simply not possible that all religions are true, or that many religions are true. I suppose one could claim that they are all wrong—at least that's a logical possibility. But it's illogical to say that they are all true, and that they are all different paths that lead to God. God doesn't lie. He doesn't mislead people. He wouldn't allow different religions that make contradictory truth claims to exist if he intended them all to be true and lead to himself.

Some people think that it's arrogant to say there is only way to God. But it's not arrogant to make a truth claim. It's not arrogant to say that two plus two is four, and two plus two is not five or three. All truth claims are narrow. They are exclusive.

But the good news is that all kinds of people can come to Jesus to be saved. He doesn't reject people on the basis of gender or ethnicity or race. The only condition is whether or not people will repent of their sin and put their trust in Jesus.

And the reason that Jesus is the only way to be saved is because he is the only mediator between God and humans (1 Tim. 2:5). Because he is divine, he is perfect and perfectly acceptable to the Father. He is the only one who perfectly represents and loves and obeys the Father. But because he is human, he can sympathize with our weaknesses and he can die in our place. The only way to be reconciled to God is to have Jesus' status credited to us, and to have our sinful status credited to him, so that when he died on the cross, our sins were punished. So our only hope is to be united to Jesus. And if we're united to Jesus, that means the Holy Spirit has been at work in us, causing us to be born again (John 3:1-8). The Holy Spirit enables us to confess that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6). I don't think it's possible to be united to Jesus and not know the truth about him. I don't believe there will be people who will be united to Jesus who think that other religions are legitimate. Yes, we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus, not through our comprehensive theological knowledge. So it's possible that immature Christians might not fully

realize this. But if someone believed that there were other ways to God besides Jesus, why would they put their trust in him?

Jesus is the only way. He is *the* way, and *the* truth, and *the* life. That's what Jesus said in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Do we really believe that?

If we do believe that, then let us consider my third point: We need to pray for boldness to tell others about Jesus. How often do we pray for that? We often pray for lesser things. If we were the disciples at that time in Jerusalem, we would probably pray for no opposition. But would we pray for the strength to keep on telling other people about Jesus?

The truth is that we will need more boldness and more courage to be Christians in our society. The prevailing culture is becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity. We can't expect to have a Christian government and Christian laws. That doesn't mean we shouldn't vote or make our case for certain laws. But we shouldn't expect that the government or the general culture will give us favor. So we must pray that we would not be silent. We must pray that we would tell others about Jesus.

If we believe that Jesus is the only way, and if we love others, we will tell them about Jesus. If they had a disease, and there was only one treatment that could cure them, we would tell them about it, wouldn't we? So let us tell others about the only cure for our sin-sick souls.