

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

PASTOR SANDY ADAMS

ACTS 9:32-10:48

Next to Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, what takes place in Acts 10 is the most important development in the history of Christianity. Up until Acts 10 the Church was made up mostly of Jews. Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism. But Jesus promised Peter the keys of the kingdom. And the man with those keys would open the door of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles. In Acts 10 God blazes a new trail, and Peter leads the way. God uses an exotic vision to open up Peter’s mind, his heart, his mouth - and the community of God. A vision supplies Peter courage to chart a new course. Acts 10 forever changes the scope of Christianity and the make-up of the Church. You cannot over-emphasize the significance of this chapter.

Beginning in Acts 10 a daring new work begins. God teaches Peter that what He once called unclean, He now calls okay – and that includes both pork chops and Gentiles. We pick it up tonight where we left off, Acts 9:32. Peter is following Jesus... “Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda.” Lydda was an Israeli city with a large Gentile population. It was 25 miles NW of Jerusalem – 8 miles from the Mediterranean port of Joppa.

There (Peter) found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.” Every morning for the first 18 years of my life this is what my mother commanded me to do, “Arise and make your bed.” I’m sad to report to you I was rarely obedient. But not Aeneas. Luke tells us, “Then he arose immediately.” It was a miracle. Aeneas’ crippled legs begin to walk. “So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” “Sharon” was a regional name. It encompassed the entire coastal plain. The good news about Jesus was spreading from Jerusalem and the hills of Samaria across the western half of the country. The port cities were next... the Jewish port was Joppa and the Roman port was Caesarea.

Verse 36, “At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha (it’s Aramaic for “gazelle”), which is translated Dorcas. (the Greek equivalent.) This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them.” “Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed.” And you should immediately start noting the similarities between the mannerisms of Peter and the methods of His Master. Peter performs this miracle exactly the way Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from her death bed. The first similarity is to put out the professional mourners and weepers. God prefers to work His miracles in an atmosphere of faith and praise.

But the similarities continue, “And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” This is what Jesus said verbatim to Jairus’ daughter. “Talitha Cumi (or little girl), I say to you, Arise.” You get the impression Peter knows he’s in over his head. He’s a fisherman not a miracle-worker, so he takes his cues from Jesus. He remembers what Jesus did and follows Him precisely. Remember Matthew 9 and Mark 5, Jesus said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed.” This is what Peter now says to the crippled Aeneas. It seems whenever Peter feels overwhelmed he goes back to default mode, WWJD, “What would Jesus do?” ...But then he doesn’t sale a cool bracelet or a bumper sticker advertising the initials... He just does it! And Peter got the same results as Jesus... “She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive.”

“And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.” A tanner was as close as you could get to an ancient taxidermist. He was skilled in dressing and preserving animal hides. And since he worked with dead animals, the rules of Judaism considered him ceremonially unclean. This prohibited him from participating in all the Jewish rituals. In fact, his trade was so despised by the Jewish hierarchy that he was forced to work outside the city. Because of the defilement associated with his work the Jewish Mishnah gave a tanner’s wife the right to divorce him.

That Peter stayed in the house of a tanner was another example of him doing what Jesus did. He was willing to befriend and identify with sinners. Jesus had shown him it was God's will to reach out to the unreachable, and love the unlovable. I’m sure Peter recalled the words of Jesus, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...” It’s interesting, Peter seems to already be leaning in the direction of grace. But in Acts 10 he free falls. He jumps out on a parachute of grace.

Verse 1, “There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment...” Caesarea was Israel’s Roman port on the Mediterranean. It was built by Herod the Great in honor of the Roman Caesar. It was a magnificent city with a world renown harbor. Caesarea was Rome’s political and military capitol in Israel. It was the home to the governor, and headquarters of the Roman occupation. And there was a soldier stationed in Caesarea named Cornelius.

Verse 2, he was “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.” Cornelius was a Roman from Italy – the original Italian Stallion. And he was a centurion – equal to a sergeant – the military’s backbone. It’s interesting, whenever a centurion appears in the NT its usually in a favorable light. Cornelius was disciplined and trustworthy. He and his Italian Regiment served as the Roman governor’s personal body guards. Cornelius was also called a “God-fearer.” He was a Gentile who’d tired of Greek and Roman paganism. He was hungry for the true God. He had embraced Judaism, short of being circumcised. He’d obeyed the Law’s moral demands, yet failed to find God. These God-fearers were sincere seekers. They even gave offerings to the local synagogue. They were good people, but lost people, nonetheless.

“About the ninth hour of the day (or 3:00 in the afternoon) he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius!” And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, “What is it, lord?” So he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.” God had heard Cornelius’ prayer. God always hears the sincere prayer of a searching heart. “Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.”

Remember chapter 8, God called Philip to leave a happening revival in Samaria to find a man on a lonely deserted highway outside Gaza. He explained the Scripture to a single Ethiopian in search of the truth. God never allows a sincere God-fearer to return home empty-handed. Whether it's the aborigine in the outback of Australia, or the little boy growing up in a strict Islamic country - somehow, somehow God will expose the sincere seeker to the truth and get them pointed toward Jesus.

Verse 7, "And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa." ...to fetch Peter... "The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour." Notice, God's timing is always perfect. Cornelius' men are in route when God begins to work on the other end of the connection. He tackles Peter's reluctance. And Joppa was the perfect backdrop for Peter's vision. It was the town where Jonah set sail. Jonah was a bigot – a prejudiced Jew who hated the Ninevites. In Jonah's mind and heart, God's salvation was for "Jews only." But God altered Jonah's direction. He stirred up a storm - scared the ship's crew - they slung the prophet overboard. A fish swallowed Jonah, then spit him up on a bank. A repentant Jonah went to preach to Gentiles. Now again at Joppa, God is going to bust up The Jews Only Club...

It's noon. The tropical heat was on the rise. Peter climbed to the rooftop patio to seek out shade, and enjoy the cool breeze. And it's lunch time... "Then (Peter) became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance..." On this day, God will serve the lunch. "And (Peter) saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." A huge picnic blanket descends from heaven and all kinds of incredible in-edibles are on the grill. Yet all the entrees are of the non-koshered variety. Nothing Peter gets offered is on the Jewish menu. God's tasty treats fly in the face of what Peter's religion taught him he could munch. Yet Peter hears a voice that says, "Rise Peter; kill and eat."

In the first century, Jews and Gentiles were separated by pedigree, circumcision, Sabbath worship – but above all, they were defined by diet. A kosher Jew was religiously superior to a non-kosher Gentile. And that kosher Jew would never in a million years pull up to a table-full of God-forbidden food. Nor would he eat with folks who occupied the table.

Jewish dietary laws were the epitome of religion. Yes, the distinction between clean and unclean had some definite health benefits – especially in a day when meat wasn't always properly prepped and refrigerated. But kosher laws were part of a bigger picture. God had conditioned Israel to approach life in a certain manner. All of life was to be delineated as clean and unclean – holy and unholy - pure and impure – acceptable to God and unacceptable to God. This distinction was a grid that overlaid every dimension of life - food, sacrifice, washing, houses, even people. The Jewish Law provided us a means to differentiate "good" from "bad." Through the Law you could pick out the good guys from the bad guys.

This is the purpose behind not just Jewish religion, but all religion. Muslim religion, Buddhist religion, Hindu religion, even pseudo-Christian religion defines clean from unclean. Every religion has its own standards, and taboos, and rituals that allow it to label "the pure" and "the defiled." Often liberal critics attack religion as the enemy of unity. They claim religion is the Great Divider in the world. Rather than bring us together, it keeps us apart. It separates us into factions and inflames hostilities. And in a sense this is true. Every religion divides humanity into

holy and unholy.

And no other religion did this as comprehensively and rigorously as did God's religion, Judaism. Kosher Jews were reminded at every single mealtime there was such a thing as right and wrong – holy and unholy. Good guys ate “clean” foods. Bad guys ate the “dirty birds.” And of course Judaism didn't end with diet... It did such a thorough job identifying good from bad, by the time you'd subjected your life to the entire Mosaic Law you had to conclude with Rabbi Saul in the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans that “There is no one is righteous, no, not one.” An honest OT Jew was forced to an uncomfortable conclusion... Everybody is a bad guy! In the ranks of humanity there are no good guys.

This is why Christianity picks up where Judaism leaves off. We say this all the time, but without its full implications hitting us... Christianity is not a religion – and that's true. Christianity is about salvation – not religion. Religion chooses sides – it picks out good guys from bad guys - it assigns white hats and black hats - it awards merit badges to folks for accumulating filthy rags... but that's not Christianity. The Gospel declares that we're all bad guys. There's only one good guy... His name is Jesus. And the goal of Christianity is to bring everybody to Jesus!

Whether you're a Tech fan or a Georgia fan – a Mac-user or PC-user - a Republican or a Democrat - you're a bad guy, and you need Jesus! Unrighteous bad guys and self-righteous bad guys – secular bad guys and religious bad guys - pew-sitting bad guys and pulpit-occupying bad guys - all need Jesus! Today, the line in the sand for the whole human race is no longer the food we put in our mouth, but the faith we put in Jesus! God bestows grace and shows favor to those who come to Jesus!

Here's what's happening in Peter's vision, God is putting an end to religion. He's replacing it with salvation. Judaism was religion. It was God's religion – a perfect religion - but it was still religion. Now God puts religion on the shelf, and He chooses new terms for His covenant with humanity. Christianity is salvation – not religion... Since none of us are good, it's all about grace. And the only place you'll find grace is the cross of Christ. Peter needed to stop being religious and drop its distinctions. People are no longer categorized as clean or unclean – chosen or common - white hats or black hats. The line of demarcation is no longer religion and its trappings – it's now a matter of receiving the grace of God found in Jesus.

Obviously, God was up to something, but Peter wasn't so sure what God was cooking up. Verse 14, “But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” Here's the ultimate oxymoron. You can say, “not so friend...,” but you can't say “not so Lord.” “Lord” means “master, boss.” If Jesus is your Lord you're under His command.

Yet I empathize with Peter's reluctance. Asking a Jew to eat non-kosher food is like requiring a diehard vegan to pig out on a chili-cheese burger. This was a complicated decision. Years of religious training, and the bias it had created, kept Peter hemmed-in. He was trapped by three powerful forces – by principle, by prejudice, and by precedence.

Understand, principles are either informed or misinformed - depending on how they're formed. Peter had grown up a good Jewish boy. Tradition forged his principles. He went to synagogue on Saturday - paid tithes - kept Passover - made pilgrimage to Jerusalem - offered a sacrificial lamb. And Peter kept kosher in obedience to Leviticus 11. He only ordered off the “clean” menu. His wife went to the deli with the rabbinical sticker of approval in the window. Shrimp, lobster... had never crawled over his lips.

Peter never savored a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich – or a plate of pork BBQ! **It was a matter of principle!** I'll never doubt Peter's devotion to principle. To me, a life without BBQ rivals the zeal of a suicide bomber!

When God told Peter to eat unclean foods - it was as if 1500 years of tradition, and the Law of Moses, and a thousand rabbis, and his entire Jewish family were screaming in Peter's ear to ask for another menu. From birth, Peter's conscience was drilled to keep kosher. This wasn't a simple preference - but a deeply-held matter of conscience - a principle. **Yet a misinformed principle kept Peter on the wrong side of God's will.**

Our conscience is an organ we train to act on cue. The conscience is taught by truth or tradition. It can fight against the Holy Spirit, or be His ally. Go to the Middle East today and you'll see this on both sides of the conflict. Jews can't give in to Muslims without violating their conscience - while Muslims can't concede to Jews because it's a violation of their conscience. Evidently, a conscience can be programmed by truth or error. Peter needed to surrender his conscience to the Lordship of Jesus. Some of Peter's principles were wrong - some no longer applied. God was blazing a new trail. A sovereign God is stepping out of the box, and he's recruiting Peter to step out with Him. But Peter has to cut ties with a few long-held **principles** if he's going to be part of God's work of grace.

Peter was also trapped by **prejudice**. Don't underestimate the power of a prejudice! When Peter thought of eating pork and visiting Gentiles it just didn't "**feel right.**" Whether it was right... wasn't his biggest hurdle! This was outside Peter's comfort zone. Prejudicial feelings caused his resistance. I know some prim and proper Baptists who'd never come to church wearing short pants, or mow their lawn on Sunday... It wouldn't "**feel right.**" There are some things that don't "**feel right**" to you, but that doesn't make it wrong for someone else. A Christian has to represent God's truth, not his own prejudices. To live by grace I make the decision not to let my preferences, or my feelings, or my traditions govern my interactions? Your prejudices will close the door to certain people. Grace keeps doors open.

And for Peter to obey God, he also had to step over a **precedent**. He answered God, "**nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.**" Peter had established a standard for his life. This had never, ever happened, never... Peter had never ordered sausage on his pizza! This is the type of conviction religious people applaud... Like an Eric Liddell never running a race on Sundays – or a Sandy Koufax not pitching on Yom Kippur - a guy makes a costly commitment and refuses to budge. Here Peter does the same, **but it works against God's will in his life.** God wants to take Peter – not up to the edge of where he's been – but to a new place. Peter has to step over a precedent in his life to obey God. Some steps are hard to take, just because they've never been taken before. Peter has a decision to make. Kill and eat - or sit still and disobey?

This was a tough decision for Peter - perhaps that's why God repeated the vision three times. Peter had to wrestle, and dissect truth from prejudice. Peter's conscience supported a prejudice he needed to pin. Verse 15, "**And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.**"

On the rooftop in Joppa God was weaning Peter off religion so he could embrace grace. Perhaps this is what needs to happen in your life? Unlike religion, Christianity isn't a commitment to **a principle**, or **prejudice**, or **precedent**. It's the pledge of allegiance to **a person!** It's all about Jesus! The Ruler always trumps the rules. The Lord overrides the Law. As followers of Jesus our conscience is bound to one passion – to please our Lord Jesus! We're not to follow religious expectations, or church tradition, or even the rules of our own making... we're to follow Jesus!

Will you go where He sends you? Do what He says do? Love whoever He sends to your door? And realize there's always a knock on the door... Verse 17, "Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate."

We get grace from God, but then we give grace to everyone around us. And it's the giving of God's grace that sends us on this grand adventure. Religion is uniform, boring, mechanical, predictable... But grace is wild and wooly. It's the call of the wild! It's orthodox to believe in grace, but risky to practice grace. Apply grace and you'll be criticized by religious folks. Dare to extend God's grace and you'll find yourself in uncomfortable places - with uncomfortable people - dealing with uncomfortable situations. This is what happens to Peter. No sooner does God fold up the picnic blanket that three Gentiles - Romans no less - are knocking at his door.

"And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, (and I love the encouragement...) doubting nothing; for I have sent them." Legalistic leanings are deeply ingrained and can derail our faith. That's why to take the path of grace you have to remove all doubts! "Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you. Then he invited them in and lodged them."

"On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." On the way up the coast from Joppa to Caesarea, Peter has been thinking through the implications of grace. In Judaism, a Jew was forbidden to enter the home of a Gentile. It would defile him. He'd be unclean. But Peter realizes once you strip away religion there's no difference between him and Cornelius. They both put their britches on the same way. They were both bad guys in need of Jesus. Peter shouldn't be worshipped. He's just a man. It's interesting though, people still do this to Peter. Go to Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, and you'll see worshippers lined up before Michelangelo's statue to kiss the foot of Peter. Over the years the lips have rubbed away his big toe. It's nothing but idolatry, and if the real Peter were here he put his foot down! He would insist he's just a man. This was his approach to Cornelius.

Verse 27, "And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.' So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God." Talk about eager listeners - this is it! They're all ears... Charles Spurgeon once said, "It's not a great preacher that makes a great congregation, but a great congregation that makes a great preacher."

Verse 34, “Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.” O prejudiced Pete, has come a long way! “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ - He is Lord of all - that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” Nothing fancy, or clever, or eloquent about Peter's sermon - he just lays out the facts... and that's all we need to do! And “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.” Peter's not through with his sermon. He doesn't even get to give His invitation. He gets interrupted by the Spirit. Peter holds the unique distinction of being the only man to be interrupted by all 3 members of the Trinity. On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter was interrupted by God the Father. On several occasions he was interrupted by God the Son. Here He's interrupted by God the Spirit. There are times when we also need to be interrupted. We've said enough. We need to quiet ourselves and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

“And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.” Before Peter could brief the Gentiles on keeping kosher, or clip a single circumcision, or make a sacrifice, or read the rules... God saved the Italian Guard, just as He did the Jews. And it had absolutely nothing to do with anything, but God's grace and their faith. “For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.” The same evidence of the filling of the Spirit that the Jews received at Pentecost... God has saved the Gentiles in the exact same way He saved the Jews. “Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.” In essence they were baptized as Christians. “Then they asked him to stay a few days.”

Remember, throughout the OT you had to be a child of Abraham to be a child of God... Just as there were clean and unclean foods, there were chosen and common people. Jews were special. Gentiles were ordinary. But when Jesus died on the cross He did so to take away the sins of the world, not just the Jews. Access to God is now available to all people. It's been said, “The only level ground in all the world is at the foot of the cross.” Today, the only “in crowd” on the planet that matters is “in Christ.” Yet sadly, that's no always the case in a lot of churches. Leaders today like to lay down their own law. If you conform to their man-made rules, you can ride in the front of the bus – but if you resist, you sit in the rear. Believers are divided into first class and coach. It's a religious caste system –and it's the opposite of grace! There are no second class citizens in God's kingdom. “What God has cleansed you must not call common!” Later Peter will write to all believers and calls them “(God's) own special people...” We're “complete in (Christ)” – not because we toe the party line! It was an amazing adventure for a good Jew like Peter... Gentiles knock on his door - he travels with Gentiles to a Gentile city - enters a Gentile home - then preaches to a roomful of Gentiles. What a culture shock! In one sense, Peter just goes up the coast of Israel, but in another sense, Peter's experience with Cornelius is the shot heard round the world. The rabbis at the time would've said a Gentile wasn't worthy to set foot under the same roof as a Jew. Yet by the end of the day, Gentile believers now know the same God - participate in the same covenant - have the same Spirit, the same power, and the same evidence as Jewish believers. The future of Christianity was forever altered by Peter's obedience to the vision. In fact, you and I owe our place in God's family to his courage.