# The Cornerstone

Acts 4: 1-12

## Background

The background to this passage is the healing of the disabled man at the Beautiful Gate, which we considered last time.

Peter and John are just finishing their address to the people following this healing when they are approached by the temple guards and the Sadducees.

Who were the Sadducees? They were teachers of the Law of Moses who did not accept any theology that did not occur in the first five books of the Bible. Thus, they did not believe in resurrection and had argued with Jesus about it. And yet here, in the Temple, were John and Peter proclaiming that they had just healed someone in the name of Jesus who had been resurrected – not only was he risen from the dead, which was against their theology, but he had risen with power to heal.

These Sadducees had Peter and John arrested and put in the cells for a night before dragging them out the next morning before a kangaroo court. Remember, this is only a few weeks or months after Jesus’ arrest and trial, and many of the same people who put him to death are forming the jury this time. What chance would you give Peter and John of survival given that they were proclaiming that these men had not succeeded in their plot to get rid of Jesus?

The question put before Peter and John is, ‘By what power or what name did you do this?’ Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, immediately goes on the offensive. He says,

* What we did is an act of kindness to a disabled man.
* We did this in the name of Jesus of Nazareth
* Do you remember you had him crucified?
* Well God raised him from the dead
* It is because of Jesus that this man has been healed.

Peter then uses an unusual quotation from the Old Testament to describe Jesus. He calls him ‘the stone the builders rejected’. What does this mean? What is the significance of this phrase?

This is a key New Testament concept in terms of the Messiah whom Peter is proclaiming. Let us investigate this phrase for a moment.

## Old Testament References to the Cornerstone

Psalm 118:19-24. In this passage, the Psalmist declares that the way of salvation has been opened by God himself, and he has done it through using the stone rejected by the builders as the cornerstone.

Isaiah 28:16-17a. In this passage, Isaiah is declaring that, in order to bring salvation to Israel, God himself will lay a cornerstone and will use justice as a measuring line and righteousness as a plumb line.

Zechariah 10:4. This passage confirms that the tribe of Judah will be the source of the Cornerstone and that a kingdom will be set up through him.

So what is a cornerstone? In ancient buildings, it was the first stone laid from which every other stone in the building took its reference. In other words, the cornerstone set the direction for the length, width, height and structure of the building. Everything lined up with the cornerstone. They would put the stone in place and then run a measuring line of cord to identify where the wall would run, and a plumb line to make sure the wall was built straight. If you got the cornerstone wrong, the whole building would be wrong.

The Old Testament passages were prophesying that God was going to bring about salvation for his people, but that he would do it by rebuilding them based on a new foundation stone. That foundation stone would be a person.

Peter is declaring to the Priests and teachers of the law in Acts 4 that Jesus is that cornerstone. He is the one on whom God is building a new building and through whom salvation is given. Peter names his audience as the ones who rejected the cornerstone that God had determined was going to be the foundation for the whole building that God was going to build. In other words, Peter is declaring boldly that when these men rejected Jesus, they rejected God’s salvation.

Not surprisingly, in v.13, it says, ‘when they saw the courage of these men...’. This is like standing up in the House of Commons and proclaiming to the government that they are responsible for the mess the country is in. Whether or not that is the truth, it is a brave thing to do.

Back in Mark 12:10 and Luke 20:17, we see Jesus telling these same people that he was the cornerstone whom they would reject. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul confirms that Jesus is the Cornerstone, and in 1 Peter 2:6-7, we see Peter using this same image again to talk of Jesus. This is a key concept in New Testament thinking.

## Interpretation

So what does all this mean?

For the Jews of 2000 years ago, the foundation of their nation was the Law of Moses. They had been saved from Egypt and brought out into the wilderness. There they had been given the Law – rules to live by as a nation which, if they obeyed them, would keep them safe, in harmony and under the blessing of God.

In the years that followed, they failed time and time again and so, through the prophets, God promised a new salvation in the form of a new deliverer or Messiah. In the same way that Moses led them out of Egypt, established them as a nation and gave them the law, so this new deliverer would bring salvation, but not just to Israel – to the whole world. God would bring this about through the very one that the leaders of Israel would reject.

Peter proclaims that this is in fact what has happened in Jesus. He came to his own nation, was rejected and crucified by its leaders, but now, in his resurrection, he has become the foundation stone for a new nation. Salvation is no longer through obeying Jewish descent, or through the Law, but through trusting in Jesus.

Peter goes on to say, ‘“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved.”’ In other words, he is telling them that the Law of Moses won’t save them but that salvation is only in Jesus, and that salvation is not just for the Jews but for the whole of humanity. On this foundation stone, God is building a new nation from all nations for himself.

## Application

So how does this apply to us today?

Nothing has changed. Salvation is only through Jesus. It is not through Buddha, Mohamed, Moses, or anyone else. Salvation is only though Jesus. But what is salvation?

There are two words in the New Testament translated as ‘salvation’: *Soteria* and *Diasozo*. Both are used in v.12 of this passage. Both of them have the sense of both salvation from immediate suffering, sickness and danger, and the sense of eternal salvation. In other words, Peter is saying that the way to wholeness and to eternal life is through Jesus. You can have wholeness now, just as this lame man has experienced, and you can be assured of a future when you die – just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so you will be too.

God has extended his promise of salvation today through his son – the one rejected by men and crucified. His salvation is available to each and everyone of us if we will put our trust in the crucified / risen son. His salvation includes:

* Healing
* Deliverance
* Forgiveness
* Help in times of trouble
* Assurance of life beyond the grave

To receive this salvation, we just have to believe that Jesus was who he said he was, did what the Bible says he did, died in our place on the cross, was raised to life and is coming again. If we believe in him and are willing to surrender our life to him, his salvation is made available to us.

If we reject him, as the priests and teachers of the Law did, then we do not become part of the new temple – the new nation - made up of people, that God is building. God does not force his salvation on anyone. It is our choice to accept him or reject him.

For Peter and John, in testifying of Jesus’ salvation, they ran a great risk – even the risk of martyrdom. But, through the power of The Holy Spirit they made known Jesus’ salvation to all – and the church quickly grew from 120 in the upper room, to 5,000 men plus women and children, as we saw last week.

## The Outcome

So what was the outcome of their testimony concerning Jesus?

V.13 tells us that the priest etc. were ‘astonished’ since there was nothing special about these disciples. They were not university educated, they were not posh; they had simply been with Jesus. Spending time with Jesus makes all the difference in how the world perceives us. We all need to spend more time with Jesus.

v.14 The authentication of their words was that the healed, formerly lame, man was standing in front of them. They would all have seen him as they had gone up to the Temple to carry out their duties over many years, and some may even have given him alms. They would have known his situation and the fact that he had to be carried each day to resume his begging. And yet, here he was standing before them, fully restored. As Leonard Ravenhill once said. “A man with an experience of God is never at the mercy of a man with an argument.” They could argue all they like that Jesus was dead and was not the Messiah, but they could not argue against that which had been done in Jesus name and the obvious miracle of healing that was standing before them.

In v.15-18, we see them still avoiding the elephant in the room - the fact was that this man had been healed in Jesus name. So convinced were they that Jesus was not the Messiah that they avoided the conclusion altogether that he might actually have been who he said he was. Instead, their concern is to shut the disciples up to stop this ‘thing’ from spreading any further. They realise that it is not just a threat to their own power and authority, but a threat to everything they believe about life, the universe and everything in it – suddenly the answer is not 42. If this message were to spread, the nation and everything they stood for might cease to exist. And so they tell the disciples not to ‘speak or teach in the name of Jesus’.

Many governments have tried this over the centuries. It never works! If we have had a genuine encounter with Jesus, we want to tell others about it. If we have been brought into the freedom which comes with salvation, we want to see others set free as well. If we have been healed or restored in some way, we want to see others healed or restored. The world will never shut us up by telling us to shut up. As Tertullian said, ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’.

In response, Peter puts the ball right back in the court of the Jewish authorities: ‘”Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you or to him? You be our judges.”’ They, as those responsible before God for the spiritual welfare of the nation, are challenged to decide whether the disciples should listen to them, as men, or listen to what they believe God is saying to them. Their Response (v.21)? A few more threats and then release on the basis that they could not really prosecute them for anything, and, anyway, the people were praising God for the miracle that had occurred.

Following this ‘trial’, I love the response of Peter and John. Whilst most of us would probably have gone home, got a good meal inside us, and had a few hours sleep, Peter and John instead called a prayer meeting. And what did they pray for? To see more healings and for boldness to preach even more about Jesus (v.29-30).

What we see here is a passion for the gospel. They knew that Jesus was really the Messiah, that he had died on the cross to bring salvation, that God had used the conspiring of Pilate, Herod and the Jewish leaders to bring about the death of God’s anointed. But that, despite it all, they were witnesses to his resurrection and would not stop talking about what they had seen, regardless of what men would do to them.

This caused a response from heaven (v.31). The room was shaken and they were all filled afresh with the Holy Spirit ‘and spoke the word of God more boldly’. They were not cowed by the strictures of the religious leaders. In fact, quite the opposite; they became even more bold in making known the gospel.

We live in a day when, almost daily, laws are being passed which seek to restrict what we can or cannot say or do. We each have a choice: we can put our head down, get on with our work, and seek not to put ourselves in a risky place; or we can take the opportunities that arise to make known our faith. Of course, we should be ‘wise as serpents and harmless as doves’ (Matthew 10:6) – I am not advocating naivete or stupidity here. But we also need to trust God that, when we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, he will watch over us and watch over the seeds that we sow.

Of course, many of the disciples did pay the ultimate price for their faithfulness to proclaiming the message, and we, too, may be called upon to pay a price. However, our response needs to be that of Peter – that we would rather obey God than men. We should also pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to witness more effectively wherever God places us.