



NO ORDINARY PEOPLE

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

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Acts 10:1-48

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Following the account of the conversion of Saul, who would become the apostle to the Gentiles, in chapter 10 of the book of Acts, Luke goes on to tell the story of Cornelius, the first Gentile believer. The conversions of these two men formed a critical part of the church's outreach to the Gentile world. At this point in the book there is an abrupt transition from Saul to Peter, as Luke leaves the story of Saul for a while. He will bring him back onstage in chapter 13, in the account of Paul's first missionary journey. Over the next three chapters, however, Peter is the main player. In our last study we saw the preparatory work that God did in Saul's life before he could be an effective instrument in sharing God's grace. As we will see, God had some work to do in Peter's life as well: He had to deal with his deep-seated prejudice, bigotry, and snobbery.

That prejudice was passed down to Peter. The notion that God was not interested in Gentiles had a long history. In the Old Testament, Jonah resisted God's call to witness to Gentiles. He actually became angry when the Ninevites repented and escaped judgment. In Acts, God breaks through that kind of bigotry in a powerful way. This text has much to say to believers today. The stakes are just as high for us.

The story of Cornelius is the longest narrative in Acts, covering all 48 verses of chapter 10 and the first 18 of chapter 11. Beginning in chapter 10, we will skip over the double miracle recording the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha from the dead (9:32-43), two events that demonstrated the gospel's power over darkness and death.

Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. (Acts 10:1-2, NASB)

Cornelius, a centurion, lived in Caesarea, a seaport on the Mediterranean coast. The city, named after Augustus Caesar, was the administrative capital of the province of Judea. Centurions were non-commissioned officers in the Roman army. They weren't the high-ranking elite, but rather came from the middle classes. They were tough soldiers who had proved their mettle on the battlefield. Whenever centurions are mentioned in the New Testament, they are spoken of highly. Jesus had this to say about one of them, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (Matt 8:10). It was a centurion who said at the cross, "Truly

this was the Son of God!" (Matt 27:54). Our text mentions another centurion, who is described as a devout man. Cornelius was probably part of a select group of men guarding the Roman governor in Caesarea. Luke records that the man made charitable gifts to the Jewish people and prayed to God regularly. He was a monotheist, in contrast to most Romans, who worshipped many gods: Jupiter, Mars, Venus, even Augustus. Cornelius realized that these so-called gods were not real; they could do nothing for him. He was a man with a hungry heart who had seen something in Jewish worship that attracted him.

In response to his yearnings, God meets him in a vision.

About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. (10:3-8)

Cornelius was praying at about three in the afternoon. Luke doesn't say what he was praying about, only that God heard him. Perhaps he cried out, "God, if you are real, help me to know who you are. Help me to understand more." God heard his prayer and sent an angel, who told him to dispatch men to Joppa, about 30 miles south of Caesarea, to send for a man named Simon (actually Peter the apostle, who was staying with a tanner also named Simon). Cornelius sent two of his servants, along with a soldier sympathetic to the mission.

This incident sets the stage for scene two. The divine choreography is awesome to behold.

On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed

animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. (10:9-16)

Peter, the apostle to whom Jesus had given the keys to the kingdom, was God's chosen instrument to open another important door for the gospel. He had already opened it to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, and to the Samaritans a little later. Now he will open the door to the Gentiles – the very thing that Jonah resisted in the same city. But before that can occur, God has a task that was more miraculous than the conversion of Cornelius: the breaking down of Peter's deep-seated racial prejudice.

About midday, Peter was praying on the housetop. Houses in that time had flat roofs, with outside stairways. Away from the activity of the house, and open to the cool sea breeze, a rooftop was an ideal place to pray. Peter felt hungry. While food was being prepared he fell into a trance, and had a bizarre vision. The sky opened up and something like a large sheet (the word for sailcloth) came down, suspended by its four corners. Inside it were all kinds of reptiles, animals and birds: alligators and aardvarks, buzzards and boa constrictors. A voice said, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" Although Peter was hungry, he responded with the strongest negative in the Greek language: "I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." (We would say, "No way!") "Again a voice came to him a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky." Even to this day, the Jews, (particularly Orthodox Jews) have a dietary system known as kosher, which distinguishes between approved and unapproved foods. They regard certain things as clean and others unclean. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 describe certain animals that can be eaten: those having cloven hooves and chew the cud – cows, sheep, oxen, etc. But certain animals were forbidden: the camel, the rock badger, etc., and sea life that did not have scales or fins.

A number of explanations were given for this dietary restriction. Moses said it was because the Israelites were to be a holy people (Lev 11). They were to be set apart from the rest of the world, even in what they ate. Scholars differ about the reasoning behind these dietary laws, but we do know that some of these restricted animals were associated with idolatrous worship, and many of them were unhealthy to eat. So it wasn't just a matter of having fussy culinary habits, but one of survival and identity.

Unfortunately, the Jews interpreted these laws in ways that God never intended. They felt that not just the food, but people who ate such things were to be avoided. So the Jews would have nothing to do with

other nations. That was a misunderstanding of their role. Israel was to be a unique people for a unique purpose: to be a light to the Gentiles, a source of revelation and good news to the world around. That is why God chose them. It wasn't because they were inherently religious or better than any other nation. God could have chosen any nation to be the vehicle to reflect his character to the world.

But the Jews took it that they were something special – and their food was special. David Roper says, "They understood this separation to be geographical and spatial rather than moral. They regarded this privilege as something to be enjoyed by themselves alone, thereby missing the whole point of their unique call. Now God was taking away the dietary restrictions so that they would see that all people were clean, and all needed to hear the good news about God."¹

Now we come to scene three.

Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. (10:17-23)

While Peter was still puzzling over the meaning of the vision, the three men arrived at the house. They could have followed their noses (a tanner's house radiated a distinct odor). The fact that Peter was staying with a tanner is an indication that his scruples were changing. (Tanners dealt with dead animals and thus were considered unclean by Jews.) But that didn't seem to bother Peter. God was already working in his heart.

The men told Peter about Cornelius, and in response, Peter "invited them in and gave them lodging." That line may not appear significant, but considering how deeply entrenched was the Jews' hatred of Gentiles, this was a miracle. The hatred was breaking down. Next day, Peter accompanied them with some of the brothers to Joppa. (Later, we learn that six Jewish believers accompanied Paul on the journey back to Caesarea.)

Scene 4:

On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called to-

gether his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man." As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." (10:24-29)

Cornelius was expecting them in Caesarea, and had invited all of his family and friends. As Peter enters the house, Cornelius falls on his knees in worship. Embarrassed, Peter tells him to stand up. Next, he addresses the many people assembled there: "And he said to them, 'You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him.'" This was not the law; it was the Jewish interpretation of the law. But Peter continues, "and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean." That was the point of the vision. Though it dealt with food, its understanding had to do with people. There are no unclean people. Peter says that was why he was there. Then he asks Cornelius why he sent for him.

Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." (10:30-33)

Cornelius told Peter the story of his own vision. Then he said, "Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." What a great opportunity! Cornelius's family and military friends and their families were present. Yet it must have been somewhat frightening too. Put yourself in that setting: a room filled with people of another nation or race, people you didn't feel particularly comfortable with, brought there by one who asks you to tell them about your faith.

Peter responds with a clear statement of the gospel.

Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. (10:34-35)

What a powerful and insightful statement about God! God shows no partiality. He receives anyone from any background, race, or religion. Peter was not saying that God welcomes every religion; that people can believe

whatever they want and it doesn't matter to God. What he said was that any man or woman with a hungry heart is welcome to come to God. Their religious or racial background is not important. They can be Buddhist, Muslim or Mormon, or have no religious background at all.

"The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead." (10:36-41)

That is the gospel, in a nutshell. Peter spoke about Jesus' character and ministry. The Lord went about doing good by the power of the Holy Spirit. But even though his life and miracles demonstrated that he was God's special messenger, they crucified him. But that wasn't the end. God overturned man's verdict and raised him from the dead. Peter says, "We saw him. We ate and drank with him. He is alive and available to all men everywhere."

"And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." (10:42-43)

And this risen Lord who ascended to heaven will return once again. Then he will come, as C. S. Lewis put it, as "God undisguised." We will meet him face to face as the "Judge of the living and the dead." That is the fate of every man and woman. Jesus stands at the end of everyone's road. That would be an unbelievably frightening prospect except for the fact that, as Peter said, Jesus died for our sins. Everyone who believes in Christ already has forgiveness of sin. Everyone, not just the Jews! The issue is no longer our sin. What separates us from God is our unwillingness to receive the forgiveness that Jesus Christ has already accomplished.

Peter didn't even need to call for a response. They responded while he was still speaking.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,

“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. (10:44-48)

All throughout the room, men and women whose hearts had already been prepared immediately recognized that this was the message they had been looking for, and they believed it. There was no altar call, no invitation. They believed, the Holy Spirit descended on them, and they were born again. This is the third instance of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Acts. It happened once with the Jews, and once with the Samaritans, and now with the Gentiles there is a third pouring out as a sign, particularly to these Jewish Christians, that what happened to them at Pentecost was now happening to the Gentiles. They were as much a part of the family of God as those first Jews who had believed. In other words, no one had to become a Jew in order to become a believer. God welcomes anyone from any nation.

I want to close by sharing two reflections from this text.

1. In God’s Kingdom, people can’t be categorized according to their background.

The major theme of this passage has to do with the breaking of old distinctions that divide people. We may think that what Peter had to learn has no relevance to us, since just about everyone here in PBCC is a Gentile. But we have a great deal to learn about the fact that God has no favorites. Prejudice is hard to overcome. It probably is one of the last things to go in our growth as Christians. Peter saw in living color his cold attitude toward anyone who wasn’t a Jew.

Christians act no differently at times. We write off whole churches and denominations. We exclude ethnic groups because of a bad experience with one person or family. We look down on people who don’t agree with us on secondary issues. We make distinctions based on education, race, and culture. We often say, as Peter did, “No way, Lord! They’re not my type!” Young couples grieve over the rejection they face from their families, oftentimes Christian families, for marrying outside their race.

Kent Hughes told a story about Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote in his autobiography that in his student days in England he was deeply touched by reading the gospels. He seriously considered converting to Christianity, which seemed to offer a solution to the caste system in India. One Sunday he attended church services, intending to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines. But when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to seat him. They suggested that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back. He said to himself, “If

Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu.”²

The evangelical church has a bad record in condoning race and class distinctions. Muslims take advantage of our failures in this area and proclaim the brotherhood of Islam as an alternative to the prejudice of Christians.

2. God provides more truth as we are obedient to the truth we are given.

Unbelievers frequently raise the question of people who live in parts of the world where they have no opportunity to hear about Jesus. Hearing Christians say that Jesus is the only way to God, they ask, “What about those who have never heard of Jesus? Isn’t it unfair of God to judge them if they have never heard the truth?” The story of Cornelius is helpful in answering this question. Although we have to be careful not to build a doctrine from one incident, I believe that when a person is obedient to the light that he has, God will take it upon himself to give him more light. The Book of Hebrews says that whoever “comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him” (Heb 11:6). That was the situation with Cornelius. He believed that God existed. He was tired of all the emptiness and sensuality of Roman paganism. He was genuinely seeking God, and God responded.

Wherever someone’s heart is open to truth, it’s up to God to impart more truth. The initiative is God’s. People are not condemned because they didn’t hear the gospel. God holds us responsible for the knowledge that we have. Everyone has some measure of truth, and to the degree that we respond to the truth that we have, he gives us more truth. The question is, What do we do with the truth that we already have?

All over the world there are people who have a heart for God. While it’s not always easy to identify them, we have the privilege of sharing with them the good news. God didn’t send the angel to preach the gospel to Cornelius. The angel told him where he could find a man who would tell him the good news about Jesus. Angels aren’t commissioned to preach the gospel; that’s our job. God uses plain, garden-variety people like you and me to preach the good news to people.

It is God who takes the initiative. This is one of the lessons we are learning in Acts. It isn’t up to us. We don’t have to be particularly skillful at sharing the gospel. We don’t have to be popular or well educated. All we need to do is be available and willing – willing to love people who look, think, act and dress differently than ourselves.

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1. David Roper, “The Reward for the Search,” a message preached at Cole Community Church, Boise, Idaho, September 19, 1982.

2. R. Kent Hughes, *The Church Afire* (Wheaton: Crossway), 149.