

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Only Jesus

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Scripture: Acts 3:11-13,15-16 & Acts 4:9-10,12

¹¹While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade.

¹²When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

¹³The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.

¹⁴You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

¹⁵By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

Acts 4:9-10, 12

⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed,

¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

Transcript:

So Holy Spirit, as we turn to your word, ask that you would help us to learn from it and live in light of it. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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Well, a long time ago, I once got an email from someone who did not like my sermons. And the first sentence of the email said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. All you ever preach about is Jesus." Well yeah. I mean, I'm a pastor. But even more than that, Jesus changed my life. I mean, it's Jesus who connects me to God so I experience his presence. It's Jesus who is changing me to be more like him. Jesus, who has called me to be part of his rescue mission, all of which has given me a much bigger life than I ever would have designed for myself. So yeah, I'm going to preach about Jesus if you don't mind, because I believe that Jesus and only Jesus saves us. And I mean saves us in every sense of that word, not just saves us to go to heaven. For sure that, but also transforms us and gives us an adventure as we partner with him to bring up there down here. And heals a physically and spiritually and emotionally. And only Jesus saves us in all of those ways.

But that is a problematic statement in our culture, isn't it? Because we are living in a pluralistic culture, lots of worlds use lots of religions. And how can you say that Jesus is the only way to God. What about people who've never heard about Jesus? Or what about people who are good people, but they just don't believe in Jesus? Or what about other religions? In our culture this is one of the most frequent objections to Christianity there is. How can you say that Jesus is the only way?

Well, it was the same back in the Bible times as well, actually very similar. And we're going to see that in today's text, which is from Acts chapter three. And the context here is that the apostles Peter and John have just healed a lame man and everyone is asking them, "How did you do it?" And Peter says, "We didn't. Jesus did." And this is what he says, "Fellow Israelites, why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers has glorified his servant, Jesus. You killed the author of life, but God," that's the theme of our sermon series. "But God raised him from the dead. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong."

Well, this gets Peter and John in trouble with the religious leaders. So they have him arrested. And then Peter says to the religious leaders this, "You nailed Jesus to the cross, but God," there's the phrase again, "raised him from the dead. It is through Jesus' name that this man stands healed in front of you. Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name by which we must be saved."

And in the original Greek, that word saved means physical, social, emotional, spiritual, the whole deal. And Peter says ain't nobody can do this for you but Jesus. Not very open-minded of Peter, was it? Especially in that culture. The Roman world, like ours, was very pluralistic, lots of different religions. So it was as

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offensive then to say Jesus is the only way as it is in our culture. And because our culture wants to say that all religions are the same. But they can't be all the same. It's not possible. Some claim there are many gods. Some say there's just one god. Some say there's life after death. Others say there isn't life after death. To say that all religions are the same is like saying all books are the same because they're printed on paper. Yeah. Okay. After that one similarity, but after that, everything else is different. And it insults all of them to say that they are the same. Muslims don't particularly appreciate it when Christians say our religions are just the same, because they're not.

Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." Now that doesn't mean that other religions don't have things of wisdom and beauty in them. They do. And we should respect other religions. But what the Bible claims and what I, a former atheist, believe to my core is that Jesus and only Jesus connects us to God and gives us the eternal kind of life here on this earth and then after we die. And that actually isn't exclusive at all. It is actually the most inclusive thing there is, which I know seems kind of contradictory, but I'll tell you why in a bit.

Thank you. It is so true. And the other thing, this isn't just about going to heaven, the other thing is this is about in the name of Jesus, there is power in the name of Jesus. And there's power in the name of Jesus to break every chain, that name that we just sang about. So it's important to know. And I haven't preached about this topic for 12 years. And given how big of an objection this is in our culture. How can you say Jesus is the only way? I think we probably should preach about it a little more than once every 12 years. So if some of this seems a little familiar, that's okay. We need to be reminded for our own sake, but also so that we can talk intelligently about our faith to other people. How can you say Jesus is the only way? Well, let me count the ways.

First of all, only Jesus conquers our worst enemy, which is death. Twice in this passage, Peter says you crucified him, but God raised him from the dead. Death is real, but God, in Jesus, conquers it. And every Easter we give you a list of historical reasons to believe that Jesus really was physically raised from the dead. And you can find that list on our website, for those of you joining online, not right now, don't be opening up that other tab. No, no, no, no, no. I'm talking. That's rude. Just keeps listening. No other religious figure in history was raised from the dead. That's unique. So we probably should pay attention to Jesus.

Second reason Jesus is the only way to God is because we are far from God, but God comes to us in Jesus. We don't go to him. Jesus is God in the flesh showing us who God is and what God is really like. And this just makes sense. If we're going to figure out God is not going to be because we go to him. It's

going to have to be because he comes to us because he's so much bigger than we are.

It'd be as if a goldfish tried to figure out one of us. And the only way they could do that is if one of us becomes a goldfish and sort of explains ourselves to them. It's like little toddlers. You know when they reach up to be picked up by their parents? No matter how hard they reach, they cannot get into their parents' arms on their own. Every other religion is us reaching up to God, trying to do enough good deeds to be accepted, trying to be enlightened enough to connect with him. Every other religion is us reaching up to God. But in Jesus, God bends down and picks us up like a loving parent.

Third reason Jesus is the only way is that only Jesus gives us what we need, which is a savior. And some of you have heard me say this before. The religion you choose will be based on the problem you think you have. So if you think that your problem is that you don't know enough, you're going to seek a religion of enlightenment. If you think that your problem is you're not good enough, you're going to seek a religion that talks a lot about good deeds. And if you don't think you have a problem at all, wow, way to be self-aware. Talk to your spouse, talk to your friends. But if you don't think you have a problem at all, you'll probably be an atheist.

But if you think that you have a problem and that your problem is that you are not good enough and you don't know enough and furthermore, there is nothing that you, a fallible, sinful, limited human being could ever do to be good enough or know enough to connect to an infinite, all holy, righteous God, you have only one option and his name is Jesus. And that's why Jesus is the only real way. We are lost. But God saves us in Jesus.

Gandhi, who wasn't a Christian, but a very good man, said this. "It is an unbroken torture to me that I am still so far from him who governs every breath of my life. And I know that it is the evil passions within that keep me so far from him and yet cannot get away from him." It's almost a direct quote of Romans 7. Why do I do what I don't want to do? And why don't I do what I do want to do? Gandhi isn't saying that he needs more enlightenment. He's not saying he needs a list of good deeds. He's saying my brokenness creates a gulf between God and me. The Bible calls that sin. And try as I might, I can't fix it on my own.

And again, this is antithetical to our culture because our culture, we don't like the word sin. We can't even admit our mistakes in our culture let alone confess our sins. That's why you hear when something goes wrong in some company, you hear someone say mistakes were made. Nice use of the passive construction. I read about a lawyer who referred to potential jurors from eastern

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Kentucky as "illiterate cave dwellers". This got him into some trouble. And so he said, "Well, the comment wasn't meant to be a regional slur. And to the extent that it was misinterpreted to be one, I apologize." Oh, far out. Way to own your stuff, mister. We can't admit even our mistakes, really can't admit we got sin, but we do.

And it hurts people. Our gossip destroys people's reputations that took a lifetime to build. It's a form of murder. You're erasing someone's life. Our lust objectifies others and uses other people. Our indifference to people's pain means we have a world that is more hurting than it needs to be. Not to mention murder and genocide and all kinds of stuff. And a God who just overlooks that is not God of love and is not a just God. Because every human being on the planet feels that when something done that's wrong, there needs to be a price that is paid or there's no justice. But God loves us. So he comes himself in the person of Jesus, dies to pay the penalty for our sins, is raised from the dead and so that we will be forgiven. Justice is served, but mercy wins.

I have a friend who one day was trying to explain all this to a coworker of his. And he came up with the most original analogy I've ever heard in my life to try to explain all this. So he said to his coworker, "Let's say that I gave you a peanut butter sandwich and told you that it had a little bit of manure in it. Would you eat it?" I told you it was an original analogy. Never heard this one before. And she said, "No." And he said, "Well, what if it was just a little tiny bit mixed in with a whole lot of peanut butter? Would you eat it then?" And she said, "No." And he said, "Well, what if I use seven grain, \$10 a loaf of bread from Whole Foods?" And she said, "No." And he said, "That's what sin is like. We try to dilute it with our good deeds, cover it over with all of our achievements. But it still, it wrecks everything. Even just a tiny bit of it wrecks everything."

And she said, "Well, what does Jesus do about that?" And my friend said, "He gives you a new sandwich and then he takes yours. And he deals with that himself." And if you accept that, then his Holy Spirit dwells in you and over time begins to make you more like him. And all we have to do is accept that. And what that means is we can stop trying to earn our own acceptance with all of our good deeds or trying harder or perform better and get the right grades and do all this to sort of feel accepted. We can stop all of that. Hoping, doing all that stuff, hoping that it is enough, so much peanut butter in our lives to cover over all of our stuff. And all God's people got stuff.

And see, this is why claiming that Jesus saves, that only Jesus saves, should not make us arrogant jerks forcing our beliefs on others. Because the starting point for this deal is I am a sinner saved by grace. I am no better than anyone else. And when you get that, you're a humble servant rather than an arrogant jerk

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forcing your beliefs on others. Christians sometimes have done that, but you can't get that out of the Bible. Only Jesus conquers death. In Jesus, God comes to us. Only Jesus offers us what we really need and that's the savior.

Now all of that raises some big questions like, well, okay, what about the people in Africa that never hear about Jesus? Or what about the person who lived a good life but they just don't believe in Jesus? Maybe they lived a better life than Christians do. Aren't they going to go to heaven? Are they not going to go to heaven simply because of they're not Christian? Well, here's what I know from scripture. God is loving. God doesn't want anyone to be lost. Jesus is the only way. And somehow those three go together.

So we know, for instance, that people in the Old Testament were saved, even though they'd never heard of Jesus. Abraham lived 2,000 years before Jesus. But the Bible says that Abraham believed God and was credited to him as righteousness. And what did Abraham believe about God, just that there was some God out there? No, no, no. It was more specific than that. When it comes to getting right with God, at one point, Abraham says, "God himself will provide the sacrifice." In other words, Abraham has a sense that he can't save himself, but God, but God will do it himself, which God does 2,000 years later in Jesus. Abraham believed in the function of Jesus and his need for Jesus even though he never knew his name. Abraham believed in the function of Jesus and his need for Jesus even though he never knew his name. So when Abraham gets to heaven and sees Jesus, he's going to say, "You're the one I was worshiping all along. I just didn't know your name."

Wherever folks have a sense that they cannot earn their way to God, God is going to have to do it for them. They are believing in the function and the need for Jesus. And then when they respond to that truth, they are putting their faith in Jesus, even if they don't know his name. And if folks go to heaven, it's not going to be because of their Buddhism or their Islam or for that matter their Christianity. Christianity doesn't save anybody. Christianity doesn't save anybody. Only Jesus does. And it's also not our good deeds because you hear that a lot.

People say, "Well, if you live a good life, you're going to go to heaven." That's not what the Bible says. The people that go to heaven are bad people who admit that they need a savior. There are not good people in heaven because there aren't good people. There are only bad people who admit they need a savior.

If on judgment day, Jesus looks at me and says, "Why should I let you into heaven?" And I go, "Well, because I was good. I was super good, Jesus. I was a pastor. Isn't that like a free admission ticket. I worked hard for your ministry." Jesus is going to go, "Oh my gosh, your poor church. Your theology is terrible, Dudley."

But if I show up and Jesus says, "Why should I let you in?" And I said, "Well, Jesus, I don't recommend it because I'll just screw up heaven because I am a sinner to my core. But you said if I put my faith in you, you would forgive me from sin and cleanse me from all unrighteousness and that's what I have done. And you are my plan A, Jesus, and I don't have a plan B." And Jesus will say, "Welcome home."

See, there's a lot of Christians who maybe aren't going to end up in heaven because they're going to stand in front of Jesus and go, "Well, I was a good person." And Jesus is going to... "You didn't get it." Only Jesus saves. Only Jesus saves. And however this all works out, however God sorts all of this out, I know one thing for sure. God is not going to be looking at me saying, "Hey, Dudley. This guy right here. What do you think? In? Out? Dudley, what's your vote?" That's above my pay grade. God's not going to be asking that. The gospel is not particular about who gets saved. It is only particular about who does the saving and his name is Jesus. And by whatever route we come, we always walk through the door named Jesus.

And that's why Jesus being the only way to God is actually not narrow. And it's not exclusive. It is the most inclusive way to God there could possibly be. You don't have to be born into the right cast. You don't have to perform a lot of rituals. You don't even have to be good. You just need to know that you need Jesus. And this isn't just intellectual stuff. This isn't just theology. And this isn't just about heaven. This is about right here and right now and how when we put our faith in only Jesus, it changes our life. It's not just about pie in the sky and the sweet by and by when we die. It's about changing our life right here in a couple of ways.

First, only Jesus offers me a relationship and that's what changes me. Other religious figures said, "I know the truth. I have the truth." Only Jesus said, "I am the truth." He does not offer us truth claims. He offers us a relationship. I know a very successful businessman who thought of himself as a good person. In a lot of ways he was. Only he'd hurt his wife because he put more energy in his career than into her. And his kids loved him, but they'd been hurt by him because he had this explosive temper. And his employees were stressed out all the time because he was such a perfectionist. And deep down, he knew he was hurting people, but in lots of ways, he was a good person. He loved his wife. He loved his kids. He was happy. I mean, he was successful. He was living the dream. Life was good.

One day he was at a football game and he felt someone hug him. And he looked around and there was no one there. And all of a sudden he felt this overwhelming sense of being loved, feeling loved like he'd never felt loved

before. And that sort of got him starting going to church. And as he kept going to church and as Jesus started to become more real to him, he was able to start opening up about his sins because, see, he knew that he was going to be forgiven because Jesus died for those sins. See, of all people, Christians should be the people who are most willing to admit our sins because we know we've been forgiven.

And gradually over time, he made Jesus his savior and his Lord. And gradually over time, the Holy Spirit just began to change him month by month, year by year. And he started to show more affection to his wife and kids. And then he started doing his job different. He realized that his business wasn't just a way to make money. It was a way to make a difference and to make people's lives better. So he changed how he did everything in his company, began to really invest in his employees, developing their gifts and their skills. And the goal was that they would be able to go on to something better once they'd worked for him. And he had a ton of fun doing it, because now it wasn't just about money. It was about actually changing people's lives for the better. He's way less stressed. He has way more joy. His relationships are way better. A philosophical truth did not do that. It wasn't like he was reading Nietzsche and went, "Oh, that's a good point. I'll change my life."

No. A relationship with Jesus did that. And no one offers that but Jesus. Buddha, Muhammad, Moses, they all said some great things, but no one except Jesus said to you, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you." Nobody says that to you but Jesus. Which brings me to the other way that only Jesus changes our lives because here's the thing. There is power, wonder working power, power in the name of Jesus to break every chain and to set us free. And only in the name of Jesus.

One of the things that is at issue in the story that I just read is power. Peter and John healed this lame man. And everyone wants to know where'd that power come from? And Peter says not just Jesus. He says only Jesus. There is no other name by which we can be saved. And I've noticed in my various travels around the developing world, that there is often more power in Rwandan Christians or in Muslim refugees who have become Christian or Cambodian Christians, more miracles, more faith, more life changed than in a lot of American churches. And I think it's because they have this laser focus on Jesus as their only hope. And you hear them say things like, "Well, if the Bible says to do it, just do it. And then Jesus will show up." Whereas we Americans are like, "I don't know, does the Bible really analyze? And maybe that's a metaphor."

Now I'm not saying we shouldn't use our minds. We should. Or our skills, we should. But there is a difference between using them and relying on them as our

hope. They are a resource, but Jesus is the source of the power. And he is our only hope. And when we turn to him and only him, not as a backup plan, not as an assistant to help us with our life plan. But when we put all of our hope on him, we experience things that are greater than the sum total of our resources.

We recently heard from one of our partners in Greece that was doing ministry to Muslim refugees about a man I'll call Ahmed. And Ahmed was kidnapped and tortured by the smugglers he had hired to get him out of Iran and into the west, but they kidnapped him and tortured him instead. And when he was in captivity, he remembered a Christian that he had met once saying if you are ever in trouble, call on the name of Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus. So Ahmed called out the name of Jesus. And he said shortly after that, he doesn't know how, but somehow the ropes around his wrists loosened and fell off of his wrists. And he was able to escape. And he eventually got to Greece and then he went to the asylum office to apply for asylum.

And while he was waiting there, an Iraqi man who he'd never met before, said, "Do you need help?" And Ahmed said, "Yes." And the Iraqi man said, "Well, then you need to go to," and named our ministry partner who I'm not going to name just to keep everyone safe. So Ahmed went. But he was scared because of this experience with the smugglers who said that they would help him but then they didn't. So he was scared. So when the man opened the door, Ahmed said, "Are you a Christian?" And the man said, "I love Jesus. Come on in." And they were able to help him. They gave him some money and all of that to kind of get him set up. Well, a couple of days later, Ahmed came back and he said, "I couldn't sleep last night because there was this phrase that kept going through my head and it kept me awake over and over the same phrase. And the phrase was only Jesus. Only Jesus. Only Jesus. Only Jesus. So I need you to tell me about Jesus."

So they did. And he accepted Jesus as his savior and as his Lord and our ministry partners said isn't this amazing that even in a pandemic lockdown, Jesus is still bringing people to him and people are still able to study God's word and learn. And so now he is a new man. He is following Jesus and he is getting the help he needs to have a whole brand new life. The phrase he heard over and over, only Jesus, only Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus and only Jesus to break every chain.

That's why the fastest growing movement on the planet is Pentecostal Christianity. Pentecostal means you just believe that Jesus is powerful and can do a lot of stuff. And that if the Bible says to do something, you just do it. It is the fastest growing movement by conversion on the planet. It's growing in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia. It's growing all over except for two places, post-enlightenment Europe and North America where we're all like, "I don't

know. Does the Bible really say that? Or I don't know. We should analyze this some more." The historical reality is that this seemingly exclusive claim that only Jesus saves led to the most inclusive, multiracial, multicultural, multi-socioeconomic community in all of history, starting way back with that first church that put Jews and Gentiles, Africans, Europeans, Asians, rich and poor together, and has continued to do that for 2,000 years. This exclusive claim has led to a radically inclusive community of people whose lives have been transformed like the businessman I told you about whose life was great, but it got greater with Jesus or Ahmed who experienced a miracle.

Whatever you are going through, there is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain and to set you free. And if you have never made him your savior and Lord, then today's the day to do it. Just pray, Jesus, you are my hope. You are my only hope. I don't have plan B. Be my leader, be my forgiver. I need you. And if you pray that, would you just please tell one of us. If you're joining online, you can do so in the chat. If you're here in this room, grab one of the staff after the service so that we can help take some next steps.

And if you do know Jesus, two action steps for you. First, review this sermon so you can talk intelligently about your faith with other people. And then second, ask this question of yourself. Is Jesus your only hope? Or is he just a backup plan? Or is he just your assistant? Are you relying on your money or your reputation or your grades or your skills more than Jesus? And if you are, then pray, Jesus, teach me to rely only on you. Because who else, who else offers us a relationship where we can stop performing to try to cover over all our flaws because we know we're accepted? Who else offers us close connection with the living God? Who else can get supernatural life-changing power into our lives? We are lost, but God, but God, but God delivers us through Jesus.

I am not talking about Buddha or Muhammad or Confucius or the latest self-help guru in our culture. They may have said and done some great things, but only Jesus exchanges our death for his life that will never die. Our sorrow for his joy, that will never be diminished. Our fear for his hope that cannot disappoint. Our poverty for his resources that never end. And our weakness for his power that cannot be stopped. What else can wash away my sin? What else can make me whole again? No other fount I know that can make me white as snow. Nothing, nothing, and I mean nothing but the blood of Jesus. So Jesus, there is power in your name to break every chain and to set us free.

And so Lord, teach us to rely only on you. We have so many other things around us, so tempted to rely on those things. But Jesus, you are our only hope. You are our plan A and we have no plan B. And Lord, we pray that you would help us to

do that so that the world can see in us that there is power in your name. And we ask it in your name. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Opening Question

- Icebreaker: Do you like to plan things out in details or be spontaneous?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions - Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions

- What steps could you take to rely on Jesus, and only Jesus, more?
- What are ways to talk to others about how Jesus is the only one who can save us? Why is that good news?

Closing Question and Application

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?