

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Demolishing Discrimination

Acts 10:1-11:18

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Over the last few months we've been working through the book of Acts. Acts is the beginning of the story of what Jesus kept doing after He ascended back to heaven.

So it is a book full of miracles and mission, it is certainly a book of the spectacular, but it is also a book of the mundane. And that's because in it Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, has filled and is working through regular people like Philip and Peter and Saul to increase His glory and the reach of His kingdom.

So at the beginning of Acts Jesus said:

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. Acts 1:8

And this started in Acts, and Jesus has continued bringing this prophecy to fruition through the ages even to present day Prince George.

Now throughout this series we've been talking a lot about glory and about kingdom and so I want to just review what we mean when we use these terms.

First, to give someone glory is to elevate them in importance. It is to sing their praise. So when I say "Nobody can play hockey like Sid Crosby." I'm glorifying him. "His stick is an extension of his arm. He can move that puck like nobody's business. So that when he shoots you have no idea where it is coming from, but you have a good idea where it is going to go – in the net." That's glory.

And similarly, Jesus gets glory every time a new person submits their lives to Him. They are saying I'm not going to play god in my life anymore, I've just been messing stuff up. But now I see that You alone are worthy of my affection and devotion. I want You to be my God. I want to please You with my life. That's glory.

And several weeks back we defined "kingdom" as the extent to which your rule extends. So everything and everyone has a kingdom. Your cat has a kingdom – maybe that's not surprising. Your cat's kingdom extends as far as their rule is felt. So all the mice in your house know about her kingdom, and if any puppy tries to come in and swipe something out of her food dish she gives him a swat. That's kingdom!

And God's kingdom reaches to the extent that His rule is felt in the universe. So everywhere that someone is saying Jesus is my God, is where His kingdom is present.

And Acts is the story of what Jesus set about doing through His disciples to increase His glory and expand His kingdom. And we've watched it grow from 120 to 3120 to 5120. And then we saw it expand from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and in Joppa and Lydda. And now in chapter 10 we are going to watch it cross the racial line as it expands into Caesarea.

So Acts 10 and 11 contain a story about Peter and Cornelius. Now today the text that we are covering is a big one, and so we aren't going to read it all the way through. But I want to encourage you to do this at home, because it is an amazing story of seeing God at work. For now let's pick it up in chapter 10 verse 1.

[Read Acts 10:1-6]

Now just to set the context for you, this story is tied to the one about Aeneas and Tabitha – also known as Dorcas – that we touched on last week. The last verse in chapter 9 tells us that Peter had stayed in Joppa ministering to the people there. So that's where Cornelius is going to be sent to find him.

But this story is also remotely tied to Philip's story. So a month ago we looked at Philip who God told to leave his successful ministry in Samaria, and travel back through Jerusalem and out to the desert road that leads to Gaza. Now the reason Philip was in Samaria was that had just fled Jerusalem because of the persecution there. So God's plan required some faith as well as a willingness not to have all the details figured out – God didn't tell him what he was supposed to do in advance.

But after going where God told him to go Philip connected with an Ethiopian eunuch who had been worshipping in Jerusalem, but didn't know Jesus. Philip remedied this, baptized him, and then God teleported him 28kms back up towards Samaria to Azotus.

Now the crazy part about all that, and the part that connects this story with today's, is that Peter and the other Apostles were in Jerusalem when that Eunuch was there. So God could have easily set up that meeting, but He chose Philip, and had him travel to be part of what God was doing. Well chapter 8 ends with this verse:

Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. (Acts 8:40)

And Caesarea is where our story picks up today. Now Caesarea is about 60km north of Joppa, which is where Peter was, but this had become home for Philip.¹ So Philip the evangelist lives just down the street, but Jesus tells Cornelius to send for Peter. God wants Peter in on this one.

And the reason is that the gap Jesus' gospel is about to cross now is racial as opposed to spatial. So up to this point, while the gospel has crossed language barriers and even broken into Samaria, it has largely been spreading among people of Jewish descent.

¹ Acts 21:8-9 – Philip is still living in Caesarea with his family.

But now all this is going to change, and there is no one better to oversee this than Peter, the pure-blood Jew from Jerusalem.

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So Cornelius and his family are devout and God-fearing people – we will come back to that – but they are Gentiles, not Jews. Gentiles were unclean. In verse 28 Peter tells Cornelius:

[Read Acts 10:28a]

So there was a line between Gentiles and Jews that was not crossed easily. The Jews hated the Samaritans, but they were basically indifferent towards the Gentiles – they didn't associate with them hardly at all.

And it is into that setting that God initiates something mind-blowing. He sends an angel to Cornelius and tells him to request spiritual direction from Peter. And Cornelius responds by immediately dispatching two servants and a soldier to make the 60km trek.

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Skipping forward a few verses we find that a day later, while these three men are hustling towards Joppa, Peter is hungry and praying before lunch. As he is doing this he falls into a trance. And in this state he sees something like a big sheet coming down from heaven full of tasty animals that the Old Testament clearly identifies as unclean.

So in the Old Testament one of the ways God stipulated the Jews were to demonstrate their separation from the world and commitment to Him was by not eating the food the other nations ate. And this was a really big deal in Israel. Israel had lots of trouble following God's Law, but this is one law they didn't mess up. So Peter would have identified these animals right away.

And then Peter hears a voice from heaven saying "Kill and enjoy bacon wrapped calamari" – or something like that. And he objects – this is unclean. I've never eaten anything like this in my life – but it does sound good. And then he hears the words of verse 15: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

And Peter sees this vision three times. And then the sheet is taken back up to heaven and Peter wakes up. Now that would have been an incredibly troubling vision for Peter. But then while he was trying to remember whether he had eaten bad tilapia for breakfast, or just needed to pay better attention to his insulin levels - the three men who had been sent by Cornelius arrive. 3 commands to eat what was unclean, and now 3 unclean Gentiles at his door. And in a second Peter recognizes Jesus is in this.

Remember last week the *talitha koum* – *Tabitha koum* connection? Peter is constantly looking for where Jesus is going to show up. He wants to participate with what Jesus is doing to build His kingdom. And so he is ready for the unexpected. And it happens again. Peter's spirit checks and he thinks "none of this makes any sense, but if I've learned anything it is that risking getting on board with Jesus pays BIG dividends. And I want in... Do you want in with what Jesus is doing in this city?"

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So the next day Peter the Jew heads off to the northern most corner of Samaria with three Gentile traveling companions. This is like the start of one of those jokes where a pastor, a priest and a Jew head into a bar. You know it is a joke right from the beginning because of how unlikely everything is.

But this is no joke. The unlikely is Jesus' point. And so when Peter arrives he finds that Cornelius has prepared his family, his extended family, all his friends and his servants, and they are all there waiting for Peter to show up. And he starts preaching, and the whole family repents, and the Spirit falls on them and they get baptized.

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Now there are a hundred different angles we could take in this text, but I want to focus in on two questions people have asked of this text surrounding taking the good news of Jesus to people who are different from ourselves. This is a story about cross cultural and cross racial mission.

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So the first question is, was Cornelius saved before Peter preached Christ to him? And the reason this is an important question is because many have looked at the words of verses 34 and 35 and concluded this. So look at chapter 10 verse 34:

[Read Acts 10:34-35]

This happens just after Cornelius has introduced himself to Peter. So you can probably see why some conclude that Cornelius was already saved when Peter arrived – God had accepted him. And this acceptance is built on the words of verse 2 which says Cornelius and his family were generous, devout, God-fearing people. They didn't know Jesus, but they devoutly worshiped God.

And based on this people have argued that prior to hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ people can be saved if they live good, God-honouring lives to the best of their ability. And this could be referring to unreached people groups in countries the gospel has never penetrated, or it could refer to those right here in Canada who have grown up without knowledge of Christ – this is happening a lot these days among young people.

So the first question is, based on this text, are good people like Cornelius saved from the wrath of God prior to their hearing the gospel of Jesus?

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And I want to handle this question by looking at four reasons this text and it's context give that prove the answer is "No – No Cornelius was not saved prior to Peter's arrival."

First we need to look at the language Luke uses to describe Cornelius, and compare it with the rest of Acts. So chapter 10 starts out by calling Cornelius a devout, God-fearing Gentile. But this same language is used earlier in the book to describe the Jews who also needed to repent before being saved.

So right back in chapter 2, just after the Spirit has fallen on the disciples, we read:
 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. (Acts 2:5)

It's the same word. But then Peter gets up and preaches "you devout people killed Jesus", and they get convicted and ask what do we do? And Peter tells these God-fearing Jews:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. (Acts 2:38)

So there is a direct parallel here between the way Cornelius is described pre-encounter with Christ, and the way the first Jewish converts are described pre-encounter with Christ. And so Luke is making it clear that being devout and God-fearing does not solve the problem of our separation from God. It is only Jesus who bridges that gap.

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Second, look at the way Peter ends his sermon to Cornelius in Acts 10:43

[Read Acts 10:43]

Peter says Jesus is the one means the prophets foretold that our sins could be forgiven. And we know from other passages that it is our sin that separates us from God. So Paul says:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... [And] the wages of sin is death. (Romans 3:23; 6:23)

So it is God's forgiveness of our sin that marks the moment of our salvation. Without forgiveness there is only separation from God. And Peter says, in verse 43, that it is by believing in Jesus that a person receives forgiveness.

What Peter does not say is that those who fear God and do good deeds are forgiven. Rather the message of the gospel is that forgiveness comes through belief in the name of Jesus.

So, whatever verse 35 means, it cannot mean that people who live good lives without Jesus are saved.

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Third, look forward to chapter 11 verse 12. At this point in the story Peter has returned to Jerusalem, and the believers there – all of whom were Jews – start giving him a hard time for associating with Gentiles. But Peter responds by telling them the story of what happened. So he tells them about the sheet from heaven, and the men who showed up. And then he says, verse 12

[Read Acts 11:12-14]

Six men had come back with Peter from Cornelius' house as witnesses. And Peter says, the reason I was there was because an angel told Cornelius that I had a message

for him that was essential for his salvation. So the message was crucial. And the message was not that Cornelius was already saved, but it was the means by which Cornelius and his household would be saved.

This also makes sense of the miraculous means God provided for connecting Cornelius with Peter. There was a message this God-fearing man needed to hear in order to be saved.

So Acts 10:35 can not mean that people who are living good lives without knowledge of Christ are already saved.

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The final reason for saying that Cornelius was not saved prior to believing in Christ is found in the last verse of our text today – chapter 11 verse 18.

This verse picks up after Peter has defended his bringing the gospel into the house of a Gentile by telling them the story of what God did to Cornelius. And the Jews of Jerusalem respond in verse 18 saying:

[Read Acts 11:18]

So the Jews praise God for granting repentance to the Gentiles that leads to life. And this is specifically eternal life, which obviously they did not have prior to Peter's message about Christ.

So, while Acts 10:35 does talk about God accepting those who fear Him and are devout, we can conclude this does not mean these people are saved by their good works. Cornelius and his household were not saved from God's wrath prior to their encounter with Christ which they received through Peter's preaching.

Now this leads us to our first take-away. And that is that we need to be people who risk crossing social and racial lines in order to bring the message of Christ to those who are not like us. And we need to do this for two reasons. First, because no matter how great they are, they are not saved. And they will not be saved unless they hear the gospel from us. And second, we need to take this risk because this is where Jesus is working.

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So Jesus has invited His church to risk stepping outside our comfort zone to partner with Him in bringing His message to those He has placed us near and those who are far away. This is why local and global mission are worthy endeavors for Jesus-followers.

So I want to encourage us to ask ourselves, am I doing this? Are we as a church doing this?... Take a second right now and ask God who He might be leading you to risk sharing Christ with so that they might come to saving faith in Jesus.

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The first question this text raised was "Are devout, God-fearing people saved prior to their encounter with Christ. And the answer, based on this text, is no. The second

question that this begs then is “What does verse 35 mean when it says ‘[God] accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right?’”

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Here we need to back up to verse 34 to get the context on verse 35. This is the first thing out of Peter’s mouth after Cornelius has recounted his story about the angel. Peter responds, verse 34:

[Read Acts 10:34-35]

Now in order to understand this we need to see the contrast between these verses and what Peter says in verse 28 – because while they are similar they aren’t the same thing.

So in verse 28 Peter tells Cornelius why he came. He says:

[Read Acts 10:28]

So Peter understood from his vision that he was not to be racist. He was not to believe that there is anyone on earth that he should consider not good enough to hear the gospel. The key word here is “anyone”. There is no one on earth that is excluded from God’s message of salvation.

But then, after Cornelius tells Peter about his desire to please God with his devotion and generosity, Peter learns something else. And we get that in verse 35.

God has taught Peter that He accepts from every nation *the one* who fears him and does what is right. Notice the words “the one.” There is a contrast here from verse 28 – Peter has learned something new.

And what Peter has been blown away by is that all around the world there are people God is preparing to encounter Him. These people aren’t saved yet – we have already seen that. But God is at work in them, fostering a desire for salvation, even before any person shows up and presents the gospel. God is already at work.

So the first take-away was that we need to risk crossing social and racial lines to bring the gospel to the people Jesus has placed us beside (and those who are far off). Because unless we do they will not encounter salvation.

The second take-away is that we should expect God to already be at work before we arrive. Expect God to be doing things in people you haven’t shared the gospel with yet.

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I love the way Cam Roxburgh and the FORGE team talk about this. They operate under the conviction that God is already at work in our city before we set food outside. So Cam is a bit like Peter in this. He is constantly looking to find where Jesus is working in the people of his neighbourhood or at his grocery store or on the bus he takes. He is looking for God-fearing devout people who aren’t yet Jesus followers.

And the way he determines he has found one is when he bumps into someone like Cornelius. So when someone is generous or hospitable or unexpectedly kind to him, his first thought now is “Jesus must be at work in this person.” And then he starts praying that Jesus might make them hungry for salvation. And he looks for ways to present Christ to them.

This is the way Christ-followers should live.

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If you have been around Fort George over the summer you know we've been talking about how we can do this as a church. And I believe Jesus has honoured our desire to be part of what He is doing by dropping an opportunity to partner with Him right in our laps.

So last night here at Fort George we had our second meeting of Lighthouse. And again dozens of young people came out. Now many of these kids have littler or no church background, but they are hungry for spiritual meaning in their lives. And so they are coming out and giving themselves to worship, and they are listening to the Word.

Now these people wear different clothing than we do, and they speak a different language, but it seems to us that their hunger for truth means Jesus must be in this. So Spencer, and myself and our youth leaders are excited to ask you to keep praying for Lighthouse. Pray that we will be able to partner with what God is doing to increase His glory and the reach of His kingdom.

There is nothing more exciting than getting to see God move. Amen?

I love you guys.

Let me pray for us.