

Sunday 28th April 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Great to see you all out there. And this morning, we're going! to be looking at the next passage in Acts. We've been on a bit of a journey, haven't we?

looking at the early church and how it was formed and how that then relates to us here today. And the passage that Rachel has just read for us, I'm just so glad is in the passage in the Bible, that it's in the Word of God. Because what it does, it establishes this principle in the early church, and you remember that's when the early church was being created, it establishes that principle that the good news about Jesus Christ is not just for one particular nation or group of people, but it's to be offered to all, not just historical chosen people, the Jews. So the gospel is for all of us too. And this is how this was established.

So we're on the cusp of the good news about Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection, not only being proclaimed to the Jews in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, you remember people speaking about this earlier in this series, that that's where the preaching started. It started in Jerusalem, it went out to Judea and out to Samaria. But it was also for the Gentiles. So who are the Gentiles? They're people like you and me, the non-Jewish people, if you like. And the instruction was that this message should go out to the ends of the earth. And we've seen how the Holy Spirit was actually very active orchestrating events in these Jewish people's lives, these early believers, so that they came to faith. And then having come to faith, they need to reach out to others beyond the boundaries of their own nation. This was good news and they needed to get out. And this was God's purpose, that they should get out beyond the boundaries of Israel and to the rest of the world. But in order for Peter and the other apostles to do this effectively, they themselves, and this is a key thing, they themselves had to take on board a really fundamental change in all their attitudes and thinking that they'd been steeped in up till then. Because there was a kind of impenetrable barrier that they set up that was preventing them, or would prevent them, from sharing what they had with those outside the Jewish race, or God's chosen people, as they were up to then. Well, you might wonder why this passage is actually here. If you were here last week, well, we've done all that. We've done about this account of being instructed to eat toad on the hole for lunch, or perhaps more accurately, boa constrictor or something like that. It all sounds a bit like a rewind. So why have we got this passage in here again, this repeat of the story? Well, it's actually Peter's account. I believe of what actually happened to him. And I think Luke records this because he wanted to show how Peter had to make sure that the other apostles, not only him, he had to have a change of mind and heart, not only him, but the other apostles and church leaders also had to be persuaded of this real truth. So there had to be a change of mind and heart, not only with Peter, but also with the church leaders before they could then go out. And they had to really review their own cultural background, their heritage. And for Peter, actually, this was a huge task, because these thoughts about them being a special race and different from everybody else was so ingrained in their thinking, it took a lot to shift it.

[4 : 17] So let me ask you a question. What does it take you or take to persuade you to change your whole way of thinking? You know, to abandon some deeply held convictions, perhaps that you've been brought up to believe, to a completely new perspective on life. I actually feel for Peter, when you think about his whole Jewish identity, his whole Jewish identity was bound up in obedience to this law of Moses that his ancestors had been given. You know, this idea of all the males having to be circumcised and not being able to eat unclean foods and a whole range of other laws that they had to be obedient to.

And he was one of God's chosen people, historically. So the thinking was, surely these new converts from outside of the Jewish nation should also adopt Jewish identity and they should be circumcised.

They should separate themselves from non-believers and only eat clean foods. Was the good news of salvation, perhaps, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, really for people outside of the Jewish race? And if it was, surely they too, they needed to obey God's laws.

They were God's laws. They were given to Moses. So they ought to be made to obey this sort of list of rules and regulations as well. So here we see Peter actually voluntarily, he wasn't sort of summoned to Jerusalem, he voluntarily went to Jerusalem with six people, six witnesses that he took with him to go and see the leaders of the early church because he realised how important it was that they should hear what had happened to him.

And you can just see that in verse one of the passage we've read. Peter said, you know, these people in Jerusalem had actually heard shock, horror.

[6 : 22] People from non-Jewish backgrounds had received the word of God. But Peter wanted them to know what he had learnt from these visions that he'd had. So he went to explain what an extraordinary few days he'd spent in Joppa and in Caesarea.

And bear in mind that that's near the border with Syria and the beginning, if you like, of the Gentile world. We've seen how the gospel was progressing and it reached the borders of Israel.

This was... And he wanted to tell them how he'd had a complete change of heart towards these outsiders. And of course, bad news travels fast, doesn't it? The accusation was, you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.

What do you think you were doing? Surely they thought that any new believers in Jesus should adopt these traditional Jewish ceremony laws and regulations.

They should be circumcised, mustn't eat food from unclean animals and so on and so forth. And these rules were obviously part of their DNA. They were laws given by God, as we've seen, to Moses and should be observed by all believers.

[7 : 35] So Peter had this massive news for them. I don't think we should underestimate how big this was for them. This was news directly from God, revealed through the Holy Spirit.

And Peter himself, through this, had come to see that if the whole church were required to adopt these burdensome laws, these rules and regulations for living, then the whole mission of the church would be in jeopardy.

Which rules should they keep? Which rules should they let go? And the Jews themselves found it hard enough to keep all these rules and regulations and the ceremonial laws, let alone compel the Gentiles to do what they had been expected to do.

And the whole point of the gospel was one of freedom, setting people free from the burdens they were living under. So where was all the new freedom in that if you started imposing all these rules and regulations again?

So these leaders, they needed to grow in their understanding of God's grace towards anyone that truly believes in Jesus. And here we come to a fundamental point about the Christian religion, if you like, the Christian faith.

[8 : 51] We're saved by grace. We're saved by grace alone. We don't need to obey a lot of rules and regulations. It's all about getting to know a person, getting to know the person of Jesus Christ.

It's not about just obeying a series of rules and regulations. If any of you out there are thinking, well, you know, Christianity seems to me to be just a lot of rules and regulations that restrict my life, hold me back.

I've got good news for you. You don't have to do that. You can't. You can't. It's impossible for us to just please God and solve our consciences, if you like, solve our consciences just by obeying a set of rules and regulations.

We can't do it. We are, if you like, unclean. We are impure. And we need someone to rescue us. And that's what it's all about. It's about God's grace. It's our merited favor towards you and me to bring us into a relationship with him and with God.

But when you've got big news to break, a good place to start is from the beginning. And that's exactly what Peter did in verse 4. He relates in detail what had happened to him.

[10 : 04] And he started from the beginning. He'd had this unexpected vision, hadn't he, during his quiet time in Joppa. You know, the sheep being let down from heaven full of wild animals and reptiles and birds.

And this voice from heaven saying, come on, Peter, get up and eat. Kill these animals. And have a lunch of toad in the hole.

A real toad. Not just a pretend one. And you can imagine if you were told that, you would be horrified. You would be disgusted. But think about it from Peter's perspective.

Not only was it a revolting thing for him to think about, but it was also against everything that he'd been brought up to believe. You can feel his sort of shock and outrage at the very suggestion that he should eat this stuff for dinner.

Verse 8. Surely not, Lord. You can't expect me to eat this stuff. Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth. What are you talking about?

[11:09] And you can imagine Peter saying this. When he was with Jesus as an apostle, he quite often challenged Jesus about what Jesus was doing. And said, no, you can't do that, Jesus.

And Jesus had to tick him off two or three times and say, look, Peter, what I'm teaching you is different from what you think. And you need to change your mind.

So it was a bit of a typical response, this challenging God, if you like. I'm not going to eat this stuff. And then this voice says, and I think this is the key voice in the whole of our passage.

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. Let me repeat that. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

And just to make sure Peter got this message, this vision, he says, was repeated three times before it disappeared into the ether.

[12:07] So what was Peter supposed to make of all this? Was the vision real? Was it really from God? Well, he hadn't really had time to process it, he says, because these three men from Caesarea were knocking at the door.

And now we have one of God's amazing coincidences. And they're not coincidences at all.

Things are all part of his, all that was happening here was part of his divine plan. With the objective of saving this Gentile Cornelius and his family.

And just look at it, you know, unbeknownst to Peter, Cornelius had had this vision, hadn't he? We saw that last week. This angelic being instructing him to send men to Joppa and look for this guy called Simon Peter.

At the Tanner's house. Meanwhile, Peter was having his visions at the same time. You see how all this was happening. And he heard the Holy Spirit then instructing him, persuading him in his mind to have no hesitation in going back with these guys, back to Caesarea.

[13:19] So Cornelius was ready and waiting for him when he arrived. You can see how this is all working together. God's plan working out. So let me ask you, have there been times in your life when a series of so-called coincidences have happened?

That perhaps have had a radical impact in changing the course of your life? I can testify to this. And if you'll excuse just a personal experience here.

Many of you have met our son, Tom, who has severe autism and learning difficulties. He comes here. He's about 42 years old. When we were living in Aberdeenshire back in the 90s, he was nearing the end of his school life.

And the funding was coming to an end. And we were concerned for the future. What was going to happen next? And the adult services were sadly lacking in that part of the world.

And we were really concerned about this. So someone who was advising us said, well, you need to have a person-centred planning meeting. So let's set one up. We said, well, okay, we go to our church, set up a person-centred planning meeting, and find out what would be best for our Tom.

[14:30] Tom. So the church let us have a room, and the facilitator came in, and we had a big sheet of paper on the wall. Tom was there. We invited our neighbours, his friends, family, to sit down and just think through what would be good for Tom's adult life.

And so we put all these pictures up. The facilitator said, somebody said, well, he loves living near the sea, so draw the sea. He loves going to church. He's got to be wherever he lives.

He's got to be near a church. He loves fish and chips, so chip and chip shop. He loves playing football, so the garden's got to have high walls, so the ball doesn't get lost every time he kicks it, and so on and so forth.

And we built up this big picture somewhere for him to ride his bike. So we had this big picture up on the wall. Nothing happened. We were really disappointed.

I mean, I used to get calls at work from the guy from the care team at the church saying, oh, we found just the place for Tom. You know, come and have a look. We'd go and have a look.

[15 : 38] Nothing comes of it. And we were getting really more and more concerned. And I remember one morning, Alison was praying up in the room upstairs, really concerned about the future.

And I was going to offer a job in London.

And the guy that ran the PCP meeting said, best place to have other services was Kent. So we thought, oh, yeah, OK. How are we going to do that?

But this call came. A job came up in London. Cut a long story short. We had to move. And we went down, came back down south. And we were looking for places for Tom.

After about six months, we were getting desperate. And then this opportunity opened up in Folkestone, a house called Maple House. Now, this was a new house. There was just a house that they'd just built.

[16 : 36] We were invited to go down. We went to have a look at it. When we had a look round, we came back. And as we came out of the house, both of us looked at each other and said, we need to get that drawing out again.

So we got home, set it out on the floor, an enormous piece of paper. And we went through, ticking all the pictures one by one. Is that a coincidence?

Cynics would say, well, that's just a coincidence. That's just luck of the draw. It wasn't, I can assure you. A lot of prayer went up. And God had orchestrated things in such a way that this was the best thing, not only for us, but also for Tom himself.

And he's still there. We keep trying to move him. And God won't let it happen. The unseen hand, we call it the unseen hand of God at work. So going back to our passage, we need to take on board here the remarkable work of the Holy Spirit that is working in these people's lives to make things happen.

They were all making their own decisions, independent decisions in some respects, but the Holy Spirit was somehow orchestrating everything behind that to ensure that Cornelius and his household came to faith in Jesus, this Gentile and his family.

[17 : 55] And Peter was ready and willing to go to him to explain the good news about Jesus, even though this man was obviously a Roman and not a Jewish follower.

So let me ask you, you know, maybe you're here this morning because someone has persuaded you to come, or perhaps you're coming just because your parents want you to be here, and it's against your better judgment.

But you're here nevertheless, or maybe a partner is saying, you know, you really must come and hear this stuff. And you say, well, I'm not sure about that. But things don't happen when God is calling you to himself.

Things don't happen by accident. These are not coincidences. The fact you're here this morning is not a coincidence. So the Holy Spirit works in this way, draws people, so that you're in the right place at the right time, and different things happen in your life to persuade you that these things are true, and that you need to give up your old ways and serve the Lord Jesus.

We can now come to what I call a lightbulb moment. As we read Peter's account, we can see how much both the visions and the coincidences, that were not coincidences at all, had impacted him, had a massive effect on him, the repeat of the visions, and the men coming at exactly the right time, and so on and so forth.

[19 : 26] But he'd had a particular, a kind of lightbulb moment. And if you look back at chapter 10, the passage we looked at last week, in verse 34, it says, I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

So this whole vision was not so much about eating disgusting food or whatever, or unclean food as they saw it, called unclean, but it's not so much that the food was unclean, but people.

People are unclean. You and I are unclean. And we need to be made clean. God's grace was being extended fully to the Gentiles, to everyone, to all the world, not just to this small group of people, this one nation.

God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. So this was, in a sense, Peter's lightbulb moment. And this was then confirmed, by the way, she saw this Holy Spirit impacting Cornelius and his family as he was explaining to them what had happened to Jesus, who he was, what he'd come to do, his death, his resurrection, and how everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

In his own words, he tells the other apostles, and he believes in Jerusalem, because he wanted them to have the same lightbulb moment. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit, he says, came on these people, and Cornelius and his family and friends, as he had come on us at the beginning, at Pentecost.

[21 : 09] And you remember those things like tongues of fire came down on the Jewish people there. Well, this is like the Gentile Pentecost happening. They were being saved too.

I remembered what the Lord had said, John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

And because of this undeniable account that Peter told to these early church leaders, the whole attitude, or their whole attitude, was changed.

It was transformed. They had no more objections. They couldn't object to what had actually happened. And they turned all their criticism in praise to God. The door was now wide open for them to go out to the ends of the earth so that people like you and me could hear about and receive this good news about Jesus and be saved.

We don't have to obey a lot of rules and regulations and ceremonial laws. Don't ever fall into that trap. All we need to do is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 25] This good news is still happening today. And you'll know as a church, we're supporting the building of a building up in the north of Nepal, up near the Chinese border, where a group of Christians want to reach out into that community that has never heard the gospel before.

So this is still happening. It's still going on. The kingdom of heaven is being ushered in, if you like, throughout the world, even now.

And this will continue until Jesus returns. Just very quickly, some points of application. As Christians, we too should be aware of opposing any sort of cultural restriction on others or put up barriers that hinder people from coming to faith in Christ.

Jesus welcomes all who come to him in repentance and faith. They turn their backs on their past lives. They have a fundamental change of heart and mind.

And Jesus welcomes all that receive him. And so should we. There shouldn't be any barriers.

[23 : 41] It may not be that we're sort of hostile or unwelcoming to other people, that are different to us, coming to the church community. But we may be guilty of unconscious bias, is the sort of trendy phrase for it, where we unintentionally make people feel that they're not part of our family, our church family.

When I was still working, and I was involved in employment, appointing people, appointment panels, if you like, and also judging research in the work that I was doing, we were always given a course on not being guilty of unconscious bias.

And there's a lot of stuff in there. There's some good examples here, which I just wanted to flash up to you. There are all sorts of things.

It's not so much that we're hostile to other people, but as people come into our fellowship and into our family, church family, there's a number of things that we can sort of put up barriers against.

Oh, I'm not too sure about that person coming in on this one. It can express itself in all sorts of ways, and the church over the centuries has been guilty of doing this.

[25 : 01] I'm not going to spell them all out, but you can see there some of the issues. And we need to undergo some changes of thinking, some changes of mind and heart, so that our biases are not imposed on other people.

We need to be, this is something that the Methodist church put out, but thinking about our biases is not a one-off experience. but needs to be part of an ongoing journey of awareness and change.

I don't say that things need to change in everybody's life. We're all unclean. We all need to turn our back on our past lives and follow Christ and follow him out of love.

But we don't need to put up barriers to people coming in and being welcomed into the fellowship. We're on a journey, as Peter and the early Christians were, to accept all those that Christ has accepted.

You know, the voice from heaven said to Peter, do not call anything, meaning anyone, unclean, that God has declared clean. This is precisely why Jesus had to die.

[26 : 10] So the unclean people, like all of us, are made clean through his sacrifice, and the slate is wiped clean. You're not sure what relevance this has to you this morning?

Your life? Just think for a moment what Jesus has done for you. He's not insisted that you be a good person before you come to him, obeying a lot of rules and regulations. You'll never be good enough.

What he has done is to fulfil the demands of the laws of God for you by living a perfect life as only he could, and then being willing to go to the cross to take up the punishment or the wrath for what you and I deserve, to be sacrificed for our sins, but then be raised again by God the Father to show that when Christ was risen from the dead, it showed that God the Father had accepted his sacrifice on your and my behalf.

We can't add our way to heaven by obeying a set of rules. It's all because of God's love for us and his unmerited favour, his amazing grace. As he hung on the cross, Jesus' last words were, it is finished.

His work on earth was done. We shouldn't pretend that we can add anything to that. He did it all for us. He obeyed all the rules and regulations if you like. He'd obeyed God's laws for us that we could never obey.

[27 : 33] All we need to do now is to put our trust in him and live for him in freedom. This thing, the whole issue has dogged the church or the early church and Paul later on had to remind the Galatians of this.

And this is what he said, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burned again by a yoke of slavery, by people telling you you've got to do this or do that or do the other.

You just follow Christ out of love. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Isn't that wonderful? Let's just pray. Thank you Lord that we don't have to obey a list of regulations and instructions and rules and ceremonial laws but we just turn to you the Lord Jesus Christ and know that our sins are forgiven through what you have done on the cross.

Do forgive us if we ever think that we can add to that in any way our own righteousness. We know we can't do it Lord. We just trust in you and your amazing grace.

[28 : 51] We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.