

Peter and Cornelius

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[0:00] Good morning to you. I've got a long passage, but I hope we can get through it. And I've got some illustrations that should make it friendly.

! Some of the Jewish culture that I'm just going to give you a little summary of. Some of you 12, 13 year olds, you're already men, you see, the young boys.

Let's get into this, shall we? This is about the very significant spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. And I suspect, looking around, I don't know everybody here, but I suspect that there would be very few, if any, among us who are from a Jewish background. There might be some.

The vast majority of us who know Jesus, we know him because the gospel moved by the power of God and in keeping with some of the Old Testament promises, it moved from the Jewish people out towards the Gentiles.

[1:03] And this is a very key story that we're going through here. And very evident from what we've read, accompanied by signs and wonders of a very extraordinary kind to probably help authenticate back to the Jewish people at the end.

We didn't read chapter 11, but I will touch on it before we finish in the sermon. I want to start with a few simple statements. And I don't know whether this rings true to you.

The gospel is powerful. Now, as you look around in the world, you'll think, well, I think, you know, President Biden at the moment is powerful. You can think of lots of other things that are powerful. But the gospel might not be something that is top of your list as a powerful thing.

Maybe you think it's often very ineffective. People hardly respond. But the Bible is very clear, and this story is very clear, that the gospel, and when the Holy Spirit is at work, the gospel is very powerful.

And in the blink of an eye, people can be changed, drawn to him. So if you're here stubbornly thinking, oh, you know, I know all this, and I don't need any of this God stuff, be careful.

[2:18] If God is at work, even you could be persuaded and drawn. I won't quote you the verse, but others will know that there is a Greek word used for the power of the gospel, *dunamis*, and it's the word from which we get things like dynamo or dynamite.

Again, think powerful. Most importantly, do not think like popcorn popping, right?

Think of something very strong. That's one statement. The gospel is powerful. The second one is, we are to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And I think we've touched on this quite a few times, and we will quote the verse later from early Acts. But I wonder, do we look much beyond our four walls?

Are we, at least some of us, quite tempted just to keep our world quite small and to ignore what God is trying to do, spreading the gospel, witnesses to the ends of the earth?

[3:29] The third thing I'm saying here, God speaks in his word, sometimes, as in this story, in other ways, visions, etc. And I'm interested to, we'll come back at some of these at the end of my talk.

Are we close enough to God to hear his voice? Now, some of that is putting yourself in a position where you are reading and you are hearing the teaching of the word of God.

Some of that is to do with just your own quiet prayer life. But I think we see, we will come across it again, but we see these people who are close to God, and God especially spoke to them.

And I wonder there's a challenge for us in that area as well. And then the final thing I'm thinking here is, God often likes to push us out of our comfort zone.

I don't know whether that's just me, but he does. It is his way. He rather likes to force us to depend on him. So he will put us in a position when we are weak.

[4:36] And I just wonder, are we a bit too fond of our armchair? You can put TV or games or whatever else you want to go into it.

So there's just an introduction. I will come back to some of those points at the end. And I now just want to have a little interlude to get you into the idea. Because the idea of being a people who, by and large, have nothing to do with another people who live a little way down the road.

In England and Brighton, I don't think we know much about that. So just a quick tour on what it might have been like. I'm not going to pick everything. I'm going to pick a few things about Jewish life. Imagine growing up and being an Israelite.

Their language in the country was Aramaic. That was the common daily language. But the Hebrew language was used for prayer and scripture.

So there's something different to what you've been doing at school, isn't it? Greek was the language of the land. Probably a lot to do with the Romans.

[5:43] So already you're getting a flavour that there were a few things going on here. Probably the language that the Jewish people wanted to hang on to the most was the Hebrew. But there were different things going on.

When boys were eight days old, they were circumcised. When boys were six years old, they went to school where readers at the synagogue taught them.

For the first few years, they studied mostly the first five books of the Bible. And they also learned how to read and write Hebrew. And for the next seven years, they studied the other books of the Bible.

I'm not sure they studied much else. So by the age of 13, I should think they knew quite a lot about these Bibles.

Probably a lot more than our 12 or 13-year-olds do. And when a boy reached the age of 12 or 13, he was considered to be a man. Sam, Sammy, do you feel a bit ready for that?

[6:43] Yeah? No longer to be called a boy? A man. And they had a ceremony, a party. Most boys left school at this age. Girls were taught at home to be wives and mothers.

Most girls did not go to school or learn to read and write by adolescence. Most girls were married. Leviticus 11 includes some rules about clean and unclean food.

Now, I'm by no means going to tell you too many of them, but I will quote you some bits of it. You may eat, says verses 3 to 8. This is parts of it. You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud.

But it has to be both of those. And then I'm misting out a bit. But I'm just picking one example. And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, it does not chew the cud. So it is unclean for you.

You must not eat. So there were a lot of rules like this. And if you go near people who have eaten or touched carcasses, that would be considered unclean.

[7:50] The Israelites, of course, were only allowed to marry other Israelites. As Christians, I think we're fairly familiar with that idea, that we should be marrying amongst our own. They did not mingle much.

This is a significant thing with the passage ahead with other cultures. I'm probably understating it there. I think I actually hated the Samaritans. And they had very little to do with the Gentiles.

They had forgotten. Daniel helped us by reading this earlier. But I'm just going to skim it again. They had forgotten detail in Abraham's original call. And particularly since we read it earlier, I'll just draw attention to that bit of the earth.

Apart from blessing you and blessing those who bless you at the end. And all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. That was the aim. So if they got a bit comfortable in their very unique and distinctive tradition, they shouldn't have.

Or in Isaiah, it says in chapter 2, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established. It will be exalted above the hills and all the nations will stream to it.

[9:06] Then they had a temple, didn't they? Up on a hill in Jerusalem. And if that's working, can you see this bit here? That's probably the holy of holies.

Just in front of it would be the altar. There were animals brought in here. Animal sacrifices made and priests in operation. That was in Jerusalem.

This was a part of their culture. I just draw attention with... Yeah, I've said the sacrifices of animals. But just notice, since we're talking about Gentiles, I just draw attention in blue to the part of the temple that if you were a God-fearing Gentile, you were just allowed in the blue area.

Nowhere else. So you were allowed to be sort of part of it, but not really in the central part of this at all. So there's the background.

But just get a flavor of that and just imagine, you know, you've heard God has chosen you. God has given you this message. He has given you this land. And can you imagine that this gospel is really going to go to other people?

[10:18] Well, if you remember the Old Testament text, you should be. And this is wake-up time, isn't it? So, who was Cornelius?

He was a Roman centurion who lived in Caesarea. That was a port built by the Romans. It was also where the Italian regiment was garrisoned.

He and his family, we are told, were devout and God-fearing. Now, that in itself is quite unusual.

The Romans had lots of other gods. An emperor who was really like a god or meant to be.

And anyone caught saying something else would be in trouble. So that was a difficult position. But he had stood for the fact that he respected God.

And as we found out later, when he assembled a whole group to hear what Peter had to say later, there's probably quite a group very influenced by Cornelius. And it says he gave generously to those in need.

[11:24] And he prayed to God regularly. So what happened to him? One day he had a vision. An angel came and said, Cornelius.

And of course, you can't quite skim past this. I think if you've seen in a vision a bright light. He was terrified. Stared at him in fear.

What is it, Lord? And the angel says, Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up.

They've been noticed as a memorial offering before God. And the instructions from this angel are now, Go send men to Joppa. And I'll just give you a bit of a clue there that that distance is about 30 miles.

I don't think they had cars. So it would have taken about nine or ten hours with some breaks. Send men to Joppa to bring back Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is by the sea.

[12:30] And we read that Cornelius obeyed. Now, I may not touch on this elsewhere. So I will just draw attention to Peter at the moment.

He's a little bit living, can I say this, on the edge. Because in taboo of Jewish customs, he shouldn't be in Gentile houses. And he certainly shouldn't be near.

If you didn't know what a tanner was. A tanner works with animal skins. Making them into leather. So he's working with carcasses. This is not a place a good Jewish person really wants to spend a lot of time.

So Peter, perhaps he was a little bit more aware than some of the fact that the gospel was going to spread. But he was waiting for further instructions. But it was unusual. At the last verse in chapter 9, we read, just in passing, that he was staying with Simon the Tanner.

So I just thought I'd draw attention to that. What happened to Peter in Joppa? Now this isn't necessarily Joppa, but I just threw it in as a picture of a typical house with a roof.

[13:40] And often we hear about people going up on the roof to pray.

That's what it was like. But we find Peter, about noon the following day, Peter went up to the roof to pray.

He was hungry. And while others prepared food, he fell into a trance, it says. And that's in verse 10. He saw heaven opened and a large sheep being let down.

What an extraordinary vision by its four corners. It contains all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds.

Now, from what we've said so far, I mentioned the pigs, but there are all kinds of things here that he shouldn't be eating. What's he thinking? This is not a comfortable picture to Peter.

And then a voice says, as if to punch him in the belly, Peter, get up, kill and eat. Surely not, Lord.

[14:46] Can you actually put those words together? Surely not and Lord.

It doesn't quite work, does it? But Peter is confused here big time.

Surely not. I have never eaten anything unclean or impure. And the voice spoke a second time. And I draw attention to it because it's probably the most important thing going on here. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. This was actually repeated three times.

This sheep comes down, goes back. Same message. Three times and then the sheep was taken back to heaven. So Peter, as you might guess, does a bit of thinking.

Thinking, what on earth is this about? And then while Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrived at the gate and called out.

[15:57] And the spirit said to Peter to warn him, three men are looking for you, so get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them.

You see these rather wonderful God coincidences. Not only the vision that Cornelius had and the sending, but Peter is warned.

He wouldn't have otherwise gone with strangers who were just turning up. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them. And the key expression in, actually, chapter 10, verse 20, and it's also repeated in 11, verse 12, it's translated in the NIV without hesitation, but it can mean making no distinction.

And in this case, that would make perfect sense, as in the case of between Jew and Gentile, making no distinction. So I can go with them without hesitation or without making distinction, the fact that these are Gentile people.

So the men say, a holy angel told Cornelius to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.

[17:13] And Peter then invites them in. And the next day, Peter sets out with them, going the other way, 30 miles or so. And the following day, Peter arrives in Caesarea.

So Cornelius meets Peter. And the first thing, do you remember what Cornelius did? He fell at his feet. In reverence. But very quickly, Peter says, stand up.

I am only a man. You might have heard of things that God has done through me. But I am only a man. Stand up. Peter went in.

He was probably only expecting Cornelius, but he found a large gathering of people, relatives, and close friends. We're told that in an earlier verse.

Probably about 30 in number. We can't be very sure. But something like that. And Peter starts to talk to them. He says, you are well aware that it is against our law.

[18:21] I'm not sure it is actually a Bible law that they shouldn't be going into the houses. More of a Jewish taboo for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.

But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. Do you notice the difference here that the vision talked about what being clean and unclean?

It talked about animals. But Peter now is talking about people. God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

So when I was sent for, I came without objection. John Stott is helpful just commenting on this particular part.

Although the vision challenged the distinction between the clean and unclean foods, which Peter had been brought up to make, the Spirit related this to the distinction between clean and unclean people and told him to stop making that distinction.

[19:30] And the fact that that verse, which I've just drawn attention to, is in bold there, that made it clear that Peter had grasped that. So Peter then asks, why did you send for me?

And Cornelius says, and I won't give you the long spiel, three days ago, man in shining clothes, angel, your prayers have been heard, now send for Peter.

So now, we are all here in the presence of God. That's lovely to hear that little detail from Cornelius, isn't it? A God-fearer, not really yet aware of full salvation.

We are here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. A preacher couldn't really wish for a better audience, could you?

So Peter began to speak, and he said, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

[20:43] And let me read, although we read it earlier, as he starts to talk to them, verses, this is 10 verses 36 onwards. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel.

This is Peter speaking to Cornelius and his 30 or so people. Announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened through the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee, after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who are under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country, of the Jews, and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

It's not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God has already chosen, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 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, and all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. So this was powerful, clear gospel truth that Cornelius hadn't quite got, or hadn't heard in this way before.

[22:31] And then we hear as we read on that while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

It says the circumcised believers, and later on we can work out that there were about six of them, who had come with Peter, were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out, even on the Gentiles.

Because where did we last hear about the Holy Spirit being poured out in a dramatic way? Acts chapter 2. A lot more people involved, but it was a very special outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

And these people, like in Acts 2, they heard them speaking in tongues, that could be in other languages, and praising God. So a similar sign, a very dramatic sign, of God authenticating this really is the gospel going to a group of people who normally would have never been coming anywhere near.

real central salvation, if you like. And then Peter says, surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water.

[23:51] They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he baptises them. And Peter stayed with them for a few days, as you might expect.

And then the bit we didn't read, but I do want to just skim over what happens next. In chapter 11, we hear that the news of this, as you might expect, dramatic things like this, it was spreading.

People heard. It wasn't being driven by car, but as people moved around and did their journeys, this stuff got passed on. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him.

And they said, you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. But Peter tells them the whole story.

I won't read it because it's very much a repeat. But from verses 4 to 16, it's pretty much following all that you've heard already. And he then says, so if God gave them the same gift, Holy Spirit, he gave us, who believed, in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

[25:13] And when they heard this, these more senior Jews, if you like, they had no further objections and they praised God, saying, so then, even to the Gentiles, even to the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

But most of us, I think, are thanking God that this is true, that the gospel spread, even to the Gentiles, even to people like us. And a verse, I think we've come back to it quite a few times in this series, but just remember in Acts chapter 1, I think it's verse 9, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So that is the pattern of how the gospel is moving and unfolding. So this was one big leap forward and the Jewish authorities, who were probably quite traditional and set in their ways, the senior people there had been woken up to get on board.

And I just want a smaller side here, that there's other New Testament teaching that did away with some Jewish traditions that had created barriers. I'll just give you some examples. The food one, I didn't comment on it at the time, but in Mark, don't you see that nothing that enters a person from outside can defile them, et cetera else?

But this is Judea. Jesus speaking, and it's making it very clear that all foods are clean. So there might have been some rules before, but Jesus was changing things.

[27:09] And circumcision, this is in Galatians, for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision or uncircumcision has any value. and in Romans, circumcision primarily needs to be of the heart and by the spirit.

And of course, it's not in my notes, but I mean, the temple structure which we went at and how it was all separated, that soon changed because God's spirit was being given and the temple of God is now in the hearts of people.

So much was changing. But of course, the Jewish people, we touched on their culture, they were expecting a Messiah.

I didn't mention that earlier, but of course, the Messiah they were expecting was one that would conquer the Romans who were oppressing. And when Jesus came along as a gentle, meek, weak-looking, did some powerful things, but otherwise quite a weak-looking, you know, not going to turn the Romans over, they didn't really take it and many still don't.

So, I just come back because I know we've got communion, I didn't want to go on too long, so I just come back to some of the things we started with and I just want to say the gospel, and it's evident from this story, it is a powerful thing when people are praying and the Holy Spirit is working, people get changed, people who you might think are way beyond the power of God or God being able to change them.

[28:43] Do think dynamite, not popcorn in terms of the bang and the power. And we are to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Look away beyond our four walls. God speaks in his word, sometimes in other ways.

This is a difficult one to put into one line, but take time to be close to him and hear his voice. Some of that is reading his word, some of that is just the conversation of prayer and keeping close to him and actually following the things you read in the word and living that lifestyle so that you learn to love the things he loves.

Because you stay close to him and I think you're a little bit more likely to hear that sense that sometimes God is asking you to do something that might not be crystal clear otherwise.

Take time to be close to him and hear his voice. And God often likes to push us out of our comfort zone. how will you respond when he does?

[30:03] It's worth remembering that everything in our culture on the TV and in adverts it's all telling you that you are at the centre of things and you should have everything you want.

Comforts, just buy it. It doesn't matter if you can afford it. Just buy it, have it, yeah? Stay comfortable. It's a big thing in our culture. It's not really a big thing in the Bible that God is not promising comfort and will frequently take us away from it.

So be ready to think about challenges. I don't know the answer to this. I mean Daniel was asking about does people want to go up and look on the book table or something that might be very uncomfortable. I don't know how many responses you've had Daniel.

I won't put you on the spot but think, are there things that might take you out of your comfort zone that you're not sure you could do but maybe you should step up? And I just end with a quote.

It's a title of a book some of you will know. If you want to walk on water, as you wait until Jesus has asked you for one thing, but if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.

[31:17] Back to Daniel. I'll see you next time.