



Acts 10:23–48

19th Message

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LIFE UNLEASHED ACROSS THE BORDER

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

When Emily and I moved into our first home in 1977, I wanted to make a spiritual impact in our new neighborhood. Being an idealist and impulsive, I suggested to Emily that I go around and knock on doors and invite people to our home for a gospel message and that she provide the food and I give the talk. She was not very keen on the idea, as she likes to develop relationships slowly over time. It took me over a decade to learn how God would use our gifts as a couple to build bridges into community in ways I have never dreamed.

I. Crossing the Divine Bridge Together

A. The journey to Caesarea: A band of brothers

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. (Acts 10:23 ESV)

After providing meals and lodging for Cornelius' three messengers, Peter and his entourage set out for Caesarea thirty miles up the coast. He doesn't know what awaits him at the end of the journey, but Peter is keenly aware that a new work of the Spirit is at hand and is willing to be led as the Lord's servant wherever the Spirit may lead. Because Peter is entering uncharted territory, he wisely invites a number of Jewish believers from Joppa to join him, who will play an important role as eyewitnesses to validate the events.

In his report in chapter 11, we learn that their number was six, which makes a total of ten in their party. Though the number may not be significant, it was the belief that wherever ten Israelite men gathered for worship, the Shekinah (Divine Presence) *"dwelt"* among them. In any event, when they arrive in Caesarea, there will be a radical new understanding of where the "Divine Presence" dwells.

B. Welcome and reception

1. The Gentile embraces the Jew

And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." (vv. 24–26)

If they were traveling on foot, the trip would have taken a good 10–12 hours, so they didn't reach their destination until the following day. Anticipating Peter's arrival Cornelius gathers not only members of his household but also his

relatives and intimate friends. His actions further confirm Luke's description of his character, as one whose devotion to God and love for people was contagious.

When Cornelius lays eyes on the apostle after four days of anticipation, he is unable to constrain his emotions. As Peter is led past the gate into the outer courtyard Cornelius runs up to him and throws himself down at his feet (just as Jairus did when he pleaded with Jesus to save his daughter's life in Luke 8:41). The military commander doesn't look so mighty down on his knees clutching the feet of Peter. Though this was an inappropriate gesture for a fellow human being, it was certainly genuine and demonstrates Cornelius' humility and spiritual hunger.

2. The Jew embraces the Gentile

But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up (lit. "rise up"); I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." (vv. 26–29)

Peter's reaction to Cornelius is likewise bathed in humility. Refusing the honor that is reserved for God alone, he raises Cornelius up as his equal. Once they are on equal footing, they exchange pleasantries and Cornelius escorts his honored guest into a large living area. Luke allows us to feel Peter's astonishment as he sees the large crowd of family and guests who are eagerly waiting for his arrival.

Peter's first words are spiritually sensitive and skillfully designed to create a bridge between two very different and opposing cultures. He begins with where they are and how they have been perceived and treated by the Jews as second-class citizens. Jews were forbidden from associating with Gentiles, lest they become ceremonially unclean. "Above all, it was forbidden to accept the hospitality of Gentiles and eat with them, particularly because Gentiles did not tithe."¹ Acknowledging people's pain opens the door for them to listen. Then Peter plays his trump card—he places God on their side and takes responsibility for their pain! He comes to them not as a spiritual superior armed with an agenda, but as fellow human being who, like them, is in the process of learning. Viewed in this light, he interprets their invitation as a divine opportunity to grow in his understanding of God. This

is why he felt no hesitation in coming. He concludes by asking Cornelius' to share his experience that led to his invitation, believing that it will shed light and amplify the meaning of his earlier vision.

Imagine going to a public lecture where everyone is anticipating listening to a well-known scientist, who has done groundbreaking work in the theory of astrophysics. After the host welcomes everyone, he introduces the speaker with litany of accolades and the crowd responds with resounding applause. The author rises to the podium, the crowd is hushed. The speaker raises his voice and in thirty-two words explains that four days ago he discovered that the defining presupposition that became the backbone of his theories was terribly wrong. After a gasp from the audience, he hands the microphone to the host and asks if he has any wisdom on the matter and promptly sits down.

C. Setting the stage: The divine encounter

And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” (vv. 30–33)

After Peter takes his seat, Cornelius steps forward and tells the story of his vision with the angel, which took place four days previously. The vision made such an impression on him that he doesn't miss one detail—it was seared into his memory. Peter now hears what we have already heard, and its narration gives him a new level of insight. As he listens to Cornelius' story unfold, he realizes the soldier's experience is a mirror and counterpart of his own. Cornelius is a devout God-fearer, whose obedience and devotion to what he knows of Israel's God is exceptional. And in this historic meeting, Cornelius recognizes Peter as God's messenger to grant his little community something richer and deeper; something they have deeply longed for, but can't quite articulate—is it possible to know God personally? One could hardly hope to have a more attentive or appreciative audience.

II. The Treasures of the Gospel Unleashed

A. Peter's tone: Solemnity and humility

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (vv. 34–35)

As Peter intently listens to Cornelius' speech, everything begins to come together and make sense. Taking a deep breath he makes a solemn pronouncement: “I am now beginning to understand (the verb *katalambanō* is present progressive) that

God is no respecter of person. But in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” This is a monumental revelation for Peter, for as Johnson observes,

Peter is coming to see it is not membership in a particular nation or the observance of its specific customs that makes one acceptable to God, but rather the way of responding to God that comes from “the fear of the Lord,” or more precise terms, “faith.”²

To those who respond to the light they have, more shall be given. In this historic moment, when the Israel's gospel lands on Gentile soil, Peter has been summoned by God to play a vital role in the birthing process. Finding words that articulate the significance of when Peter crossed the threshold of Cornelius' home is difficult. But those of Neil Armstrong come close—“One small step for a man, a giant leap for mankind.” In one breath centuries of prejudice are wiped away.

B. Sharing the gospel story with Gentiles

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (vv. 36–43)

In verses 36–43 Peter summarizes the essentials of Jesus' story, shaping them in a way that pulls Cornelius and his God-fearing friends into the story. It's imperative that we not only get the story right, but also that we know how to contextualize it in order to connect with those who are listening.

1. It's a story of God's faithfulness—“the word he sent to Israel”

Though God shows no partiality, Peter is not shy about God's particular choice of Israel as bearers of promise for the whole of creation. God's way of stepping into our broken world and bringing redemption is intimate and personal. In Israel's case, he began by choosing one individual, Abraham, through whom he promised to make a great nation, and ultimately to bless “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). The election of the one is not for the purpose of casting off the rest, but for mediating God's blessing to the whole world, for “he is Lord of all.” As Christopher Wright says, “God so loved the world that he chose Israel.”³

Cornelius and his friends were knowledgeable and sympathetic to Israel's traditions and doing their best, as outsiders looking in, to honor the God of Israel. Now they are told that God has fulfilled the promises he made to Abraham in sending Jesus to Israel. This is the first note of God's great news. The gospel is rooted in real history that is verifiable and is going somewhere. God's sending of his son to Israel is the climax of God's great redemption story, one in which you are now invited to have a part.

2. It's about a peace the world cannot give—"the good news of peace"

The second theme of the gospel Peter highlights is that the "way" of the kingdom is "good news of peace" and not rebellion against Rome. As Tom Wright explains,

When Jesus announced God's kingdom, he did so in the teeth of nationalist expectation of imminent armed revolt against Rome. No, declared Jesus: it was a message of peace. But to underwrite the message, God anointed Jesus with the spirit and power: in other words, he really was the "the Messiah," the anointed one, even though his form of kingship didn't look like what people expected.⁴

John the Baptist was the last in a long line of Israel's prophets, who was sent to anoint Israel's last King with the full measure of God's Spirit and power. Jesus did come to wage a war, but it was not against Rome. His battle was against the devil and his legions of unclean spirits. Wherever Jesus went, he cast out demons and brought healing and restored health to those who were suffering under Satan's oppressive hand. This was the primary significance behind Jesus' miracles.

The most dramatic confrontation took place when Jesus and his disciples set sail to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. En route their boat is overtaken by a fierce windstorm and begins filling with water. The disciples are terrified and awaken Jesus from his sleep. Once awake, Jesus "rebuked" (*epitimaō*) the wind and the raging waves and immediately all was calm. "Rebuking" is what Jesus typically does to overpower demons (Luke 4:35, 41; 9:42). Arriving at the other side, Jesus is confronted with a man who is possessed by a "legion" of demons (an allusion to Rome's might). Despite their numbers, the demons are terrified and beg Jesus not to send them to the abyss. Instead they ask permission to enter a herd of (unclean) pigs on the hillside. With just a word the demons are released into the pigs, and the startled pigs rush down the hillside and are drowned in the abyss of the sea (which is what the Jews desired to do to the unclean Romans). The man is restored and tells his story around the ten cities of the Acropolis of the miracle of his deliverance. This is the message of shalom Jesus came to give. But the powers in Rome take note. Having dealt a fatal blow to the devil, Jesus has become "Lord of all," which means Caesar is not lord, and Rome will be held accountable to a higher authority.

3. It is proclaimed by eyewitnesses—"we are witnesses"

The fourth theme Peter highlights is the unique role of the apostles, who were chosen beforehand by God to be eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry throughout Galilee and Judea, and culminating in Jerusalem with his arrest, execution, burial and resurrection. These twelve are the flaming lights and stewards of the gospel to the next generation and beyond. How privileged and honored Cornelius and his friends must have felt that God sent his "A" team—his hand picked eyewitnesses, whose credibility was impeccable—to share the good gospel of Jesus with them on their turf.

4. It secures our future—"appointed by God to judge"

There will be no other events in history that will trump what Jesus has done, because he is not only the beginning and the climax of Israel's story to which all the prophets bear witness, he will also be the consummation of history that ushers in a New Heavens and a New Earth. He is the judge of all, which means no one is exempt, and everyone is accountable.

5. The gifts of the gospel are priceless, yet free—"forgiveness of sins and..."

N. T. Wright sums up Peter's invitation to Cornelius,

Peter is saying: "Cornelius the God whom you have worshipped from afar has done all this, as part of his global plan to set everything right at last; and, at every stage, Jesus in the middle of it all! God has thus fulfilled the purposes for which he called Israel in the first place; and you, Cornelius, and everyone everywhere who believes this message, will receive a welcome at once, without more ado, into the family whose home has, written in shining letters above the door, the wonderful word 'forgiven'."⁵

III. The Spirit is Unleashed and Confirmed

A. God pre-empts the preacher

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. (vv. 44–45)

After Peter preached his first gospel message on Pentecost, his hearers responded, "What shall we do?" Peter gave a fairly lengthy response,

"And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." (Acts 2:38–40)

But now God doesn't allow Peter to exercise his role as pastoral midwife and explain all the birthing procedures.

He doesn't even wait for anyone in Cornelius' family to say, "I believe." At the first mention of the "Spirit," he throws open heaven's gates, unleashing a torrential downpour of the Spirit, plus the sign to go with it. It's a little humbling for a midwife to be prepping for a delivery, and then at the first sign of labor, the doctor rushes in, pushes her aside and performs a C-section; and suddenly the room is filled with a choir of newborns singing the praises of God in several foreign languages.

Why do you think God did that? If you felt second class all your life, how would you feel if God bypassed all the channels of authority and just met you on your own turf, and made his loving presence felt in a way you didn't think possible, and then he says to you, "I'm not leaving, no never!" and anoints you with a new capacity to speak his word and/or to serve the poor and marginalized (1 Pet 4:10–11) with his love and grace. How would you feel? Second class people don't want to be tolerated; they want to be welcomed, embraced, forgiven, healed, transformed and acknowledged.

How do you think Peter feels? The midwife has been set aside. When you have the keys to the kingdom, it's easy to become proud, to control and manipulate, to make sure you're the holy channel and that nothing significant happens if you're not present. Nothing quenches God's Spirit and the life of the God's people more than spiritual control. So Peter gets another dose of humility. He is reminded that he is not indispensable, nor is he to use his mantle of leadership to make the Gentiles in Caesarea feel subservient or dependent on him. In the kingdom the only kind of leadership is servant leadership (Mark 10:42–45).

B. The Spirit's work is confirmed by the many

“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. (vv. 47–48)

If there were any doubts about the validity of Peter's new insight about the impartiality of the gospel, they evaporated like dew under the hot sun. However before confirming the work of the Spirit in baptism, Peter wisely puts the question to his six Jewish brothers, lest there be any dissension or misinterpretation of what God did in Cornelius' home.

As William Willimon affirms, “The gospel is not about the solo efforts of one enlightened and progressive leader who takes it upon himself to baptize gentiles.”⁶ Wise leaders don't rush off on first impulses, but rather seek confirmation of the community of believers to confirm the work of the Spirit. Imagine the joy of that baptism!

It took several years for me to learn how to build a bridge into our local community and earn the right to speak. God did it through my wife's gifts of service and wisdom. For many years she served in the school system, and we were invited into that world on many different levels. After I returned from a mission trip to Romania in 1989, a couple hosted a bar-b-que for parents and their children. Having heard of some of the amazing things God did on that trip, our hostess asked me to share with the whole crowd why I went to Romania and what happened there. It was one of those rare opportunities when one is given the stage to share one's faith by the hostess of a secular event. As I was sharing my story, I realized that it was Emily's faithful service of quietly building relationships in the school system for 12 years that built that stage.

When PBC Cupertino was first founded in 1986, I was invited to speak with another group of God-fearers. During those two years of ministry to that group of people, 17 came to know Christ and became the backbone of this church. Considering the countless joys I have as a follower of Jesus, there are few that surpass that of being invited to cross the bridge.

1. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), n.p.
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 194.
3. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 39.
4. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One*, Chapters 1–12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 169.
5. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 169–70.
6. William Willimon, *Acts*, Int (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 99.

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