

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

Stretching Faith (Part 1)

Acts 10:1-23

Acts 10 is generally regarded as teaching on the conversion of a gentile by the name of Cornelius. While it is true that Cornelius will be saved as we progress through this chapter, I suggest to you that the real emphasis of our text is not so much on the conversion of a Gentile to Christ but rather the conversion of a Jew regarding his prejudices.

Peter, as a Jew born and bred, was raised with the teaching that Gentiles were nothing but, and perhaps even lower than dogs. So ingrained was low view of Gentiles upon the hearts and minds of Jews, that whenever a Jew would leave a Gentiles territory, he would shake the dust off of his feet. According to Jewish teaching and customs, a Jew would not eat with a Gentile and would never think of having a Gentile into his home. If a Jew were to possess any utensils made by a Gentile, he could not eat with them, unless they were first ceremonially cleansed. And all of these customs and habits of the Jews, none of them were prescribed in the law of God.

Over the course of Peter's experience, he had certainly come to learn that Gentiles could become Christians. His assumption however was that the Gentiles would have to first become Jewish proselytes. It might be argued that at this point in Peter's theology, he believed in a salvation by race plus grace. What is going to take place for us in this chapter is that Peter is going to come to know that Gentiles are saved in the same way in which the Jews were, and that by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; apart from anything Jewish.

While the conversion of Cornelius is certainly a grand event, let me remind you that he is not the first Gentile we have come to see saved as in Acts 8 Philip witnessed the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. But what's different in our text is that unlike the Ethiopian eunuch who returned to his own gentile territory in Africa, the conversion of Cornelius would keep him in contact with and in fellowship with Jewish Christians. Our text serves as a prelude to what will take place in Acts 11 where the predominantly Jewish church will have to admit Gentiles into the fold without first becoming Jewish.

Without a doubt, our text is revealing the providence of God in teaching both Jews and Gentiles that they are all one in Christ, all part of one body, the church. And one of the lessons that we need to take from this text is to beware of any prejudices; any ways in which we might look down upon others in thinking that they are not worthy of hearing the gospel. *We must guard ourselves against any attitudes that see sharing the gospel with someone as beneath us because we might regard them as unworthy, unloving, or unapproachable.* We must proclaim that people are enabled to become Christians by the grace of God alone, apart from jumping through some hoops that we make for them. To even suggest to someone that in order to receive Christ you must first give up certain aspects of your lifestyle, or you must first do certain things for the church or for others, is to introduce a works-based faith. To tell someone that in order to become a Christian they must first join a church is ridiculous. To tell someone that in order to become a Christian they must first give up smoking, give up drinking, or give up whatever vice that is damaging their lives, is to imply that they themselves have some power, or capacity to do such things apart from the grace of God, in order to receive the grace of God.

Please do not misunderstand me. I firmly believe that as one truly comes to faith in Christ, that true faith will affect their behavior. As said so many times, grace that does not affect one's behavior is not the saving grace of God. But until that grace is realized, asking an unbeliever to become something, or to do something that they have no divine ability to do, is utterly ridiculous.

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And so I say to you that this text reminds us that our goal in reaching people for Christ is to share the life transforming message of the gospel; to teach them that Christ came into the world to save sinners; from themselves, from their sins, so that they might, by the power of God and the grace of God live now to the glory of God. In other words, we need to spend less time preaching reform of one's life as we need to be preaching Christ and allow Him to bring the reformation to a life. Reformation of one's life never comes before the transformation of one's soul. Therefore we preach, we teach, we proclaim, the grace of the gospel of Jesus and then turn the work of transformation over to the Holy Spirit of God who upon transformation of a heart will then bring reformation of the heart.

To this end, I offer you just two points of consideration as we look at the first half of Acts 10:1-23. In these verses we find an account that reveals the amazing grace of God in saving a sinner and in sanctifying a saint. I want you to see the good providence of God, how He is working in the lives of men and women for the express purpose of bringing them to faith in Christ. This is a picture of the sovereign grace of God in the salvation of sinners. We also see how God stretches the faith and comfort levels of His people to proclaim the gospel. We find God working out His purposes in two ways in our text: first we will see how God prepares the person for salvation, and second, we will see how God prepares the preacher to proclaim salvation.

I. God Prepares the Person for Salvation (10:1-8)

Let us read the first portion of our text beginning in Acts 10:1-8...

1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 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. 3 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!" 4 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. 5 "Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; 6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." 7 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, 8 and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

If this text reminds us of any particular truth, it certainly reminds us of this: that God does whatever is necessary in order to bring those for whom Christ has died to faith. The hand of God is clearly evident in the life of Cornelius. So then, let us note what our text tells us about Cornelius.

First, we see that Cornelius was a religious man, yet he was still lost in his sin. We come to find that he was a centurion. In the day, centurions were not mean-spirited, brute men. The general qualifications for such men were that they would not be reckless men but good leaders, steady and stable of mind, and not prone to take the offensive to start fighting at the drop of a hat. Centurions were men who were able to stand fast and even die at their post if overwhelmed and hard pressed by larger forces. The point is that Cornelius, to hold this post, was an intelligent, thoughtful, and able man.

Being a centurion, he was in charge of over 100 soldiers which was a portion of a cohort of some 600 men. But what ought to capture our attention is that this particular Roman centurion is

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described in verse 2 as **"a devout man and one who feared God."** What this tells us is that Cornelius had left his pagan Roman religion and had become a follower, in the loosest sense of the word, of Yahweh. Verse 2 tells us that his devotion to the God of the Jews impacted not only the way he lived but also of his entire household. We are told that he is a generous man, having given many alms and offerings to help the Jewish people. The final description of this man in verse 2 is that he was one who prayed to God continually. To see a man doing these things today would cause many to come to one seemingly natural conclusion; that this man was a believer. But Cornelius had not yet come to know Christ he and was still very lost in his sin. This reminds us that just because a person goes to church, memorizes some Scriptures, is involved with various activities and reaches of the church, that none of these works save a person; for salvation is always by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.

But what this does tell us about Cornelius is that he was a man who had come to realize the bankruptcy of paganism, of any religion outside the worship of the one true God. He given up polytheism for monotheism; the worship of many gods for the worship of one God. He obviously was a man of prayer, a man who sought to live a moral life, and sought to be a help to others. Up to this point, he had been living according to the light that he had. Our text would reveal that the God of Providence was about to give him more light, the fullness of truth to draw him to His son Jesus Christ. And not to belabor the point, but a casual reading of verse 2 should almost be startling to us, that such a man of noble character and of commitment to God was yet still in need of salvation that can only be found in Christ alone.

It is interesting to note the last three key characters we have come to know in the book of Act that have come to faith. It started with a religious man, the Ethiopian eunuch, who was worshiping in Jerusalem and as he was traveling home was reading the prophet Isaiah. And yet, until he was given the truth of Christ by Philip, he was lost in his sin. This is followed by the conversion of Saul, another religious man. Saul, a man of great zeal for God, and yet his religion did not save him. He was lost in his sin until he was confronted with the truth about Jesus. And now we have yet another religious man, Cornelius. Luke seems to be impressing upon us a truth that each and every one of us must keep in mind as we leave this place and as we have opportunity to share the gospel. The truth is this; that just because a person is religious, just because a person does some seemingly "Christian" things does not make him or her a Christian. Salvation is an inherent trust in Christ and in His work and His sacrifice alone. We must remember that until someone has experienced what Jesus called in John chapter 3 "the new birth" - while he may be as theologically astute as Nicodemus or as Saul, and while he may be as intent in the Scriptures as the Ethiopian eunuch, or as devout and generous as the gentile Cornelius, such a person is yet lost in his or her sin. Cornelius was religious yet lost.

This brings us to a second consideration, namely that although Cornelius was lost, it is evident that he had been chosen by God. Beginning in verse 3 we see that something happened to Cornelius at about the ninth hour of the day. The ninth hour being a reference to approximately 3 PM in the afternoon. This was the time of prayer and so we are not surprise of find Cornelius, who was just described as a man who prayed in verse 2, is now praying during the hour of prayer. Yet this time a prayer was utterly unique. In verse 3 we read, "he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God..." This angel had a message for Cornelius; God has heard his prayers and was bringing salvation to him; but he must first hear the gospel from a man named Peter. Turn over

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with me to Acts 11:13-14 were we find Peter summarizing this event and communicating to the leaders at Jerusalem this very truth.

13 "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

We see the good Providence of God in providing everything that would be necessary for this man, Cornelius to be saved. God had prepared his heart through the teachings of the Old Testament. God had sent an angel to tell him what was about to happen. And, shortly in our text, we will find Peter proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ to a man that before this time Peter would have regarded as nothing more than a dog. But as Peter would come to know and even later record in his second letter, in seconds Peter 3:9, Peter declares:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but his patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

The Lord was drawing Cornelius to himself. In our text we have reference to two different cities. The first one we read of in verse 1 is Caesarea. Caesarea was an important port city and a sprawling metropolis. A busy center of commerce. In verse 5, the second city is mentioned. The place is Joppa, a small rural town about a day's journey south of Caesarea. After the angel informs Cornelius that his prayers had been heard in verse 4, verse 5 introduces a command. Cornelius was to send a delegation to Joppa in order to find Peter. The angel tells Cornelius exactly where and how to find Peter. But what I would like you to notice there in verse 7 is the response of Cornelius. What do you see? Yes, Cornelius obeys but let us add the appropriate adverb to his action of obedience. As soon as the angel departed, Cornelius immediately prepares his delegation. There is no hesitation, there is no holding back, there is no deliberating as to whether or not he should or should not do this. And there is a lesson for anyone in this room who may not yet know Jesus Christ and it is this: when God sends you the message of salvation, do not hesitate; act on the truth now.

Our text tells us that Cornelius chose to of his servants, or his household slaves and one devout soldier. The servants would act as the representatives of Cornelius and the soldier was sent along to protect the two servants. But to sum up this first point, that God prepares the person for the hearing of the gospel, remember that Jesus is the good shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep because He loves them and calls them to Himself. We see in the man Cornelius one who from our perspective appears to be seeking after God, and yet our text reveals that God had been at work in this man's life all along. This reminds us that anyone who is seeking God only does so because God has first sought him out. We are reminded that those who are dead in their sins will never turn to God until God first turns Himself towards such ones and draws them to His son Jesus Christ.

Does this mean we should not call people to seek the Lord? Of course we can call people to seek the Lord while He may be found. But salvation always begins with God working on the heart of a person. And so we must be careful that we do not simply sit back and wait for God to do some kind of obvious work in the lives of those people to whom we are responsible to share

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the gospel. Parents do not wait until your child expresses an interest in reading the Bible before you start encouraging them to read the Bible. Do not wait to invite a neighbor or coworker to church or to a Bible study until they express some kind of interest in spiritual things. We do not know how the good hand of Providence has been working in their lives. And in fact your own very presence in their life may be regarded as God taking the initiative, that first step in bringing that family member, that friend, that spouse, or children to his son Jesus Christ. We are about to see that when God prepares the heart of a person to receive the truth of the gospel, He will also bring someone who knows the gospel into that person's life. And that brings us to point two...

II. God prepares the Preacher (10:9-23)

Before I read the text part of our text, I want to dispel any thought of disregarding the second point because of my use of the word preacher. We are so accustomed to calling the pastor of a church the preacher. We believe that somehow the term preacher is limited to just a very small handful of people who stand behind a pulpit and teach. You are all to be preachers; proclaimers of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. So in this sense we are all to be preachers, witnesses, declares of the truth concerning Jesus Christ. With that said, our text beginning in verse 9 could begin with the introduction, "Meanwhile, back in Joppa..." Beginning in verse 9 we read,

9 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. 10 But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; 11 and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, 12 and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. 13 A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." 15 Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." 16 This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

17 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; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." 21 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?" 22 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." 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging. Peter at Caesarea And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

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I find it interestingly significant that we find Peter in Joppa. Some 700 years before Peter was here, Jonah, in disobedience to God's word to preach the message of salvation to the Gentile Assyrians, fled to this very town for refuge. Jonah was so prejudice against the Assyrians that he initially refused to preach the word of God to those Gentiles. Now, 700 years later, we find Peter, who will initially struggle with the idea of preaching the gospel to the Gentile, only this time the outcome will be different. It is ironic that God would demonstrate the need to overcome prejudice in preaching the good news to those who may seem to be unworthy from the very same city of Joppa. Of course, as we noted last week, progress had already been made for we find Peter staying in the home of a tanner, an unclean profession according to the law. Simon the Tanner had evidently come to faith in Peter had obviously received him.

But beginning in verse 9 and running through verse 16, we find Peter, not a religious man, but a righteous man. And although he was righteous, he was obviously confused as he receives this revelation, this vision of a huge picnic sheet coming down out of heaven. For most of us seeing a big picnic sheet coming out of heaven would be a cause of great joy and celebration. But for Peter it was confusing.

We see Peter up on the roof of a house, and what do we find him doing? We find him spending time in prayer. Please note how much time is being spent in prayer in our text, particularly as it relates to evangelism; to our proclaiming of the gospel. It makes me ask myself and so I ask you as well, do we pray this earnestly for the gospel to go forth and be understood?

The incident that is about to take place here for Peter needs to be understood in context. Back in chapter 9 Peter responds with great boldness to the challenge of preaching the gospel to those who are in sickness, the paralyzed man. He responded boldly to the challenge of preaching the gospel in the midst of death, as in the case of Tabatha. But how will Peter respond to the challenge of preaching the gospel to someone who is racially and religiously different than himself?

Peter was praying about the sixth hour, which corresponds to about noon our time. And so, it stands to reason as we read in verse 10, that he became hungry and wanted to eat something. But something happens, he falls into a trance. The word "trance" is a bit vague but the original Greek term seems to imply some kind of intense event that came over him causing him to go into this trance like state. And while in this state, verse 11 indicates Peter seeing the sheet coming down out of heaven that had all sorts of crawling creatures and animals that he would have considered unclean according to the Mosaic law. I can only imagine that upon seeing that sheet of unclean animals, Peter would have been initially repulsed. However, his revulsion was increased when according to verse 13, the Lord commands Peter to kill and eat. Peter had been raised a good and devout Jew, he had never eaten anything like that before, and in his mind he was not about to start now. It would be a violation of the Mosaic law. And yet here is the Lord himself expressly canceling that law.

But why would God cancel the dietary law? Because God was going to use this as an illustration of a greater principle. Peter had been taught that all the animals on that sheet were unclean, but now God would tell him not to call anything unclean which God Himself has now declared to be clean. This is exactly what we see in verse 15. And the true lesson for Peter, the conversion of his heart that needs to take place, is that he was no longer to consider Gentiles whom God had intended to save, as unclean or is unworthy of hearing the gospel. For if God has

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declared the Gentiles clean by virtue of the cleansing blood of His son Jesus Christ, how dare Peter or anyone consider them unworthy of hearing the gospel?

This is one of the essential truths that would begin to permeate the rest of the book of Acts. It would be one of the truths that Paul repeatedly emphasized in his missionary journeys as well as in his letters. In Galatians 3:28 we read,

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Peter is about to learn the truth that the apostle John would record in the book of Revelation, in that scene in heaven where the church as represented by the 24 elders along with the living creatures and the angelic host cry out in song saying as recorded in Revelation 5:9,

Worthy are you to take the book into break its seals for you were slain and purchase for God with your blood man from every tribe and Tom and people and nation.

In our text, the Lord is revealing to Peter that the time for the nations to be won to Christ was upon him. Peter needed to realize that salvation was not found in becoming a Jew, but was rather in coming to Christ. As A.T. Robertson noted, “the symbol of the sheet was to show Peter ultimately that the Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jews. At this moment he is in spiritual and intellectual turmoil.” In verse 16 we are told ***“this happened three times...”*** indicating the emphasis that God was putting upon this truth. It is been said before it is worth noting at this time that whenever an author repeats himself twice, one ought to pay attention, as when Jesus would say things like, “Truly, truly I say to you...” And if an author repeated himself three times, then that is truly a point to be emphasized; as when the angels in Isaiah 6 declared God three times holy saying, “Holy, holy, holy!” And now here in Acts 10:16, we find God telling Peter three times, “What I have declared clean, do not regard as unclean or unholy. Preach the gospel of my Son, Jesus Christ!”

According to verse 17, this entire vision caused Peter to be ***“greatly perplexed in mind.”*** Peter's mind was in utter confusion. God had turn the tables on him. But notice that while Peter was confused he was not beyond correction. In verses 17-23, we find God commanding Peter to leave Joppa to go to the house of a Gentile for the express purpose of preaching the gospel. Let us remember that this went against every social norm that Peter knew. For a Jew to have social contact with a Gentile was strictly forbidden according to Jewish custom. There is nothing in the Old Testament that forbade such a contact, however, it is understandable that in general the Jews wanted to have little contact with the Gentiles because they were seeking to avoid falling into their idolatry. God had commanded them not to so interact with the Gentiles so as to become like them and to take up their forms of worship. And while this was true, they had taken this to an extreme and had even refuse to share the truth that they had about the one true God with the Gentiles.

I cannot even begin to comprehend what was going on in Peter's mind. For years and years he had been indoctrinated with the avoidance of the Gentiles, but now inside he was being reminded that what he had seen and learned about the unclean animals had some kind of application to his being prepared to share the gospel with someone he would have before this

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moment considered also unclean. Did Peter learn his lesson? Absolutely! For while in his vision he initially rejected and refused to eat what God had declared to be clean, we find in his response to go to Cornelius a sense of immediate obedience. In verse 21 it says Peter went down to the man and said in effect, "Here I am, the one you are looking for."

And so, just as we saw in Cornelius a man prepared by God to hear the gospel, we find in Peter a man prepared by God to preach the gospel. All the pieces were falling into place. And may I remind you that the Christian life is truly an experience of seeing all the pieces fall into place by the good hand in Providence of God. We struggle at times and are as perplexed as Peter as to the how's and why's of events and circumstances. Yet there are times in which God gives us glimpses, does he not? Glimpses allowing us to see how an event or series of events; how our circumstances, sometimes good and sometimes bad, are all a part of God's plan and purpose in seeing us become better, more bold witnesses, preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and allowing us to be part of seeing others come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In our minds, God, in His wisdom, could have or should have come up with a better way of spreading the truth of salvation in Christ alone than by using us. But He has chosen us and is calling us to go to the highways and the byways and to bid, plead people to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Our great commission to make disciples whenever and wherever we go implies that we will come across people who are at times a very different from us. And I have no doubt that for each one of us God will put people in our path who may make us feel uncomfortable. If you have a racial prejudice, God may very well put you in a position to share the gospel with those of another race. If you have socio-economic prejudices, maybe looking down on someone because he is poor, or looking down upon someone because he is rich, God may very well put you in a position to share the gospel with such people.

God wanted Peter to share the gospel with this Gentile Cornelius and did everything necessary to prepare the person and the preacher for the encounter. It would be important for Peter to witness the truth that Gentiles come to the faith in Christ alone, not through becoming Jews, not through the works of the law, but by faith alone in Christ alone. Let me close with the warning that I gave you at the beginning of the sermon: guard yourself against any attitude that sees sharing the gospel with someone is beneath you because you regard them as unworthy, unloving, and unapproachable. You and I have been called to make disciples, followers of Jesus, teaching them to obey all that Christ has commanded. May our faith be stretched even as the faith of Peter was stretched in order to accomplish the goal of seeing Christ preached to the nations. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria

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