

**Stand Tall**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

<sup>1</sup>While Peter and John (Gk. They) were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, <sup>2</sup>much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup>So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup>But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup>The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup>with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup>When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" <sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup>This Jesus is

'the stone that was rejected by you,  
the builders;

it has become the cornerstone.' (keystone)

<sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Acts 4:1-12 (NRSV)

**Sermon:**

The scholarly consensus is that the author of Acts is also the author of the Gospel of Luke. Luke's Gospel was written for or commissioned by a person named Theophilus, whom I believe was a Hellenistic Jewish patron of Luke and his church, not a convert to Judaism turned Jesus-believer or a so-called non-Jew God-venerator. (I would be willing to discuss how I came to this conclusion.)

Luke-Acts can be seen as a sort of historical, theological travelogue used to clarify for Theophilus, and possibly others, who and what Jesus was and how he fit into the greater scheme of God's restoration or salvation of Israel.

This sequel to Luke's Gospel, The Acts of the Apostles, continues the movement of the Good News of God in Jesus the Christ that has moved from Galilee to Jerusalem and now across the world or the Roman Empire. This next leg of the journey, the Acts leg is the church's leg, and begins where Jesus' earthly life ended in Jerusalem with Peter and the disciples and terminates with the Apostle Paul under house arrest in Rome. We are not sure about the time lapse, if any, between the writing of Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

However, let us remember Luke writes long after Jesus' death and resurrection, the destruction of the Temple and the Sadducean priesthood. So, as much as the author is making an orderly and comprehensive case for God's work in Jesus for Theophilus, everyone would have known that God's judgment upon the Temple and its administrative managers was a fait accompli.

To best understand our text today, let us look at the time, the setting, and the characters in the scriptures and see what they have to tell us about God's will for God's people then and now.

Earlier Peter and John had gone to the Temple for a time of prayer. En route to the Temple, Peter, whose powers of healing have been retained, heals a lame beggar in the name of Jesus at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate. This gate faced the Mt. of Olives and was believed to be the gate through which the Messiah would enter Jerusalem to restore it and usher in the kingdom of God. This would have been a perfect place for a lame man to sit and beg, since it was believed that when the Messiah came he would bring restoration and healing.

After the healing, Peter confronts a now astonished crowd, telling them that they, in their collective identity, are guilty of the unjustified death of Jesus, the Righteous One. Furthermore, God has now validated Jesus as the Righteous One by his resurrection and he abides with God, awaiting the day of Israel's restoration. Peter calls for the crowd as a collective body of Israelites to repent of their offenses against the honor of God, the person of Jesus, and the honor of their people by joining the Jesus group. They must join if they expect to take part in the benefits of the kingdom when it arrives and occupy places of honor within it. Incidentally, this kingdom was understood to be in the burgeoning Jesus community.

The Sadducees, the priestly elite, sensing a threat to their station and honor or maybe to Jerusalem if Peter and John sparked an insurrection, have both men seized and arrested. The Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, are annoyed with Peter and John for telling the people that they have seen the resurrected Jesus. I point out that a resurrected Jesus was not only an amazing thing, like the healing of the lame man, but he would have been living proof that the leaders had gotten it wrong and had totally acted dishonorably in killing Jesus. The proof of all this comes from none other than God - the Lord of Life and Death.

Peter and John spend the night in jail. The next day they are brought before a rather august and comprehensive body of the priestly elites and lay aristocratic leadership. Now, however, Peter is questioned not about the resurrection but by what authority he healed the lame man - shades of Jesus, as a holy man, being accused of dubious healings in the Gospel of Luke (11:15; 18-19).

Peter, a man of low birth, now a holy man of God himself, is empowered by the Holy Spirit and again gives testimony to God's work and presence in Jesus without regards to these people's high social rank or status. This common fisherman presumes to lecture these learned leaders about rejecting God's presence and power in Jesus of Nazareth.

Let us remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was considered the virtual House of God and a reference for what it meant to be an Israelite the world over. The Temple forms an important institutional polarity in Luke's writings with the house and home at the other end. The Temple was the locale for Israel's hoped for salvation and a symbol of Israel's holy relationship with God.<sup>1</sup> The home was a place of nurturing, safety learning, sharing, and protection.

Most religious and moral instructions went on within the context of the family and home, but the Temple and the priests, officiating over the sacrifices, were mediators for the people to God and God to the people. They were also supposed to be brokers or agents of God's good will and blessings through what one scholar has referred to as a redistributive economic and religious enterprise. As the wealthy people prospered, a sign of God's blessings, they were supposed to redistribute their blessings among their clients and the needy. We are talking about a sort of divine trickle-down redistribution system here.

Given there was no such thing as separation of church and state, or economics from religion, politics and family, the Temple as an institution, its administrators, and wealthy, elite supporters had been condemned by Jesus for imposing heavy taxes and tithes on the people, confiscating

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott, John H. "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions," *The Social World of Luke-Acts, Models for Interpretation* Neyrey, Jerome H. editor. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1991. P. 217.

peoples' land for debts, devouring widows' houses, and neglecting justice. The priests at the Temple and other wealthy elites, instead of being good brokers of God's beneficence, were instead full of extortion and wickedness, as well as neglectful of the needy. In fact, a good case can be made for Luke's Gospel and subsequently his Acts of the Apostles as a Gospel directed to and for the Rich and Famous, highlighting and reframing what it meant to be a good and true patron of God's people, which turns out to be a beneficent and charitable servant of God's people, totally in opposition to the prevailing models of power, control, and wealth.

Thus, in Luke's Gospel and now here in Acts, the Temple institution is revealed as morally, socially, and spiritually bankrupt, filled with greedy and corrupt leaders, who capitalize on the Temple's purity and sacrificial system for their advantage. These leaders and their lackeys will not raise one finger to lift the heavy social, religious, and economic burdens that have been placed on the people or redistribute not only God's material blessings to the needy, but dispense God's justice, mercy, and peace among God's people.<sup>2</sup>

In Peter's and John's confrontation with the crowds, Peter gives the crowd the benefit of the doubt by saying that what they did to Jesus was obviously out of ignorance. However, now given God's validation of Jesus by his resurrection, they get one more chance to change, repent, turn around and get on board with the practical and spiritual dimensions of God's revelation in Jesus the Christ. To make his point, Peter tells the leadership that this Jesus of Nazareth, whom they as the architects, builders, and maintainers of Temple Judaism rejected, is actually the keystone, the stone that holds a brick and mortar arch in place, in God's overarching plan to restore or save God's people. (Keystone is a more accurate understanding than corner stone.)

Speaking of salvation, the most fundamental and comprehensive meaning of salvation in the Hebrew scriptures is that of God delivering people from real-world situations and restoring all aspects of their lives to a state of wholeness or Shalom. Wholeness, Shalom, well-being, participation in the joy and abundance of the good life was and is God's original intent for creation and creature. Therefore, the deliverance of the oppressed and needy and their restoration to well-being in relationship to God, others, and creation are at the heart of the Hebrew concept of salvation. The Hebrew Exodus story and wilderness wanderings are the most obvious examples for understanding Jesus' and Peter's concept of salvation wherein God in the wilderness wanderings, was an ever-abiding, protecting, providing, and guiding presence - past, present, and future.

The opposite of salvation was to be excluded, cut off from, or lost to God and one's family and left to suffer the existential anguish of being alone, without reference or reasons for living. In short, to be excluded from the kingdom of God and its familial, tribal, or national constituents.

With these thoughts in mind, let us return to our text, verse 12. Peter says, "<sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which "we" must be saved." (who is the "we"? Israelites and Israelite leaders and teachers.) During the so-called Disciples Renewal movement of the mid 90s, I often heard this verse taken out of its context to intimidate or bludgeon Christians and non-Christians alike, relegating all those who disagreed to the fires of hell. Many who misused or misuse this passage to promote an exclusive Christian franchise on God, the Creator-Sustainer of All Life, fail to remember that Peter, ever the Jew, described what salvation looked like and meant for him and Israel. In Acts 2: 36-40, we read Peter talking to the crowd:

*<sup>6</sup>Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.' [note the collective responsibility]*

*37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'* <sup>38</sup>*Peter said to them [his fellow Israelites], 'Repent, and*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 236.

*be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins (that is, their rejection of and participation in the crucifixion of Jesus) may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>For the promise is for you, (those of the house of Israel) for your children, and for all who are far away (those Jews living in the Diaspora), everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' <sup>40</sup>And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'*

Thus, the salvation Peter is talking about is Israelite people and "those whom the Lord our God calls to him," being saved from Temple Judaism and its oppressive, corrupt, and abusive leadership. The people's only solution is to embrace the truth and witness of Jesus the Christ, become members of the Jesus-group as it were, where there is now honor among its people, help for the needy, justice, mercy, and peace, as they await the kingdom's coming fullness. Thus, salvation is more about the well-being of God's people here and now than some nebulous future dimension. I say this because most Israelites, as God's elect, would have expected to enter the kingdom of God; the only question was about their place of honor within the kingdom. In other words who would go in first or be the greatest type of thing.

Therefore, those who run around using verse 12 as a mantra as an exclusive claim on God and the Christ for their own sense of in-group status and prestige had better check to see how they are using their time, talents, and money toward alleviating institutional and personal injustices and abuses that impede the wellbeing of all peoples, but especially God's people. In other words, stand tall in Christ or be quiet. No, no, since those of this ilk would relegate to hell those who don't agree with them, let me say, "Shut the hell up!"

As non-Jews, we also are the inheritors of the benefits of God's revealed will and ways, not only in the laws of Moses, the words of the Prophets, but in the empowering call and witness of God in the Holy Spirit. God has called us to the divine self and we share in the redemptive work of the cross. However, in matters of religion and faith expressions, in-groups and out-groups; please, please, let God be God in relationship to all who do not know the Christ or worship and acknowledge him as we do - okay?

As I have gotten older and after many years of studying not only my own Christian faith but other religions, I have come to a sense that God holds each person accountable to the highest moral and spiritual truths they hold and know, especially if those truths are based upon and encompass the Great Law of Reciprocity - Do unto others as you would they do unto you. I believe the Spirit of Truth will lead any and all true-seekers of the Holy into realizing that to love others as the self is to experience and participate in the Holy and this Law of Love goes well beyond any religious dogma. So, as Christians let us stand tall in what I believe is the greatest truth ever revealed - the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

I think the Apostle Paul, writing much earlier than Luke and still within a Jewish context, has a good grasp on what I am trying to say; although I don't think even he realized its far-reaching implications for the world:

*<sup>1-2</sup> You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did - Jesus crucified. <sup>3-</sup>  
<sup>5</sup> I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate - I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it - and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else. <sup>6-10</sup> We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it's not popular wisdom, the fashionable wisdom of high-priced experts*

*that will be out-of-date in a year or so. God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest - what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene. The experts of our day haven't a clue about what this eternal plan is. If they had, they wouldn't have killed the Master of the God-designed life on a cross. That's why we have this Scripture text:*

*No one's ever seen or heard anything like this,  
Never so much as imagined anything quite like it -  
What God has arranged for those who love him.*

*But you've seen and heard it because God by his Spirit has brought it all out into the open before you. <sup>10-13</sup> The Spirit, not content to flit around on the surface, dives into the depths of God, and brings out what God planned all along. Whoever knows what you're thinking and planning except you yourself? The same with God - except that he not only knows what he's thinking, but he lets us in on it. God offers a full report on the gifts of life and salvation that he is giving us. We don't have to rely on the world's guesses and opinions. We didn't learn this by reading books or going to school; we learned it from God, who taught us person-to-person through Jesus, and we're passing it on to you in the same firsthand, personal way.*

*<sup>14-16</sup> The unspiritual self, just as it is by nature, can't receive the gifts of God's Spirit. There's no capacity for them. They seem like so much silliness. Spirit can be known only by spirit - God's Spirit and our spirits in open communion. Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God's Spirit is doing, and can't be judged by unspiritual critics. Isaiah's question, "Is there anyone around who knows God's Spirit, anyone who knows what he is doing?" has been answered: Christ knows, and we have Christ's Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2 The Message (MSG))*

Or, do we?

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