

Gospel Breakthrough to People of Peace

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[0:00] Thank you, Karen and Tonya. Today is something of a finish line for me. As you heard a moment ago, our other pastor Andrew is wrapping up his four month sabbatical this week.

We've made some transitions in our music ministry. We've onboarded our new groups and formation director. And so grateful for your prayers for me and for our team during this unique season.

And I want to especially thank you for rescheduling your crises during these past four months. And now that that time is coming to a close, you can feel free to email us your struggles, problems, and needs.

It's Andrew at Christ Church East Bay. That's A-N-D. Well, I'm going to be catching up on a little sleep this week.

Our daughter is moving to college next Monday and soaking up some last minute time with her before she hits liftoff. But, you know, today is also something of a finish line for us as a church family.

[1:08] We're coming to the end of this sermon series in the book of Acts. And I hope that you have come to love this exciting narrative and the many case studies that we've been looking at of what it means to be a living church.

What does it mean to be a spirit-filled church? And I hope that you've also come to appreciate that this is the only authoritative account of the church that we have in our Bibles.

And so it's so important for us to know what it is and what it means for us. And I want to dive in one last time here in God's Word in Acts chapter 10.

This amazing case study of God's work in two people pretty much like a lot of us, Cornelius and Peter. And I want to talk about three things.

I want to talk about God's purpose, God's peace, and God's power. I want to think together a little bit about God's purpose, God's peace, and God's power.

[2:08] And let's start with God's purpose. Here we have a story of two men. They're 40 miles apart. They're about a two-day's journey from each other.

One of them is a Jewish Christian named Peter. The other one's a Gentile pagan named Cornelius. And the story is about how God brings them together through prayer.

And if you read the whole story, we couldn't print it all, but if you go back and read the whole story, Cornelius is calling on God one day at 3 p.m.

And then the next day, Peter's calling on God at 12 p.m. And within this 24-hour period, God reveals himself to both of these people in prayer so that Cornelius, the Gentile, sends for Peter, the Jewish Christian.

And Peter, the Jewish Christian, who's been trained all of his life to have nothing to do with Gentiles, those unclean people, God has been preparing him to welcome them to his table and then to go and enter into their house, this house of uncircumcised, non-kosher Gentiles, and spend days with them teaching them about Jesus.

[3:22] So he's crossing over a boundary, an ethnic boundary. He's crossing over, intentionally crossing a cultural barrier. And what's God's purpose in this?

What is God doing to prepare Cornelius and to prepare Peter for this divinely appointed encounter? And I want to start with Cornelius because we read about him in verse 1 that at Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian regiment. This guy's a company commander of a hundred battle-hardened soldiers.

His unit is directly tied to the heart of the empire in Rome. They're stationed at a base in a place that's named after Caesar Augustus.

And do you think Jews, like Peter, are excited to have these folks in their backyard? This occupying power that, you know, if you get out of line, we'll just put you up on a cross.

They're not super excited about that. But Cornelius is an interesting guy because he's earned his rank through his discipline in the barracks, through his distinctions on the battlefield.

[4:33] And he's the guy you want in your foxhole. He is trustworthy under pressure. He's the kind of guy who can lead a hundred people into battle. And so the question, when we think about how Cornelius is described here, do you think that his time in the Roman army was an ideal place that was super conducive for spiritual exploration?

Think about that. The Roman army. What do you think that was like? Do you think if you went to your commanding officer and you said, hey, you know, I'm no longer going to participate in the state religion and all the sacred customs of our military.

I'm no longer going to pray to Caesar or to Jupiter or to Mars for help. How do you think that would go over? Well, that tells you a lot about Cornelius who broke ranks to embrace a different God.

He embraced the God of Israel. And like that man that we met last week from Ethiopia, he was no longer satisfied with the pagan worldview that he had grown up with.

And so he upgraded to a better worldview, to the Jewish worldview. And I won't repeat what I said last week about all the doctrines and ethics and practices of worship that were involved in that.

[6:00] But you can see how his life had been changed in verse 2. It says that he and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and he prayed to God regularly.

Israel's scriptures say that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And he has an awe. He has a respect for the creator God.

He has a certain reverence for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he's transferred his faith from all those gods of his empire to this one true and living God.

And how does that embody itself in Cornelius' life? Well, it says that he gives generously to the needy and to the poor and that he prays morning, noon, and evening to God. So he's devoted and that devotion is expressed vertically in his piety and horizontally in his charity.

And this is a good man. This is the kind of man that you want your sons to become. It's the kind of man you'd want your daughter to marry. This is a good guy. But what's amazing about this story is that even though he's spiritually and morally righteous, it's not enough.

[7:13] And how do we know that? Well, look at verse 30. And this is kind of like a Christopher Nolan film. There's a lot of flashback, flash forward. This is verse 30 where he's looking back and he says, three days ago, I was in my house praying at this hour.

At three in the afternoon, suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. So send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.

God gets the attention of Cornelius through prayer and he says in that strange moment, he says, Cornelius, you need to talk to a Christian.

You need to hear about the apostles' teaching. You need the deep inner transformation that only the message Peter has can give you.

And that's amazing because Cornelius is part of the greatest government that the world has ever seen. He's a high-ranking officer. He's powerful. He's wealthy.

[8:14] He's not let it go to his head. He's not let it corrupt him like everybody else. And now here he is. He's participating in the world's greatest religion and he fears the God of Israel.

He's a generous and a praying man. He's a man of virtue. He's a man of character. He's a good man. But God, when he comes to Cornelius, he doesn't say to Cornelius, well done.

Keep going. I'm sure if you just try harder and don't give up, you'll find salvation. No, God says to Cornelius, you're not enough.

Your spirituality and your morality is not enough. You need something more. You need to send for this Christian named Peter and you need to hear the message that Peter has to give you.

And that's stunning to me because the same thing happened to this other guy in the Bible named Nicodemus when he went to Jesus and he had this encounter in the Gospel of John chapter 3.

[9:16] Nicodemus is very much like Cornelius. He was brilliant. He was accomplished. He was wealthy. He was powerful. He was a man of impeccable credentials. He wasn't a proud and self-righteous man.

He's humble. He's open. He's teachable. He says, Jesus, we know that you're from God and that God is with you. We want to learn from you. And so what does Jesus say to Nicodemus? He says, well, Nicodemus, you're a great guy. You know the Bible. You're a teacher of Israel. You're spiritual. You're moral. And what you need, Nicodemus, is just to be kind of topped off and touched up here and there and maybe add a few things.

We'll complete the picture. No, what does Jesus say to Nicodemus? He says, Nicodemus, you must be born again from above by the Holy Spirit. You must be converted.

You must be regenerated and unless that happens, you cannot even see the kingdom of God, much less enter into the kingdom of God. It's not about being topped off.

[10:21] It's about being reborn as a new creation and starting over from scratch. And notice again in the story of Cornelius like that Ethiopian man we met last week that God is the one who takes the initiative with Cornelius and it's God who enables Cornelius to see.

It's his purpose that Cornelius would come to see that he is not enough and that only the authentic apostolic Christianity that Peter's going to bring to him has what he needs so that God works through prayer to bring a Christian into Cornelius' life.

So maybe some of you here are like Cornelius. You're spiritually searching. You are exploring. You're intellectually hungry.

You're existentially thirsty. Well think about the question how has God been trying to get my attention? How is God working in my life?

How has God introduced a Christian or several Christians into my life? Why am I even here on a Sunday morning? And think about God's purpose like with Nicodemus, the Ethiopian, Cornelius to bring you to what you really need.

[11:48] To bring you beyond yourself to that thing that you really need. Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 18, truly I tell you unless you change, unless you turn, unless you convert and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

But you see, God's purpose here is bigger than just Cornelius because he's also working on this Christian named Peter. He's working on him through prayer and through the revelation of his word and he's saying, Peter, you need to grow in your faith.

You need to develop and mature in your faith. Peter needed to learn about the wider horizons of God's mission. Peter needed to learn that God didn't just bless Abraham and bless Israel. He wanted to bless them so that through them they could bless all the nations of the earth. Peter needed to know that God's grand purpose for this world was for his people to be a light to the Gentiles, a light to the nations.

And so God's purpose is to prepare this Christian, Peter, to begin to do new and uncomfortable things. to go out of his way and to inconvenience himself to reach new people like Cornelius.

[13:05] God's purpose was not just to draw outsiders into Christ. His purpose was to push insiders out to the world so that Peter would go on this 40 mile walk that he had not intended to do.

That he would take a two day journey. That he would seek out these people, these strangers that he did not know and begin to talk with them. And if you're a Christian, the question for you is are you willing to do that?

Are you willing to make sacrifices and go out of your way like Peter went out of his way? And by the time Peter gets there, it says in verse 27, while he was talking with Cornelius, Peter went inside and he found a large gathering of people and he said to them, you are well aware that it's against your law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or to visit them, but God.

But God has been working on me. And God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

See, this meeting would have never happened apart from God's purpose to transform this Christian and to compel him to cross over barriers and cross over boundaries that normally would have kept these two people apart, but rather to begin sharing meals with people he didn't know.

[14:23] developing a bond of friendship with total strangers and entering into a relationship with them. And the question is, if you're a Christian, is there any class of people, any category of people that you think should be avoided or that you think should be dismissed as beyond God's grace?

for example, has God put a Republican in your life? Or has he put a Democrat in your life? Or has he put anyone in any category, economically, politically, socially, and on and on, who your tribe of people is telling you you should look down upon and feel superior to?

Because here in this story, Peter says, God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean, and I should not think that anyone is beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

And this is a watershed moment for the history of the Christian mission because there was now no person who was seen as beyond the reach of God. There was now no boundary or barrier that Christians would not cross in order to get this message out to the people.

And this is what gives rise to the transnational, multicultural, polychromatic church. If you just look around, it's the way it is because of this moment right here.

[16:00] And it's all about God's purpose. It's God's purpose. But I also want to talk about God's peace. God's peace. Because when Peter gets to this house of these non-kosher, uncircumcised Gentiles that he's not supposed to be with, what does he say in verse 36?

He says, God sent the message announcing the good news of peace through Jesus who is Lord of all. He comes to them to talk to them about the good news of peace.

Now, I want you to imagine two nations that are at war. And I know that's hard for us to imagine right now. Two nations that are at war, one of them, the lesser power, has rebelled against the greater power.

And there's this enduring conflict that seems like it's never going to end until this greater power offers terms of peace, terms of surrender, terms of reconciliation.

And Peter's saying to them, that's the story of the world. That the human story is one of rebellion against God, but the creator God has made a way of peace through his Messiah who's now the Lord of all.

[17:14] And you see, Cornelius and all of his household, they'd heard the gospel of Rome. They'd heard about Caesar and the Pax Romana. They knew that if you wanted his peace, you had to bend your knee to Caesar and call him Lord.

And so Peter comes into this house and he says, I'm talking about a different peace. I'm talking about a transcendent and a cosmic peace. I'm talking about a different Lord, a Lord who's higher and a Lord who's more powerful.

And Peter begins to share with them in verse 37 the story of Jesus. He says, Jesus was anointed by God and by the Holy Spirit and by God's power and therefore he went out and he did good to the poor and the needy and he healed the sick and he healed the demonized and God was so clearly with him.

And then in verse 39 he says, ultimately people killed him by hanging him on the cross but God raised him from the dead. That's how God makes peace. Through his Messiah.

Through his death and through his resurrection. And Peter goes on in verse 40 and he says, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people but by witnesses whom God had already chosen.

[18:29] By us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. Now sometimes we say if only the dead could speak.

Well in this particular case here is one who was dead and now is alive again and did speak. And for 40 days after his resurrection Jesus was with his disciple community and he's giving them convincing proofs that he's alive.

And if Jesus was really just a spirit in that moment if he was just a ghost I don't know how he sat down and I definitely don't know how he drank with them.

That would have been really really messy. Peter does not say listen we had a vision of the resurrected Jesus. We had a hallucination of the resurrected Jesus. We had projected wish fulfillment of the resurrected Jesus.

No, you don't ask a hallucination to pass you the bread. And even if you do ask a hallucination to pass you the bread they're not going to pass it to you.

[19:33] And if you say that they pass it to you well you're nuts. Unless he actually does pass you the bread and then you know it's the real Jesus. You see if the resurrection didn't happen Christianity is a complete waste of time.

You are totally wasting you could be at brunch right now. You're wasting your time. But if it did happen that means that everything Jesus claimed to be and all of his work on the cross to atone for our sins and to bring us peace with God is true.

And so Peter goes on and he says in those 40 days after the resurrection Jesus not only convinced us that he was alive but he gave us marching orders. And he gave us a precise description of the

content of the message that we are to proclaim to the world of which Jesus is now the rightful Lord. And what that means is that everything Peter's saying here is not just authentic Christianity it's not just apostolic Christianity it's Christ's Christianity. Everything that he's saying is straight from the lips of Jesus his perfect life his redeeming death his bodily resurrection and then he comes to verse 42 he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead and all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Now some of you have noticed in the past few weeks that our services have been a little bit full and you've been asking how we're going to make room and create some space well I figure we'd preach today on the Christian doctrine of judgment and then if that doesn't work we'll do the Christian ethic of sexuality and then if that doesn't work we'll preach on tithing and then there should be plenty of seats here in the coming weeks and months but verse 42 says that this good news of peace this good news of peace from God through Jesus it involves a divinely appointed judge and a day of judgment and this isn't just Peter Paul when he gets to Athens he's speaking to the philosophers there he's speaking to the Epicureans and the Stoics the philosophy department at Cal he's telling them Acts chapter 17 verse 32 he says for God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed he's given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead and some people say well I don't like

[22:20] Peter and I don't like Paul I like Jesus well okay here's the gospel of Matthew chapter 25 Jesus says when the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him he will sit on his glorious throne all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the peoples from one another these will go away to eternal punishment but these righteous to eternal life that's just one of many examples Jesus says in the gospel of John chapter 5 the father judges no one but he has entrusted his judgment to the son very truly I tell you whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but is already crossed over from death into life now imagine some of you here that's hard to digest that's hard for you to believe probably for many different reasons and I'm thinking about our worldview class last week and later today but perhaps your worldview is naturalism or materialism and so you believe by faith in the extinction of the human person at death and you say you know we're not eternal souls we're not immortal beings we're just gonna cease to exist the day we die or secondly your worldview is moralistic therapeutic deism and so by faith you believe that good people go to heaven and we're all pretty much good so be happy and have a good time and thirdly perhaps your worldview is new age spirituality and so by faith you believe that nothing essential happens at death and that each person is just simply somehow reunited with the universe and you become stardust the problem with all those views is that they are self-defeating and none of them really does an adequate job with evil and justice if you hold one of those views let me ask you do you really think that for all of our lies for all the betrayals for all of our greed for all of our cowardice for all the murders of the 20th century the bloodiest century in history do you really think that we're not going to be judged how can you fight for human rights and for justice when there's really no ultimate standard of judgment above you or out in front of you in the future and how can you even give an accounting of justice if there is no God and if the day we die we just cease to exist what if you're wrong what if there will actually be justice in the end what if a day is coming when all the rubbish is going to be cast out of the world when God is going to put the world right what if

God really has appointed Jesus as he said here to be the judge of the living and the dead what if that breathtaking claim is true if words have any meaning at all then it means that no one can escape the day when all of us without exception will stand before this same Jesus who lived on earth and who now is alive forever that all the destinies of all people are in his hands and there is a coming a day when all doubt about that will disappear and we will stand before this majestic figure and give an accounting of our lives the book of Hebrews chapter 9 verse 20 to 27 says people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment now if that's true then it's absolutely unloving to pretend that it's not true and it's absolutely unloving to withhold that information from people but notice that this judge and this judgment is part of the good news of peace remember that Jesus breathtaking claim of judgment here in verse 42 is followed in verse 43 with another breathtaking claim that all the Old Testament prophets testify about Jesus and that everyone who believes in him receives the forgiveness of sins so verse 42 he's the judge of all people whether you believe that or not verse 43 he's the forgiver of all who believe verse 43 the Old Testament is

looking forward to the first coming of this savior who will forgive our sins verse 42 the New Testament is looking forward to the second coming when he will be our judge and the question is on what basis will he judge us on what basis will he judge us well you will either bring before him your own record right your own spiritual and moral record and in which case that day really should cause you to tremble it really will be for you a day of disgrace a day of tears a day of misery that will go on without end or

Jesus will smile on you that day and he'll say Jonathan we settled this thing out of court remember I've already given you the verdict of this day a long time ago that if you took advantage of my first coming to be your savior if you accepted my terms of peace if you looked on my finished work on the cross if you received my forgiveness if you claimed my spiritual and moral record as your own righteousness then you've already the moment you believed you crossed over from death to life as I said so Jonathan it's so good to see you on this judgment day now enter into the joy of your master you see if you put your trust in Jesus you can look into your judge's face and you can see your savior there and you can know with absolute surety and confidence that you have peace with God and that peace is going to go on not just today not just tomorrow it's going to go on forever that's what

Peter told Cornelius that's what Peter told this entire household of Gentiles it was God's purpose to get Peter to come and talk about God's peace and then what happened God's power came when they began to actually believe every single one of these articles of faith the power of God came down in that place and what do we read about in verse 44 you've got a whole house full 50 people 75 people 100 people they're there in the presence of God they're hearing the gospel of God and it says in verse 44 while Peter was still speaking these words the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles for they had heard them speaking in tongues and praising God you know God certainly would not have poured out the power of the Holy [30 : 34] Spirit unless these people were repenting and believing he certainly would not have poured out the power of the Holy Spirit unless these people were believing in their heart that God raised Jesus from the dead unless they were declaring with their mouth that Jesus actually is Lord and Lord of all and the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit coming down it's proof it's proof that in that moment their hearts are being converted their hearts are being regenerated that they in this moment all of these people together are being born again from above by the Holy Spirit which Jesus said has to happen for you to enter into the kingdom of God when they heard the gospel that Jesus on his cross he took your curse so that you could get his blessing when they heard that glorious message that Jesus on the cross was baptized into the absence of God he was baptized into separation from God my God my God why have you forsaken me that he did that so that you could be plunged into the presence of God so that you could have the fullness of the power of

God so that you could be immersed in the grace of God which leads to the peace of God oh all these Gentiles from all over the place they they had the power of God coming down into their life their hearts were flooded by the power of the Holy Spirit Christianity is not something that you decide you're going to take up it's something that comes down and takes you up you see it's a power it's the power of the living God and how can you tell when someone's been filled with the Holy Spirit well verse 46 says they were speaking in tongues and praising God and some of you are like oh my goodness what's he about to do well Acts chapter 10 is just a mini Pentecost it's a Gentile Pentecost like Acts chapter 2 Acts chapter 10 here as there they're speaking in intelligible languages and known languages why are they doing that so that more and more people can hear this glorious message about the peace of God that comes through his Messiah who's now Lord of all remember Acts chapter 2 verse 11 it says that we hear them on the day of Pentecost we hear them declaring in our own tongues in our own languages the wonderful works of God and what's happening there is happening here again that these newborn Christians are praising God they're declaring the wonderful works of God they're extolling God's mighty works of salvation the birth of the Gentile church the birth of the church that includes non-Jews like most of us here it began with joyful worship and that's how you know you have the Holy Spirit that you're excited about these things if you do not have that joy and that praise you probably don't have the Holy Spirit and you're not a Christian but if you do have it if you have the Holy Spirit if the presence and the power of God has come down into your life there's praise there's thanksgiving there's uninhibited singing there's rejoicing at what

God did to come and make peace peace that's gonna go on forever and ever and ever amen so friends are you praising God not just here but is your life full of praise of God it seems fitting that we would end this sermon on a song of praise so I want to invite you to pull out your liturgy and I've asked Rich to come up and he's gonna teach us how to sing the Nicene Creed Peter covered a lot of these points in his little message there to Cornelius and his household and so we want to sing them we want to be as excited as they were about these things and so as as these let's praise our God in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen