

“The Gospel Gains Ground as Barriers are Broken Down and/or Barriers are Broken Down as the Gospel Gains Ground” (Acts 10 (NIV84)(10.3.21)

You can decide which is true or if both are true?

Even for me, this is a longer portion of scripture from which to preach; BUT, there is a very good reason. We are given here one story. Acts 8-10 is a crucial pivot point in the history of the fledgling Christian Church.

Please intentionally focus as you hear this story. Who are the primary actors? What is their significance to this story and in the bigger picture? There are underlying themes here and there are implications for us today.

Acts 10 (NIV84)

10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants.⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate.¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you.²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

²² The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

²⁷ Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ Cornelius answered: “Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The word of God for the people of God.

LET US PRAY.

Title: **“The Gospel Gains Ground as Barriers are Broken Down and/or Barriers are Broken Down as the Gospel Gains Ground”**

INTRODUCTION:

In the eighth chapter of Acts, the Apostle Philip was in Samaria preaching Christ. An angel of the Lord sent him to a desert road south of Jerusalem. There, Philip encountered the Ethiopian Eunuch who was returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After explaining that Jesus was the Messiah as prophesied in the Book of Isaiah, the Ethiopian Eunuch believed and was baptized.

The good news of Jesus was breaking down a color barrier. The Church of Christ was going to be planted on the continent of Africa. The Lord engineered the circumstances. The Lord moved in the Ethiopian’s heart and in Philip. Just as Jesus had commanded, Acts 1:8 (NIV84) “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Then, the Spirit of the Lord brought Philip back to Samaria. There he preached the gospel in the various villages until he arrived in Caesarea. This is where Cornelius lived; and yet, Cornelius didn’t send for Philip, he sent for Peter. Why? We will get there in a minute, but first we will take note of Acts chapter 9.

It starts with the word, meanwhile. God was working on many fronts. He was working with Saul on the Road to Damascus. Saul was persecuting the Church when Jesus confronted him, knocked him off his horse, and blinded him. Saul, why are you persecuting me? Jesus asked him.

While this may seem like a separate story, it is integrally connected to barriers being broken down. Saul, the great persecutor of the Church, would become the great Apostle Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. Acts 9:15 (NIV84) But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”

BODY:

So, in these three chapters of Acts, we have a dramatic shift, a breaking out of the gospel. Barriers are disappearing and God is doing what He has promised in the day of Abraham. Yahweh had called him to be the father of The Chosen People. God tells Abraham in Genesis 12:3 (NIV84):

³ I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.”

Jesus confirms this in the verse prior to our call to worship, where he says: John 4:22 (NIV84) “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

That is why Peter must come from Joppa, even though Philip was already in the same city as Cornelius. Peter was the head Apostle – whose faith was the rock Jesus promised to build His Church upon. For such a dramatic shift, the Lord was using the authority that Peter held in the Jewish Christian Church.

The fields were already being prepared. The gospel was flourishing in Samaria when most Jews held Samaritans in disdain. Peter was staying in the home of Simon the Tanner. Normally, Jews would not associate with a tanner because they worked with dead animals, making them unclean. God was already stirring the spirit within Peter.

The same can be said for Cornelius. As a centurion, he too was a man of authority. He was a military man of the most powerful army in the world, the Roman army, stationed in a prominent Roman city. He headed an esteemed Italian Regiment. With his position also came some wealth and social rank.

Not only was he a success by secular standards, but Cornelius was also seriously religious. Can you think of a better accolade? “He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.”

And we can see from this account, God heard his prayers. The Lord sends an angel to appear in a prayer induced vision. The angel commends Cornelius for his faithful prayers and generosity to the poor. The phrase, “a memorial offering before God,” is intriguing. Some are inclined to think the reference is to God remembering, but who needs to remind God.

A memorial offering is mentioned mostly in Leviticus, but also in Numbers. A small portion or “token” of the grain offering is given to God, while the rest is used to be consumed by priests. In that “token” or “memorial offering,” it must be remembered that the whole belonged to the Almighty.

A widely quoted commentator, called Driver, makes this observation: “In Acts 10 it soon becomes apparent that Cornelius and his household function in the story as a representative portion of the Gentiles. Just as the prayers of Cornelius and his charity to the poor arose as the “memorial portion” of an offering before God, Peter recognizes through the grace given to the one man Cornelius that God “accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.””

There is a very significant lesson in the case of Cornelius. Though he lived rightly and religiously, he still needed Jesus. The Lord engineers the circumstances so that Cornelius and his family and friends can hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In God’s timing, Peter is praying and having a complimentary vision to Cornelius’ vision. Now some would attribute Peter’s vision to being hungry. In combination with that, his host works with a variety of animals. You put them together and you get something like a sheet with animals to be eaten upon it.

Peter objects to the command to eat unclean animals. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God gives the Chosen People very strict dietary restrictions. It is part of what separates them from other peoples. It helps to define how they live. You can see it is a barrier. In fact, Peter confesses to Cornelius that

normally Jews are forbidden from even visiting Gentiles. The rules of hospitality would include sharing meals, and this just wasn't possible.

It is described as "Something like a sheet from heaven" is lowered three times for emphasis. It seems to be to also represent three different things. The first function of this sheet is as a barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles. At first, Peter wonders at the meaning of the vision and it will not become clear until he meets Cornelius and his family.

Upon finishing his prayers, the emissaries from Cornelius are at the gate. The circumstances that helped inform the vision and the circumstances choreographed by God are intended to guide Peter and Cornelius. How did they respond? In obedience. They didn't mull things over trying to find a loophole. They didn't give Satan an opportunity to whisper words of doubt into their consciousness. They obeyed. Even without fully understanding, they obeyed.

When we are praying, God is working. When we engage with scripture, God is working. When we hear the word of God proclaimed, God is working. Through other believers, God speaks to us. In signs and circumstances, God is speaking to us. If we have a healthy spiritual life, we stay attuned to the working and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is an old folk song by Woodie Guthrie's called "This Land." Here is one of the verses:

As I went walking I saw a sign there

And on the sign it said "No Tres-passing."

But on the other side it didn't say nothing,

That side was made for you and me.

While Guthrie intended this as a protest song, this verse represents a natural human tendency. We look for a way to justify our ignoring the sign.

Last week, when I was parking cars in our church parking lot for the Italian Festival, I was directly across from the exit for the lot across the street. There was a good size sign with orange letters saying, "Do Not Enter." I saw more than a dozen cars completely ignore that sign. Even while other cars were exiting, others drove around them and the sign.

I want you to have eyes to see the signs from God: visible, spiritual, and from godly sources. Lloyd Ogilvie says, "The Lord couples insight and instigation. He shows us truth and gives us an opportunity to act on what we've learned."

The second function of the sheet was to act as a curtain that is raised and lowered between acts of a play. While it seems most likely that this sheet was horizontally oriented, that isn't necessarily so. My first impression reminded me of the veil of the Temple that was torn from top to bottom during Jesus' crucifixion. Everyone now had access to the holy of holies, the presence of God.

Think of the sheet as a curtain of separation – it was lowered as a barrier and then lifted, creating a new scene, a new era, a new dispensation. As in a play the curtain rises and falls as a demarcation between Acts.

CONCLUSION:

The third function of the sheet is as a tablecloth. It was lowered by the four corners. This language reminds us of the four corners of the world; north, east, south and west. Food was envisioned on this tablecloth. This is a table set for the whole world. The Lord's table is no longer limited to the Jews as the Chosen People, but to all who abide in Jesus.

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism." When I think about food prepared and approved by God, the Lord's Supper comes to mind. When I think about the grain offering, I think of the bread of life. When I think about a memorial offering, I think of the sacrament Jesus gave us, "Do this in remembrance of me."

At first, I thought that maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see. But then I read a sermon by Lance Andrews presented before the King of England. He saw this connection to Holy Communion. And, who is worthy to come to this table? None of us under our own merit. The Lord says here in Acts 10, that it is God that makes man clean. Only through faith in the Lord Jesus do we get made righteous.

Let us now prepare our hearts to come to the Lord's table. We come to the Communion table, the supper of our Lord Jesus, as equals. All in need of God's grace. All in need of remembrance that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Amen and amen. Let us pray.

Scriptural Prayer for Revival

Mighty God, give me the burden for prayer so that revival may come. Just as You moved on Peter, move on me as I pray. Let me have a specific time and place to go to You in prayer. Prompt me throughout the day to seek You in prayer. Teach me to pray—to pray with travail, with a burden.

I do not merely seek revival, but I long for the great Reviver (Acts 10:9). As I pray, Lord, bring to my mind things, beliefs, and practices that are not right. Teach me to unlearn things that I may have accepted as true, but You tell me they are not (vv. 10–13). Teach me the difference between clean and unclean, between holy and what is unholy. Teach me Your ways. Forgive me, Lord, for those times I have allowed things to have priority over You.

Enable me to press through the distractions of life and not forfeit my time with You (v. 15). Speak to me through Your Word, through Your Holy Spirit, through dreams or visions. Challenge me; change me into Your image, just as You did with Peter. Show me how to process Your truth and apply it to my life.

Oh God, let me recognize Your voice (vv. 10, 13, 15, 19). Lord, teach me never to say no to You, for if I say no to You, then You are no longer my Lord. As I process truth, be patient with me (v. 14). Father, teach me the importance of thinking about and meditating on Your Word. Confront and convict and challenge and comfort me with Your Word. (v. 19).

Let me be sensitive to Your Spirit when You speak to me. Let me rise and walk in obedience to Your leading, doubting nothing (v. 20). Please, Lord, send revival. Let us recognize when You are trying to change us, so that we may know Your reviving. Teach me, oh Lord, to pray through for revival.

In Jesus' name, amen.