

The birth of the Church

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved....”

It's the morning of the fiftieth day since Jesus was killed on the cross. Very early that morning the twelve apostles, including Matthias (who'd replaced the now dead Judas Iscariot) and around one hundred and twenty others, had all gathered in one place in Solomon's porch, the long structure with columns and roof at the east end of the Temple precinct. They needed to reserve a spot quickly because thousands of their fellow Jews would soon be pouring into the Temple area, filling Solomon's porch and the Temple courts outside.

And there they sat together, waiting.

At nine o'clock their eardrums were suddenly hit with the howling sound of a hurricane force wind, flames appeared above their heads, and they found themselves yelling out how great God was in dialects that none of them normally spoke in. Peter then stands up, and at the top of his voice he yells to the astonished crowd that what's happening to him and the other one hundred and twenty are signs that the Spirit predicted by the prophet Joel has come, and from this moment on until the "glorious day of the Lord," **Acts 2:20-21**, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

It sounds great, that a whole new era has begun in which salvation is open to anyone calling on the Lord's name. But what exactly does that statement mean? Was Peter now suggesting that the only thing required of people to be saved from eternal death and damnation in the future was state his or her belief in the God of the Bible? Or that if you vocally express the right kind of prayer to God, admitting your sins and asking for forgiveness, he'll take you up to heaven after you die? In other words, was Peter making a blanket statement here that the key to any individual being saved from hell and entering the kingdom of heaven is professing his or her belief in God and praying to him? If so, can we translate verse 21 as, "everyone who simply calls out to God, expressing belief in him and confessing sins to him, is guaranteed a spot in heaven"?

But didn't Jesus say in **Matthew 7:21**, that "NOT everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven"?

Oops. Looks like a contradiction here, which puts into serious question what so many Christians preach today, that people can be saved by merely professing a belief in Christ, or saying a 'sinner's prayer'.

On the other hand, didn't Paul mention in **Romans 10:8-9** that the message "we Christians are proclaiming is this: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved"? In other words, isn't Paul agreeing with the Christians who say that all it takes for a person to be saved is professing belief in Christ, or that all you have to do to be saved is say 'Jesus is Lord'? And didn't Paul then say in **verse 13**, that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," as if to confirm that's what it means?

So how on earth do we sort this out, taking into account that many people coming into contact with the prevailing Christian culture today will be told they only have to verbally express a belief in Jesus as Lord (or Jesus as their Saviour) to be saved? It's the first question you get asked by a Christian in the street: "Do you believe Jesus is your (Lord and) Saviour?" - which isn't surprising if the Christian believes your actual salvation is at stake if you don't believe it, based on what Paul said in Romans 10, and so did Peter in Acts 2:21.

But when Peter made that statement, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord," how do we go about figuring out what HE meant by it? By using the word "Everyone," for instance, was Peter addressing everyone who ever lived from that point on?

No, he wasn't, because his next statement in **Acts 2:22** is "Men of Israel." Peter is addressing Joel's prophecy to the same people Joel addressed it to - to the people of Israel. THEY are the people who need to grasp what Peter is saying, in which case how would a Jew or Israelite of **that** day understand what Peter meant by "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"? Can we imagine ourselves as one of the crowd of Jews listening to Peter, and how that would hit our ears **as a Jew** instead?

Well, if I was a Jew in the crowd and I heard Peter use the term "calling on the name of the Lord," I'd know exactly what he meant, because it was a familiar statement in the Old Testament, first mentioned in Genesis 4:26 after Seth was born, and repeated several times after that. Abraham, for instance, called on the name of the Lord in Genesis 12:8 and 13:4, so did Elijah in 1 Kings 18:24.

Naaman expected Elisha to call on the name of the Lord too, to cure him of leprosy (2 Kings 5:11). And when the writer of Psalm 116:3-4 was overwhelmed by trouble and sorrow, he too “called on the name of the Lord,” crying out, “O Lord, save me.”

That last example is interesting, because here we’ve got a person who is literally calling on the name of the Lord to be saved, which seems to support the Christian idea that all you need do to be saved is call on the name of the Lord, or profess belief in him. But when the chap in Psalm 116 is calling on the name of the Lord to be saved, it’s not saved from hellfire and damnation, is it? It’s not ‘salvation’ in the typical sense of a Christian seeking eternal salvation in heaven, or wherever. It’s about salvation from trouble and sorrow **in this life now**, not in some future eternal existence. And that’s how a Jew would hear what Peter was saying, because that’s the only version of ‘calling on the name of the Lord to be saved’ that he knew.

And God had no problem with them calling on his name to be saved in this life either. In **Exodus 2:23-25**, for instance, when “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, their **cry for help went up to God** (they called on the name of the Lord), and God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant, and he looked on the Israelites and he was concerned for them.” And when he finally freed them from Pharaoh’s evil grip, the song Moses and the Israelites sang in Exodus 15 was, “The Lord has become my salvation” (verse 2). A Jew, therefore, associated **salvation** with the Lord solving their problems **in the here and now**, and the Lord hearing them every time they called out to him.

It was the same in the book of Joel, from which came the original statement, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Terrible disaster threatens Israel in Joel - an invasion by an enemy nation it sounds like in Joel 1:6 - which Joel compares to a massive invasion of locusts sweeping across the land destroying everything in its path (1:11). And note Joel’s response to this threat in **Joel 1:19** - it’s “To you, O Lord, I call.” So he too, like the writer in Psalm 116, is calling on the Lord to save them from their troubles, even though it’s the Lord himself who initiated this entire mess in the first place (1:15). But call on the Lord, Joel says, and “Who knows,” **Joel 2:14**, “God may turn and have pity.”

And God does have pity, just like he had pity on Israel in Egypt, and he lets it be known in **Joel 3:16** that “the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.”

God then promises in **Joel 3:20** that “Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations,” clearly pointing to some time in the future, but it was still in physical terms, of God saving them as a nation, which is how the Jews, therefore, would interpret Peter when he quoted Joel’s statement that everyone who called on the name of the Lord would be saved.

It was about national salvation, the sparing of Israel as a nation. When that great and glorious (and terrible) day of the Lord comes, those Jews who call on him will be spared from the trouble, just as Joel promised. It gives us the context of what “calling on the name of the Lord” means. To a Jew listening to Peter it was just like the days of Joel, when calling out to God guaranteed their safety in the terrible troubles that were coming.

This was totally different to the people in Matthew 7:21 crying out “Lord, Lord,” whose only purpose in calling out his name was to tell him what great things **they** had done, like “prophesy” in his name and “drive out demons and perform many miracles” (verse 22). It wasn’t about calling on the Lord and **his** greatness to save them; it was about calling on the Lord to remind him of their **own** greatness and good works earning them a place in the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus totally rejected them for it (23), because that wasn’t what God had taught his people to call on him for. He’d taught them to call on him for help in their troubles in the here and now, **because** he was a very personal Lord who pitied and cared for his people.

And God got that point across very early in Israel’s history, when Israel was in its deepest troubles in Egypt. That’s when he heard their desperate cry for help and he told Moses in **Exodus 3:12**, “I will be with you,” with a promise in **verse 17** “to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt.”

And you’d think that’s all the Israelites would need to hear to trust God to save them, but Moses had his doubts, because in **verse 13** he says to God, “All right, so I tell the Israelites that the great God of their ancestors sent me to rescue them, but what if they ask me ‘What is his name?’ Then what am I supposed to say?”

But why would that be a question the Israelites would ask in the first place? Why would the Israelites want to know God’s name? God’s name was ‘God,’ wasn’t it? And the Hebrew word for God in that verse was Elohim, which was all about his majesty, authority and power - totally enough to save them.

But Moses was a man of that culture, and he knew how important **names** were to the Israelites of that time. Names were given to reveal an individual's personality traits, or family traits, or his function in life, or the circumstances of his birth, like Moses' own name meaning "drawn out," because he was rescued from the River Nile. The name of a person, therefore, gave him a unique identity and a personal touch that enabled others to understand and relate to him on a personal level. But what did the name 'Elohim' tell them about God, that the Israelites could relate to **personally**? Not much at all.

And God obviously accepted that, because he identified himself by a name **that they could relate to** as humans living in a world full of troubles. He calls himself 'I AM' (14), adding a very personal touch to "I will be with you " in verse 12. It now becomes "I (Elohim, the majestic all-powerful God) will be with you because **'being with you' is actually my name**. That's what 'I AM' means; it's short for 'I am with you always', so from now on call me by that name to remind yourselves that my very existence and identity is being your ever-present helper."

That name, therefore, became Israel's lifeline, because it confirmed in the most personal way that God's presence had been and was always with them, no matter what they were going through. When they called on his name, therefore, it meant **THAT name**, YHWH, I AM, the ever-present one, whose very existence and identity was totally wrapped up in their personal lives during every moment of every day.

They could now relate to God very personally as being on call for them at any time, because that's what his name actually meant. Imagine having a human friend like that, who tells you his name is, 'I'm here for you any time you need me, or call me IAM for short', and he then says to you, "I don't go by any other name when I'm with you, so please call me by that name whenever we're together." In other words, he exists to be with you and be on call for you any time you're in trouble. No wonder Israel called on that name whenever they needed rescuing. And God made it clear to Moses that he didn't mind Israel doing that, because that's exactly what his name implied and encouraged them to do.

So when Peter on Pentecost yells out that prophecy from Joel, that from now on "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," imagine the thoughts going through their Jewish minds at the time, and the memories of the times they HAD called on that name and what the results were. The result was always help in the here and now, and God's salvation in their present troubles.

Ringling in their ears at that present moment in Acts 2, therefore, was this wonderful promise of salvation at last, a second Exodus from the slavery of pagan rule by the great Lord YHWH who was always with them. The glorious day of the Lord was on its way, when Israel would be restored to the greatness YHWH had promised.

So, when Peter raised his voice and yelled “Men of Israel” in **Acts 2:22**, imagine what those Jews were expecting to hear next - perhaps the same stirring words from **Exodus 14:13-14** when Moses yelled out at the Red Sea, “Fear not, Israel, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today....The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

What they heard **instead** in Acts 2:22 was, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves saw and witnessed.” But what on earth did that have to do with being rescued from their present troubles? Peter had just told them that all they had to do to be saved was call on the name of the Lord - “the Lord,” of course, being the great Lord YHWH who’d always come through for them when they’d called on him in the past to save them. But here was Peter rattling on about Jesus of Nazareth, who was dead and gone fifty days ago.

It was the first hint of the bombshell that would shake those Jews to their roots, the first whine of the howitzer shell whistling in their direction that “the Lord” they were to call on in Acts 2:21 for salvation was none other than the man they’d just had killed on the cross. What Peter was actually announcing to that massive crowd of Jews, therefore, when he said, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” was in fact, “The Lord upon whom you must now call is none other than the prophet who was crucified fifty days ago right here in the city of Jerusalem, the man you all knew as Jesus of Nazareth.”

Hearing this as a Jew would have been a mind-blower, because the prayer they’d prayed that very morning, and prayed every morning and evening, was **Deuteronomy 6:4**, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, THE LORD IS ONE.” There was only one Lord in the Jewish mind, therefore, and that was YHWH. To refer to Jesus of Nazareth as ‘Lord’, then, either meant that Jesus was YHWH, or there were now **two** Lord YHWHs, and both those ideas would amount to blasphemy in a Jewish mind. So, Peter, what exactly is going on here? Well, “listen up, Israel,” Peter says in Acts 2:22, because he’s about to explain...

First of all, **Acts 2:22**, Jesus had YHWH's total backing. He'd been "thoroughly endorsed by YHWH," been put to death according to "YHWH's set purpose" (23), and it was YHWH who'd "raised him from the dead" (24). So this was all part of YHWH's plan, and, what's more, all this had been predicted long ago by King David in Psalm 16:8-11 as well, which Peter then quotes in Acts 2:25-28.

The Jews, of course, knew these verses in Psalm 16, and what they said about YHWH not abandoning his "Holy One" in the grave, **Acts 2:27**, which David himself understood as referring to one of his own descendants one day being resurrected from the dead (30-31). So Peter was on firm ground talking about Jesus being endorsed by YHWH, because in their very own scriptures Jesus' death and resurrection had happened exactly as predicted. It was also well known by then that "God has raised this Jesus to life," **verse 32**, because "we are all witnesses." So there was no doubt in the many who'd witnessed his death and resurrection that Jesus was the one who fulfilled these verses.

That being the case, it was now time for the real bombshell to land, that YHWH had now "exalted" Jesus to his own right hand, and given **to him** the promised Holy Spirit (33), the proof of which was what they were now seeing and hearing at that very moment with their own eyes and ears. And that included a brand new interpretation of David's prophecy in Psalm 110:1, the most quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament, and used by Jesus several times as credentials for who he was. Here it is, in **verses 34-35**, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"

We've got one Lord talking to another Lord, and it's clearly Lord YHWH doing the talking, but who's this other 'Lord' he's talking to? In the original version - and in the Hebrew meaning - that second 'Lord' could well refer to David himself, because David was YHWH's right hand man on the ground representing him, so here's YHWH telling David he'll always be right there with him, no matter what his enemies try to do to him. But Peter then yells out in **verse 36**, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made **this Jesus**, whom you crucified, both **Lord** and Christ."

Peter says this right after quoting Psalm 110:1, to show that the second 'Lord' in that verse is actually referring to Jesus, and YHWH has now made HIM a 'Lord' too. And that's when the bombshell explodes in their Jewish heads, **verse 37**, because "When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'"

But why did they react so strongly? Well, for one thing, Peter had made it clear from David's prophecies that they'd just killed YHWH's right hand man, the "Holy One" he'd sent to save them. And how pathetically ironic that was, when YHWH had taught them so many times over so many centuries already to trust him for their salvation and to call on his "I am always with you" name whenever they needed help, which they'd done and he'd answered them - but the very person YHWH had predicted he would send to rescue them at **that time then**, with clear signs and miracles proving who Jesus was, they'd done away with.

Worse still, they'd now found out from Peter that the name of the Lord they would now be calling on was Jesus, who now, just like YHWH, had the power to save and deliver them, but they'd just killed him. And worse even still was the Greek word "Kurios" (or kyrios) that Peter used for "Lord" to describe Jesus in **Acts 2:36**, because kurios was also used as the Greek equivalent of YHWH in the New Testament. In other words, God had granted his own lordship to Jesus, and the same type of lordship too: Jesus was now "the I am with you always," and God's very personal representative involved in people's lives in the New Testament, just as he, YHWH, had been involved so personally with Israel in the Old Testament.

Worse even yet for those Jews was the embarrassing fact that none of them had a foot to stand on in their own defense. They were all witnesses, Peter said. It was true too; they knew the scriptures, they'd seen the miracles and prophecy fulfilled, and the news had obviously spread during the last fifty days through the million or so Jews gathered in Jerusalem that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, exactly as David had predicted. And not one voice in that vast crowd had yelled out to Peter that anything he was saying was untrue, either.

In other words, the Jews had just killed the best help they'd got. They'd killed YHWH's man on the ground, the one he'd sent to save them because of his personal love and care for them. They'd just killed their best friend.

And this is where we leave the Jews, stricken to the core, realizing who Jesus was, that he was "the Lord" of Joel's and David's prophecies, whose name they'd be calling on to be rescued. So, now what were they supposed to do (verse 37)?

The answer to that was simple: It was do what every Jew and Gentile would do from that point on when they realized who Jesus was. It was simply accept and admit that "Jesus is Lord," as Paul says in **Romans 10:9**, and the rescue begins.

And this is where it becomes meaningful and personal for us too. Once we accept that YHWH conferred his loving “I will be with always” lordship on Jesus, the same rescue now kicks in for us that kicked in for the Israelites when they called on the name of the “I will be with you always” YHWH in the Old Testament.

So now we go back to what the Jews understood by the word “salvation.” To them it meant being saved or rescued from slavery under pagan rule, whether it was slavery under the Egyptians in Moses’ day or the Romans in the first century. This is what they called on the name of their “I will be with you always” Lord YHWH for, to be saved and rescued from the ungodly culture they were living in.

And that definition of salvation remains exactly the same for us, as Peter makes clear in **Acts 2:40**, when “he pleads” with that vast array of Jews before him saying “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

And since that now includes us as Gentiles too, as Paul makes clear in Romans 10, what do WE now suppose that means? Well, if we understand what calling on the name of the Lord meant to a Jew, we have our answer. It means that we too have an ever-present YHWH Lord in the person of Jesus, who is ready and willing, just as YHWH was in the Old Testament, to be our best friend in time of need in the here and now.

We have an ever-present Lord on the ground right here with us every moment of every day whenever this corrupt culture is overwhelming us. The great personal Lord YHWH of the Old Testament is still alive and well, now in Lord Jesus, doing for us what he did for Israel, enabling us to rise above the stupidity and evil of our culture.

And how practical is that, when every day we’re being bombarded by the corrupt and ridiculous thoughts, conversations, gossip, and ideas of this world? And how embarrassing it is when we bow to pressure and join in, or retaliate against injustice with accusing and condemning anger. It’s as embarrassing for us as it was for those Jews on Pentecost, when it dawned on them too that the great Lord YHWH had always been there with them to enable them to rise above the corrupt culture they were in, so they weren’t taken in by it.

We can rest assured, then, that we have a Lord just like YHWH, whose name we can call on at any time to rescue us from the corrupt ways of this world’s thinking - and THAT was the key message at the birth of the Church.