



# CROSSING OVER THE DIVINE BRIDGE

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 10:1–23a  
18th Message  
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We come now to the most critical phase of the expansion of God's kingdom in the book of Acts, the conversion Cornelius, the first Gentile, along with his entire household. Peter's welcome embrace of this Roman household into the faith triggers the greatest struggle for those in leadership, demanding a radical redefinition of what it means to be the people of God and a willingness to let go of their privileged status and national identity. The amount of material Luke devotes to the struggle that it takes to cross this bridge, is a testimony to its importance, not to mention its difficulty. It will take the next six chapters (Acts 10–15) before the crisis precipitated by Peter's bold and courageous actions is resolved. Ultimately through many labor pains, the gospel will be set free from the shackles of an ethnic religion and heralded as a universal gift for all mankind.

This is a climatic moment in salvation history when God's promise to Abraham—"in you all families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3 ESV)—is fulfilled. Luke leaves his readers no doubt that this was God's ultimate goal, for this promise frames his gospel with Simeon's pronouncement in the beginning (Luke 2:32) and Jesus' commission of the apostles at the conclusion (Luke 24:7)—and it is underscored at his ascension when Jesus reiterates how the divine program will unfold through the apostolic witness, first in Jerusalem, then in all Judea and Samaria, and finally to ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

You might ask, "If this is the ultimate goal of salvation history and Israel's story, why was it so difficult to implement?" The simple answer is prejudice. It is extremely difficult for those of privilege to see that our privileges are gifts of God and not badges of superiority, and that these gifts are not for our exclusive enjoyment, but for the benefit of those who are less fortunate on the outside. But when privilege feeds our pride, prejudice becomes entrenched creating an impassable gulf between the privileged insiders and those on the outside. In Israel's case it was even more difficult because God called them out from the nations to be set apart, distinct from the pervasive idolatry around them, so that through them God's light might shine. To inculcate the notion of purity and protect the nation from assimilation Israel was taught to make fine distinctions between what was clean and unclean through a *radical symbolization*<sup>1</sup> in every area of their daily lives—from how they managed their crops, how they dressed, cut their hair, and what kind of food they ate. So you can imagine how difficult it would be to suddenly shift gears and throw the door wide open to outsiders, who have no interest in maintaining those distinctions that set Israel apart.

So how does God break down walls of prejudice? How does he get his disciples to let go of their pride and welcome outsiders, granting them all the privileges of insiders? As we continue our studies in the book of Acts, the apostle Peter becomes the paradigm for transformation, but the larger context reveals that God has been at work preparing Peter to cross this bridge for quite some time.

## I. God's Preparatory Work on Peter

### A. Jesus's example

Peter learned from Jesus whose teaching and example exemplified the truth about welcoming outsiders. His inner circle of apostles was as diverse politically and socially as one could imagine. You can grow up with solid teaching and good examples, and still be prejudiced; not until you have a personal encounter with the Spirit does the truth move from the head to the heart.

### B. Philip's example

In the book of Acts, Philip, a layman, is the first one to break out of the mold and start welcoming outsiders from Samaria and Africa (the Ethiopian eunuch). He then travels up the coast preaching the gospel to all the towns from Azotus to Caesarea where he settles down. Philip models freedom to reach out beyond the cultural borders of the Jews, so when Peter launches out to encourage the saints, he follows in Philip's footsteps to strengthen the work he had begun.

### C. Miracles with Aeneas and Tabitha

In the healing of Aeneas' and in the raising of Tabitha, Peter becomes the channel through which the Holy Spirit frees Aeneas' from paralysis and raises Tabitha from the dead. Their restoration had nothing to do with dietary laws or rituals associated with the Temple. He just sees the Spirit at work creating life. As Paul would later write: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation" (Gal 6:15 NIV).

### D. Invitation to lodge by the sea in Joppa

- Peter's new location on the coast next the open sea creates the possibility of granting Peter a new perspective of the kingdom, one that embraces the whole world (Isa 49:6).
- Lodging with Simon, a tanner (unclean occupation), brings theological tensions to the surface.
- The harbor outside Simon's house is where Jonah came to flee the presence of God when God commanded him to go to Nineveh. Will Peter be as repulsed by God's request as Jonah was and flee like the prophet?

## II Cornelius: The Outsider Looking In

### A. The glory of Caesarea

Luke shifts our focus from Peter's ministry in Joppa to the Roman seaport of Caesarea, 30 miles up the coast. It was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. Herod wanted to build a major international port that would rival Alexandria and also "show his sympathy and support for his non-Jewish subjects through the construction of a great Greco-Roman urban center complete with pagan temples and other structures that were inimical to his Jewish constituency."<sup>2</sup> If you had been a tourist in Luke's day, you would have been first captivated the magnificent architecture and elegant beauty of the city, but nothing compared to engineering marvel that

transformed a second-class harbor into an international seaport. Richard Longenecker writes,

It was named in honor of Augustus Caesar, the adopted heir of Julius Caesar. Formerly it [Caesarea] was called Strato's Tower and was considered a second-class harbor because of its shallow entrance and openness to the strong southern winds. But in carrying out his pro-Roman policy, Herod the Great changed all that by making the harbor into a magnificent seaport and the village into a provincial capital. He deepened the harbor, built a breakwater against the southern gales, constructed an imposing city with an amphitheater and a temple in honor of Rome and Augustus, brought in fresh water through an aqueduct that ran over stately brick arches, and established a garrison of soldiers to protect not only the harbor and city but also the fresh water supply. The magnificence of the port dwarfed the splendor of the city, which is probably why a Neronian coin bears the inscription "Caesarea by Augustus's Harbor."<sup>3</sup>

### B. The character of the outsider

**At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. (Acts 10:1–2 ESV)**

But Luke has no interest in Caesarea's splendor or engineering marvels. He focuses our gaze on a greater marvel—a divine bridge God is designing to span the chasm between his people (known as saints) and the Gentiles, creating a new humanity from every nation on earth. Like all of God's new ventures, it begins with his choice of "a certain" individual who will become the base of operations for the new enterprise. Though Caesarea was predominantly Gentile, there was a significant Jewish population there and considerable friction between the two groups. But, astonishingly, God's choice is not a Jew, but a Gentile. And not just any Gentile, he is a commanding officer of the occupying army whose brutality was relentless! Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian regiment, which placed him in command of 100 soldiers.

Though Cornelius is technically an outsider, Luke's description of his character suggests that God has been preparing the soil of his heart for some time. He is a genuine God-fearer, who worships Israel's God and supports their community. Like Tabitha in the previous chapter, his reverential spirit and generous heart make him a respected leader in his home and a treasured member in the Jewish community.

### C. An inside look at his prayer-life

**About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." (vv. 3–6)**

The telltale sign of Cornelius' devotion to God is his commitment to prayer. Prayer is an opening of the mind and heart to God, which heightens our spiritual faculties and makes an encounter with God possible. (In Luke's two volumes there are seven instances when prayer sets the stage for significant spiritual encounters.<sup>4</sup>) When Luke gives us our first intimate look at the Roman commander, we find him praying during one of the three traditional times of prayer, at 3:00 pm, which coincided with the afternoon offering at

the temple in Jerusalem. Given the context of Cornelius' prayer we can imagine his request similar to David's in Psalm 141.

**Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice! (Ps 141:2)**

As the smoke of the sacrifice ascends to heaven in Jerusalem, Cornelius' eyes are opened to see an angel clear as day. Unable to take his eyes off of him, the angel approaches and calls him by name, "Cornelius." Seized with terror, he respectfully asks what the angel requests of him. The angel calms Cornelius' alarm by assuring him that his acts of devotion have been pleasing in God's eyes and have been accepted by him, such that God is going to answer his prayers.

He is not told exactly how God will answer, but by obeying God's detailed instructions Cornelius is assured that he will find out. Cornelius is to send messengers to Joppa to summon a particular Simon, called Peter, who is lodging with another Simon, who is a tanner, whose house is by the sea. So the messengers are told exactly where to go and who to find, but they have no idea why they are going, which is God's typical way of keeping our faith engaged.

### D. An inside look at his home-life

**When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. (vv. 7–8)**

Luke gives us another look at Cornelius' character in way he relates to those under his care in the privacy of his home. Cornelius' obedience to the angel is immediate. After the angel's departure, he summons two of his servants and a soldier from among "those who attended him." The meaning of the verb *proskartereō* ("attended") suggests his loyalty earned him a place on Cornelius' permanent staff.<sup>5</sup>

The spirit of obedience and respect that pervades his home is reminiscent of another centurion, who Jesus encountered (Luke 7:2–9), and highlights one of the benefits of serving in the military. The supreme attitude that is drilled into new recruits is respect for and obedience to one's superiors ("Yes, sir!"). In Cornelius' case, respect and obedience go both ways. Those under his care grant him the same respect and devotion he has shown to God. One of them has followed his example of devotion and reoriented his life to serve Israel's God. Luke tells us that like Cornelius he is devout. This soldier provides spiritual discernment as well as physical protection for their daylong journey—a wise choice for the task. Having explained everything the angel had told him, Cornelius dispatches the three messengers 30 miles to Joppa.

## II. Peter: The Insider Looking Out

### A. Hunger pangs

**The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. (vv. 9–12)**

Luke turns our gaze back to Joppa at noon ("the sixth hour") on the next day. The messengers are now within sight the city, but God has more work to do before their arrival, and he hasn't much time. Peter must be adequately prepared before for their arrival and

any stumbling blocks must be removed. It is often easier for an outsider to embrace an insider, than for the insider to embrace the outsider. A Gentile God-fearer would have no objection to having table fellowship with a Jew, but a devout Jew would never cross the threshold of a Gentile home, let alone enjoy a meal with them. Jesus' example and teaching had softened many of Peter's prejudices, but it will take a direct revelation for him to fully cross that bridge.

That revelation comes a just the right moment. As noon approaches Peter goes outside Simon's house and climbs the stairs leading to the roof, where he can pray undisturbed. From the rooftop he has a panoramic view of the Mediterranean, glistening in the noonday sun with scores of sailboats gliding through the blue water like white sheets floating across the sky.

While he is the midst of praying he is overcome with hunger pangs. Distracted and unable to concentrate, he orders a noonday meal. While Simon's servants are preparing the meal, "a trance" comes upon him. Peter sees the heavens open and a large sail (or "sheet") lowered by its four corners, containing every kind of animal, clean and unclean (except for fish). God has preempted the kitchen staff with a meal of his own and spreads it out like a massive smorgasbord to satisfy the cravings of one who is famished.

#### B. The divine command

**And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill (lit. "sacrifice") and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. (vv. 13–16)**

As Peter is mesmerized by what he sees, he is further jolted by what he hears. The divine voice commands him to "rise, sacrifice and eat!" Given the context of Peter's hunger and the nature of the command, the voice sounds more like the devil's than God's, when he approached Jesus when he became hungry in the wilderness and offered him a meal of his own making. The thought of sacrificing what God has declared unclean evokes revulsion within Peter. The double negative ("by no means," "never") makes the refusal emphatic and uncompromising, for he has never eaten anything that was common or unclean. Peter views his rejection as obedience to God's law (Lev 10:10), just as the prophet Daniel refused to be defiled by the king's food in Babylon (Dan 1:8–12). These were the laws that kept Israel distinct set apart from the idolatry of the nations. As William Willimon explains,

They identified, demarcated faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith, drop one's particularities and become a good citizen of the empire. A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated.<sup>6</sup>

But the divine voice persists and will not be silenced. The command is repeated a second time and then a third, each concluding with the emphatic announcement, "What God has made clean, do not call common." It is extremely important to understand, as N. T. Wright asserts, this is not about God "simply getting rid of all distinctions and being 'tolerant' of everyone." Rather, with the coming of Christ, the radical symbolization of the dietary laws becomes obsolete, because the gift of the Spirit transcends the symbols, purifying the heart in a New Creation. As Wright further explains, "in Jesus the Messiah of Israel, God has broken down the barrier wall between

Jews and Gentiles, humiliating both categories in order to reveal God's mercy to both."<sup>7</sup>

#### B. The arrival of the outsiders

**Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. (vv. 17–18)**

The vision is over and Peter remains alone on the roof pondering the import of what he had seen and heard. Though he is troubled and perplexed, God doesn't give him any time to sort it all out on his own. Like a teacher who refuses to fail a poor student, God isn't going to leave Peter any room for failure. Just as the curtain closes on Peter's vision Cornelius' messengers arrive at the gate. Their timing is uncanny when you consider the time it took to travel a 30 miles to Joppa; after they entered the city, they had to find their way to the harbor, and then search out someone who could give them directions to Simon's house. The variables are endless, but they arrive right on the dot.

#### C. Orders from the Commander in Chief

**And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." (vv. 19–20)**

The three messengers stand outside the gate calling out Peter's name with a voice loud enough to be heard over the street noise. Just as those inside the house hear the call, the Spirit breaks into Peter's consciousness and rouses him to action. Like a general giving orders to a loyal officer, his instructions are communicated with the utmost urgency ("Behold"), clarity (3 imperatives), and assurance ("for I have sent them"). Peter must go with them with any hesitation or doubt, being assured that this is a divine mission. ("without hesitation" could also mean "making no distinction," i.e. "Make no distinction whether they are Jew or Gentile.")

#### D. The insider comes down

**And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" (v. 21)**

Peter got up and went down the outside stairway and found the messengers who were calling his name. The insider has come down from his place and is now on equal footing with three outsiders, having a conversation on neutral ground outside Simon's home. I am moved the next sentence, "I am the one you are looking for." Missions and ministry is not about creating marketing strategies and five-year programs. At its core, it's about responding to God's invitation, being invited on to his stage to play a significant role in a drama that is bigger than life.

Most significantly Peter takes on the role of listener, to hear their story and why they have come. When you become a listener, you are in a position to learn and grow.

#### E. Invitation to the insider

**And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." (v. 22)**

The speech by the messengers is skillfully constructed and shows how well Cornelius prepared them in their roles. They explain that

the one who sent them is a Roman Centurion, whose devotion to God is well known and acclaimed by everyone in the Jewish community. They go on to say that their mission in coming was divinely orchestrated by an angel, who appeared to Cornelius and directed him to invite you into his home “to hear what you have to say.”

#### F. The outsiders are invited inside

**So he invited them in to be his guests. (v. 23a)**

By the time the meal Peter ordered was ready, three more were invited to sit at the table. And finally for the first time, Peter crosses that bridge and invites them in for table fellowship. While he is eating, Peter is likely hearing the echo “What God has made clean, do not call common.” And he may be remembering another time when he was sharing a meal with Jesus by the sea, when Jesus asked him three times, “Do you love me?” to which he emphatically answered yes. And Jesus replied, “If you love me, feed my lambs... tend my sheep...feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). Putting two and two together, he realizes the command to no longer make a distinction about clean and unclean foods is ultimately about people. Sitting directly across from him are three Gentiles, and he is feeding them. He has crossed the bridge.

### III. Will You Cross this Bridge?

The hero of the story is God, whose hand is busy working behind the scenes every step of the way. God pulls out everything in his holy arsenal to orchestrate this historic meeting: Two angelic visions, God’s voice, geographical location (on the coast in Joppa, and the memory of Jonah), a hospitable host (Simon, the tanner), hunger pangs, the complex orchestration and timing of the messengers’ arrival (who have traveled thirty miles!) to coincide exactly when Peter’s vision ends, the Spirit’s voice and five obedient servants. I know of no other text in the Scriptures where God’s sovereign hand is so blatantly active in so many dimensions that every character in the story is pulled into the plot and carried along unimpeded by human resistance or doubt until the ultimate destination is reached. God’s involvement reveals his commitment and guarantee that Peter is not going to fail. Peter will not become a second Jonah. This bridge will be crossed. Reflecting on this, Luke Timothy Johnson writes,

The reader is a privileged observer, knowing far more than the characters about what God wills and what God is doing. But the reader is also drawn sympathetically into the poignancy of the human confusion and conflict caused by God’s action. The struggle of Peter and his fellow believers to understand what God is doing works subtly on the reader, shaping a sharper sense of the enormity and unprecedented character of the gift.<sup>8</sup>

Where does all this leave us? What prevents you from crossing this bridge? The text suggests that God has his God-fearers in every community. All we need to do to find them is simply pray. Then, if the example holds true, they’ll find us, often for reasons they don’t really know. And then comes the crucial step, the great risk you have to take—invite them to dinner.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:14–18).

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 281.

2. Robert L. Hohlfelder, “CAESAREA (PLACE),” AYBD, 1:799–800.

3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), n.p.

4. Darrell Bock lists seven examples in Luke and Acts where prayer sets the stage for spiritual encounters (Luke 3:21–22; 6:12–16; 9:18–22, 28–31; 22:39–46; Acts 1:14; 13:1–3). Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Backer Academic, 2007), 387.

5. “*proskarterō*,” persevere with, persist in,” BDAG, 881.

6. William Willimon, *Acts, Int* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 96.

7. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One*, Chapters 1–12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 164.

8. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 187.