

SUMMER 6 - Surely Not Such as These!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 January 2012

Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's pray together. Lord God, we pray tonight that you would help us, that we might understand your word, that we might understand your purposes, and that we might live in accord with them.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, some of the most revolutionary words in scripture are found in Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 and 27.

You might like to look at them, I don't need to give you a page number because it's the very first page of the Bible. Genesis 1, 26 and 27. It is the sixth day of creation, and God speaks and says, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. Now these words, and the chapter that surrounds them, convey a magnificent picture.

God has created the world. He has made the world a place where humans might live in right relationship with him, where they might live in right relationship with each other, where they might live in right relationship with the world in which they live.

[1 : 20] This is God's dream for humanity. It is a dream of a world where there are no walls. No walls of a vertical kind, that is, no walls between God and humanity.

No walls between human being and human being. No walls between human beings and the world in which they live. And verse 31 says that God's verdict on this world that he has created in chapter 1 is that he saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

However, we all know that the ideal does not last very long. Within 50 short verses, God's ideal has been thoroughly shattered. Sin has entered into God's world.

The result is that there is now a breach in relationship with God. So vertically there are problems. There is a breach in relationship between the two human beings in the garden. There is a breach in relationship between the two human beings and the world in which they live.

It no longer behaves as it should. Instead of peace and harmony and untainted relationships, we now find that walls have been erected. There is now a wall that separates human beings from God.

[2 : 31] A wall between human beings themselves. And a wall between humans and the world in which God placed them. However, I need to tell you that the God of the Bible is a God who never forgets his dream or his ideal.

You can see this in the story of the scriptures that follow. You see, Genesis tells us of a God who plans and who prepares for a return to the ideal. He even gives a little glimpse of it within Genesis 1-3.

And the Bible tells us as a whole that there will be a return to Eden. And the first major step that God takes in this return happens in Genesis 12.

So in your Bibles, flip over to Genesis 12. For in Genesis 12, 1-3, God makes a choice among humans. He chooses one man, Abraham and his descendants.

And he stipulates that through this man and his descendants, blessing will come to the whole world. This man and his descendants will be God's means of salvation, of returning people to Eden.

[3 : 36] It is very important that we grasp what is happening here in Genesis 12. See, in Genesis 1, God placed humans in a world where there were no walls.

However, humans rejected God's ideal. And because of this, walls were erected. Those walls were the fault of human beings. However, notice what's happening here in Genesis 12.

You see, God is adding walls to those which already exist. He puts a special wall between this one nation and every other nation on earth.

From this point on in the history of humanity, there will be one nation separated from every other nation on earth. From now on, God will have a special people.

And the role of God's special people is developed more fully if you have a look in Exodus chapter 19. So Exodus 19. Please turn with me to it.

[4 : 32] In Exodus chapter 19, verses 1 to 4, God notes how he's acted toward the children of Abraham. He says, look, I've rescued you from Egypt.

I've brought you up as on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. And although the whole world is mine, you are my chosen people and I have rescued them.

You. This is my summary of what's being said there. And then he goes on to say that they will be his means of blessing the whole world. And they'll do it by being a separate people, a chosen people, a royal priesthood.

He separates them to live, work and speak as God's treasured possession, his special people. And they will do it by being people who live in obedience to God.

People who reflect their relationship with God in obedience. And that is what is meant by verses 5 and 6. This is how God is at work, building a wall again. But it's a different wall this time.

[5 : 29] This time, the bricks in that wall are God's saving acts toward his people, which he has done for no other nation in such a way. They are also the Ten Commandments and the law that will be outlined after it in the chapters that follow.

These laws, this saving action of God, these laws will separate the people of Israel from the rest of the world. And as we read on in the Bible, we see God continue to build and maintain this wall around his people that separates them from the world.

Now, every now and then we find in the Old Testament that there are small breaches in the wall. I wonder if you remember some of them. That is, occasional outsiders, non-Jews, who sort of somehow scramble in to the inside.

There is even one in Exodus. I wonder if you know who he is. He is Jethro, the priest of Midian. He is an outsider, but somehow he gets incorporated. Who are some others?

Rahab, the prostitute in Joshua 2 and 6. The Gibeonites in Joshua 9. Ruth, the Moabites in the book of Ruth.

[6 : 36] And so on. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are walls that surround God's people and that divide humanity. And that God has been at work in erecting some of them.

Inside those walls are God's people. They are the special ones. The privileged. The ones to whom God has made himself known. The special nation.

These are the ones who have access to God. And outside the walls, well, are the Gentiles. The rest. The nations. Those excluded from special relationship with God.

As Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 and 12 says, The outsiders, those outside this wall God has erected, are without hope. Because they are without God.

The God of the whole earth. Now that is the way things are in the first century. Or were in the first century. And there was a physical representation of this in the New Testament.

[7 : 38] If you were to go on a guided tour of the temple built by Herod, you would see graphically what this was like. You see, as you approach the temple from the outside, you are faced with what was a wonder of the world.

A magnificent structure built by Herod. It was enormous. It was overwhelming. The temple represented the presence of God. And it stood on top of this elevated platform.

And as you approach this elevated platform, you would find a wall at ground level. However, as you approach that wall, imagine you are a Gentile. You want to go and have a look.

You want to get up there and see if you can get in and see what happens inside the temple of the God of all the earth. You would find signs. You would find signs. They have been recovered from archaeological digs.

They are written in Greek and in Latin. And they read like this. Now, that's pretty clear language, isn't it?

[8 : 49] What it's saying is we, Jews, God's people, have a wall around us. Separation is complete. And in one sense, you're going to feel that there's a wall around their God as well.

Friends, this is the world of Jews of first century. This is the world they lived in. So you can only imagine what the Jewish Christians thought of the events of chapters 8 to 11 as they unfolded. Now, let me tell you that my suspicion is they might have stood with their mouths agape and might have pondered to themselves. Surely not.

Surely not such as these. So let me just take you for a tour through what happened. Let me briefly explore these chapters. I need to give you a warning.

The warning is I don't have time to look at lots of the detail. I want to give you a big picture of these number of chapters. I'm going to skip over some things. You'll just get the big picture. You'll have to do your own work on the details.

[9 : 55] So that said, open your Bibles. Open them at Acts chapter 6. Sorry, Acts chapter 8. No, no, no.

Go back to 6. Do you remember the first seven verses of Acts chapter 6? Remember, you are at this stage dealing with a church that is completely Jewish. However, remember that we found out that there are two groups within the church.

There is disunity among them, and it shows itself in the distribution of food. Anyway, remember how they solved it? It's solved by choosing a number of spirit-filled Greek-speaking Jews to administer the distribution of food.

Now, one of them you remember, because we talked about him in our last session, is Stephen. And then in chapters 6 and 7, we hear about his preaching among Jews.

And they kill him as a result. And persecution erupts at the hands of a man called Saul. And the persecution causes some Christians to scatter outside of Jerusalem and even to head north.

[10 : 52] And in chapter 8, we hear of one of them. His name is Philip. Now, Philip's just like Stephen. He's one of the spirit-filled people mentioned in chapter 6.

And he finds himself outside of Jerusalem. He finds himself in the city of Samaria. He finds himself, therefore, among Samaritans. Now, let me tell you a bit about Samaritans. They are not Gentiles in the sense that we normally think of Gentiles.

That is, they believe in the same God as the Jews. They accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They believed God would send his Messiah, a saviour of the world. They believed in a judgment day.

They had priests. And they offered sacrifices required by the law of Moses. But they had absolutely no respect for Jerusalem and its temple.

They believed that Mount Gerizim was the place that God had ordained for worship to occur. And there was a deep-seated hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

[11 : 51] But Philip does what spirit-filled people do. He speaks about Jesus to even Samaritans. He evangelizes. And God accompanies his word with acts of deliverance and with healing.

Verse 12 says that people believe. They were baptized. In other words, the incredible thing happens. Samaritans become Christians. And it is here that some strange things happen.

You see, what is the normal thing when people become Christians? They receive the Holy Spirit. But look at verse 16. Chapter 8, verse 16. I want you to notice it.

It's a very important verse. Verse 16 tells us that in this situation they were baptized, but they had not received the Holy Spirit. Now, why do you think God would not do this normal thing?

My suggestion is that the Jerusalem Jews, sitting down there in Jerusalem, would have thought, Samaritans becoming Christians, not on your life.

[12 : 59] It just ain't going to happen. Particularly Orthodox Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would say, surely not. No way about Samaritans.

Surely they can't be acceptable to God. They're not Jews. And so I think God does a one-off here. He delays the giving of the Spirit. The apostles in Jerusalem hear that the Samaritans have believed.

And they send their two top men. You can see it in verse 14. Peter and John. They turn up in verse 15. And they pray for them to receive the Spirit.

And in verse 17, it happens. Look at what it says. Peter and John laid hands on them. And they received the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Jewish apostles, the representations of Jewish Christians, confer the sign of belonging to Christ.

They confer the Spirit on these Samaritans. Like the Jews of Acts 2, the Samaritans have their own Pentecost. So you've got Pentecost number 2, as it were. Now cracks in the wall are really

beginning to grow a bit wider at this point.

[14:07] Aren't they? And the apostles know it. Look at verse 25. They return to Jerusalem. And as they go, these are the apostles who've probably not spoken, you know, never preached to Samaritans before.

As they go, what do they do? They proclaim the good news to Samaritans themselves. Friends, this is the glory of the gospel. It breaks down ethnic barriers.

It shatters religious division. It binds people together in Christ. By the way, before we move on, I really do need to repeat something.

Some people look at this chapter and they say that these people have two experiences of the Spirit. That cannot be supported by the text. It is not there in the text.

Verse 15 is clear. The Spirit had not yet come upon them. That's what the text says. They hadn't had a first experience. The Spirit had not yet come upon them.

[15:07] And verse 17 is clear. The Spirit is given at the hands of Peter and John. Now, I've given you one reason why I think that might be happening. It's a special case here. Normally, people will receive the Spirit when they become Christians.

The gospel has gone to Jerusalem in fulfillment of the command of Jesus in Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 8. And now, in fulfillment of the same command, it has come to Samaria.

And the apostles need to be there to verify it and validate it. They're to verify and validate the most incredible thing. That even Samaritans are acceptable to God.

Now, that we move on to verses 26 to 40. Now, we don't have time to look at the details, but the story is straightforward. Philip is still active. So, one of those Spirit-filled seven.

Still active. This time, he's sent to a wilderness road. And there he comes upon an Ethiopian. Now, let me tell you a bit about this Ethiopian. The text tells us some things. Other things are probably implied or can be inferred.

[16:16] And the original readers probably would have understood it. First, we're told he is an Ethiopian. That most likely means that he was a black man. That also means that he comes from what was considered a very distant country.

Second, verse 27 tells us that he was a eunuch. That means that he has been castrated and possibly even dismembered. Third, he was very interested in biblical faith.

Verse 27 says he'd gone to Jerusalem to worship. Verse 28 says he was reading the prophet Isaiah. In fact, he was reading a very important passage in Isaiah that talks about God's servant. It was this passage that Christians throughout history have seen as one of the Old Testament's strong points. Pointings towards Jesus. Fourth thing about this man.

The passage infers that this man is in trouble. You see, Deuteronomy 23 verse 1 says that no one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

[17:29] So here he is interested in Jewish faith, but he will be forever excluded. Why? Because someone has performed this barbaric act on him.

He will be ever excluded from that faith. Anyway, Philip explains the passage to him. He uses it to explain the gospel to him. He evangelizes him.

And this Ethiopian eunuch embraces Christian faith. But let me show you something. And to do this, you need to do a bit of flipping back into Isaiah. Go back to Isaiah 52.

If you're looking for a page number, it's on page 96. Isaiah 52 and 53. Notice that it is talking about, this is the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading.

Notice that it talks about a servant who will bring forgiveness through his suffering. You see that in chapter 53. But now what I want you to do, this is magnificent. Flip over to Isaiah 56.

[18:41] Isaiah 56 talks about the benefits that have been gained by the actions of the servant back in chapter 53. And I want you to look at the wonderful words in verse 3 to 5.

Friends, they are incredible. God speaks to outsiders and promises the grandest things. Listen to it. Do not let the foreigner join to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people.

And do not let the eunuch say, I'm just a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, To the eunuch who keep my Sabbaths, Who choose the things that please me, And hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name.

Better than sons and daughters, I will give them an everlasting name. Notice the play on words, That shall not be cut off. Friends, People from the ends of the earth are hearing the gospel here.

Black, Gentile, eunuchs, Are being told that because of Jesus, They can have a home with God. They are acceptable to God.

[19 : 57] And people may ask, Surely God can't accept people like this. But the gospel shouts back loudly and clearly, Yes, In Jesus he can. In Jesus he does.

Now let's briefly turn to chapter 9. Now we're going to spend Wednesday night looking at this chapter in depth. We've looked at God's reach out to Samaritans, And to bring them in. We've seen him reach out to black, Gentile eunuchs, And bring them in. Now take a quick skim through this chapter, And see what God does now. I mean, He takes this Jewish persecutor of Christians.

Now friends, Let me put it plainly to you. He is an enemy of God's purposes through Jesus. He is an enemy of God's Christian people.

And God chooses to bring the Christian faith to kings, And Gentiles, Gentiles, And even Jewish people through this man.

[21 : 01] In order to bring about this choice, God confronts him, And he turns him around. He converts him to Christian faith.

And within days, This persecutor, This enemy of the people of God, And of God himself, Is proclaiming the very faith that he scorned. Friends, None of us are beyond the reach of God. Not persecutors, Not persecutors, Or enemies of God. Not even this one. Friends, I wonder if you can see what's going on here.

Paul the Jew, Has found out, That the God, This God, Is a God of overwhelming grace. He knew it, Beforehand. But now he has been enveloped in it.

He is the God, Who accepts enemies, As friends. He is the God, Who brings persecutors, Under his wing, Through Jesus.

[22 : 03] He is the God, Who can bring such persecutors, Into existence, Into an existence, Where walls are gone. And where everyone is together.

Into this new community, Where there's neither black nor white. Eunuchs, Nor people with organs intact. Gentiles or Jews, Slaves or free.

Man or woman, Rich or poor. Before Jesus, All of these sorts of people, Whichever category they were in, All stood before God, As equal sinners, In equal need of forgiveness, And in Jesus, They are all, Equally forgiven.

Equally recipients of grace. Friends, This is the grandness of the gospel. And it's the greatness of our God. Let's move on to Acts 9, Verses 32 to 43.

Because Paul now returns to the scene. Sorry, Peter now returns to the scene. He's responsible for the healing of a certain Aeneas. And then he raises someone from the dead. And then in verse 43, We're told that he stayed in Joppa for some time.

[23 : 15] Now let me tell you a little bit about Joppa. You see, Joppa is not an unknown place in scripture. Those of you who know your Bibles well, Will know at least one other place it occurs.

It's very famous in a particular story. In the story about a Jewish prophet. Called Jonah. One day the word of the Lord comes to Jonah.

And God tells him, Go to the Gentile and evil city of Nineveh. And Jonah resists the call. And he goes down to Joppa. Where he gets on a boat.

And he goes in the opposite direction. Or in a place where God is not known. Toward a place where God is not known. So, I reckon, We might be asking a similar sort of question here.

What's going to happen? Will God call again? Will he call a man to go to Gentiles again? And if he does, Will this man go?

[24 : 15] It's just a little hint. Anyway, We don't have to wait very long. Turn to chapter 10. And see it all happen. Now, Before we embark on this chapter, I want you to remember where we started.

Remember that Jews like Peter Lived with the temple That symbolized walls between them and Gentiles. They lived with things such as washings and so on That symbolized that they were separate from everyone else.

They knew that they were from God. So they worked hard at keeping themselves from contact with Gentiles. Often they would avoid them and never eat with them or befriend them. Some Jews even went further than this and called Gentiles dogs.

But what did Gentiles think of this? Well, as we know from history, Most Gentiles regarded Jews as a rather strange group of people. Many of them hated them. They were strange because they

believed in only one God.

We think that's normal in many ways now. But in the ancient world, it wasn't. And they didn't believe in a multitude of gods. And they had strange moral beliefs and practices. They kept themselves apart from everyone else.

[25 : 23] However, there were some Gentiles who looked on and who found Jewish beliefs quite attractive. You see, Jews kept themselves apart from everyone else and they weren't like the rest of the world, which was just, you know, often horrible.

And in fact, these Gentiles looked on Jews with favor and perhaps even a hint of jealousy. Some Gentiles, like Cornelius, were sick of paganism and its excesses and were attracted to the ideal of one God to whom you alone had to be responsible.

They were impressed by the moral standards of Jews that they'd met. They looked with favor on their virtue, their consistency, their devotion. However, the demands, particularly if you're a male, of becoming a Jewish convert were too severe for most to take on board.

And so groups of Gentiles simply chose to sympathize with Jews and even to protect them.

Remember, there's a centurion in the gospel who's like this. So they chose to worship the Jewish God as far as they were able.

However, these Gentiles often realized that there was still a huge gap between them and the Jews that they sought to emulate and line up with. They still inevitably felt excluded, alienated from full membership of the people of God and they longed for things to be different.

[26 : 44] They wanted full status, full participation, full rights to worship, all those sorts of things. In Acts chapter 10, verses 1 to 2 and verse 22, we're presented with such a person.

He is a typical God-fearer of the first century. Let's listen to what's said about him. Acts chapter 10, verses 1 to 2. In Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort, as it was called.

He was a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. Now, verse 22, it explains further.

Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear what you have to say. So, can you see the situation in Acts 10?

Situation is one that paints a world separated by walls that have been constructed by both God and man. One of the walls has gone. Which one is it?

[27 : 55] It's the vertical one. It's the one that separates human beings from God. It has, at least, it has, through the work of Christ, it has been obliterated.

It has made possible now for humans to have relationship with God, untainted. Because of the death of Jesus, access to God is now possible for all people. However, there is more that has happened.

Even before Acts 10, some cracks have begun to appear in the other great wall, that wall that separates Jews and Gentiles. The cracks began to appear in the ministry of Jesus.

Although at times, Jesus seemed a little reluctant, he did heal Gentiles and reach those outside of Israel. And in his teaching, he taught it in such a way that walls would come crashing down.

Do you remember some of the things? He concentrated on Israel, but he did speak of the whole world as his target. For example, do you remember this? He spoke of the temple being a place of prayer for all the nations.

[29 : 02] Mark 11, verse 17. He talked about gathering people from outside Israel. John 10, verse 16. Moreover, we've seen in Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 8, that Jesus has said, you're on your way to the end of the earth.

In Acts 2, there are cracks widening a bit further. In Acts 6, it's clear that there are Greek-speaking Jews who are becoming Christians. In Acts 8, Samaritans become Christians.

Ethiopian eunuchs creep over the walls. In Acts 9, enemies and persecutors become Christians. In other words, by the end of Acts 9, it is clear that the cracks in the wall that separate Jews and Gentiles have become so wide that some outsiders are beginning to climb in through them.

And there's beginning to be a rush on them. And all that remains is for God to obliterate these walls, to knock them down. Acts 9 and 10.

Show us a God who has planned the fall of these walls. Can you see it there? There are three critical ways in which God plans, in this event, the falling down of these walls. The first thing he

does is that he chooses a leader for this new group of Christians who are on the way.

[30 : 17] We've had a little snapshot of them, that Gentile, that eunuch. Who is the man? Saul. Second, God commissions him as apostle to the Gentiles.

Happens there in chapter 9. The words are even used of him. Third, God moves Peter into place geographically. You see, he removes him from Jerusalem and out into mixed territory.

However, there are signs that he's been preparing Peter in other ways as well. Just little hints. You see, it seems clear from Acts 9.34 where Luke records that Peter has stayed with Simon, the tanner.

Now, a tanner is someone who deals with dead animals. Everything that they touched was also unclean. They were ceremonially unclean. In other words, here is Peter staying with a person perpetually unclean and with his family.

You wonder, has God been at work here in softening the man for the task? Nevertheless, he's not quite ready yet and so two further things need to happen. First, God works outside of Israel in the life of this Gentile Cornelius.

[31 : 26] He speaks to Cornelius and he gets him to arrange a meeting. You can see that in Acts chapter 10, verses 1 to 8. Second, God sorts out things at the Jewish end by giving a vision to Peter.

Now, as a result of the vision, God is at work. You know, it's a vision of, you know, animals being let down and they're all unclean animals and the vision, in the vision, Peter is told to get up and eat. He says, no, I'm not going to do that. You know, I don't do that. I don't eat that sort of food. And God says, three times, do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

And I reckon he has those words reverberating in his brain three times. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. Do not call anything impure God has made clean. Do not call anything impure God has made clean.

And there is Cornelius. It reaches the climax in verses 17 to 23. And he invites these Gentiles into his home as guests.

[32 : 36] Friends, the walls are about to come really crashing down. And Acts 10, 23, 45, and 11, 12, we're told that six Jewish believers are present with Peter that day, or the next day.

And they arrive and they find Cornelius expecting them. And he's gathered a group together of his relatives and close friends. You know, he said, come, this is a big opportunity. God's told me this needs to happen.

Here we are. We've got representatives of God here. And Peter delivers his speech. And he points out the lessons he had learnt from God in the last 48 hours. And he explains that God had taught him not to call anyone or anything impure or unclean.

And since God had made himself so clear, he felt himself free to turn up to a Gentile person's house. It's then he says, okay, so what do you want me to do?

Why am I here? Cornelius explains. Peter responds with a short sermon. Peter's sermon has a number of key points in it. Let me just go through the key points. Point number one. God has revealed himself in Jesus.

[33 : 44] That's in verses 39 to 41. 2. This message is firstly for Jews. Verses 36 and 38 to 38.

3. But Christ is Lord of all. So this message is also for Gentiles. Verses 34 and 35 and 42.

Now the conclusions to the sermon, the fourth point are very strong and come in verse 43.

Therefore, everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins.

And the point strikes home and it's revolutionary for Eden is back. Access to God is now possible for everyone, whether they are Jew or Gentile.

The promises to Israel are for everyone. dividing, and they have come through Jesus who has now become the blessing to all nations.

[34 : 47] The promises for Israel to Abraham are for everyone. Dividing wars are gone, enmity is done away with, and then God acts to make the point in the clearest of possible ways.

He makes sure that everyone knows that He's behind this by giving the great promise of the Old Testament. He pours out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles.

Verse 44. And it, I mean, when you look at it, you think this, I've seen this before, where is this?

Didn't happen quite like this with the Samaritans as far as we can tell, but this looks like Acts 2.

Deliberately. What happens to Jews in Acts 2 now happens to Gentiles. What was evident about God from Genesis 1 is now a reality. There is now no distinction, no favourites.

The word is used, verse 34, or its equivalent. And Peter is convinced by everything that's happened. God has accepted Gentiles without any other requirement than that they believe. [35 : 57] That they believe in Jesus. So he then turns to his Jewish friends and says, well, let's accept God's work and let's in one sense authenticate it or not authenticate it but validate it, show that it's true by doing what?

Baptising them. That's a sign of being Christian so that's what they do. Then in chapter 11, the Jews in Jerusalem hear Peter's report and they seem to be a bit suspicious at first but then finally at the end of chapter 11 they concur, verse 18 of chapter 11.

The Jews in Jerusalem praise God and say, then God has given even to Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

Now what I'd like to do now is to leave Acts 10 and 11 and spend some time just reflecting quickly on what living without walls is like. Turn with me, remember we're in Acts which is written by Luke and so let's go back to Luke's gospel, Luke 14.

Matthew, Mark, Luke 14. If you're looking for a page number it's page 849 and you'll see down there that's called the parable of the great dinner.

[37 : 13] Runs from verse 15 through to 24. It's all about going and gathering people into a great banquet sort of symbolic of being present with God. I want you to notice how Jesus concludes the parable.

He says in verse 23 Then the master said to the slave This is after people have turned them down because they're all too busy to come. He says, So go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in so that my house will be filled.

You see, Jesus is clear. Paul is also clear when he talks about dividing walls being broken down in Ephesians 2 and 3. The kingdom of God is now open to all and the task of God's people is to fulfil God's purpose by urging people, compelling people is a very strong word to come in, to get in, to come inside the walls, to join them because the walls are obliterated.

Now, it sounds like Acts 1, 6 to 8, doesn't it? We're told there that God's people have a task, the evangelisation of the world and Acts 10 tells us it's for all people no matter what nationality, sex, colour or status.

What I'd now like to do is think through our response. See, it seems to me that you can have two reactions when you hear these sorts of things. The first reaction would be, out of enthusiasm and that's a noble thing, to simply share the gospel of Jesus with everyone that we meet.

[38 : 47] And that's a good thing. I encourage you to do it. The reaction, though, is often unplanned and often has no conscious strategy to it. There are no long-term goals and plans and there's nothing wrong with it.

It's good because it comes from the heart and it's about telling people the great news of Jesus. It is good. It is the natural reaction of someone, I think, who's understood what God has done and is doing in his world.

However, I want to say that there is another reaction as well. The reaction is based on the nature of God. You see, the reason I started with Genesis is I wanted to show you that what happens in Acts chapter 10 is not a spur of the moment thing by God.

He has had it planned from before all eternity. He has had it planned that Abraham will bless the world. He has had it planned that there will be a return to Eden.

He has had it planned from before time as we know it began. And God thinks ahead. He plans ahead.

[39 : 53] And I want to urge us to think and plan like God carefully, deliberately, and in such a way as to make the most of our limited resources. Now, such a reaction might be this.

We all have that task of being witnesses to Jesus. We have a message, God's message of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. We have a target audience, the world.

We have limited resources and access. So what's the best way to get God's message to the world? Once we get to the fifth point, we then need to do some creative thinking, don't we?

And we need to analyse the structure of our society, our local situation, and perhaps plan a bit as to what we're going to do. And then submit, of course, our plans will in fact prepare them in prayer and submit them in prayer.

And then we need to implement them. My own view is that the Apostle Paul thinks this way. You see him adopt a particular strategy. You see him, don't you, constantly planning where he's going,

planning what he's going to do when he gets there, engaging in a strategy of evangelism.

[40 : 58] He has a systematic strategy of follow-up by visit and by letter, and he submits what he does to God, allowing God to correct him as he sees fit, and God does. And he remains constantly open to hear what God is planning and doing, lest he gets out of sync with God.

Now, as I speak today, I want to urge you to choose the second response. You see, we need to think and plan carefully about the best way to reach our communities, our country, and our world for Christ.

The planning should take into account our place in society, the limits of our resources, of the resources God has placed in our hands. Now, I've spent 18 months here at Holy Trinity thinking this through for us here at HTD, and this year we'll start putting some of it into place.

I want to ask you those who are members of Holy Trinity, will you pray for God to be effective through it, and pray that many will come to know Christ through it. Friends, there hasn't been lots of application tonight, but there's been lots of great things about the God that we worship.

God. Now, I'd like to wrap up tonight by telling you how I find this story of God so incredible and so overwhelming.

[42 : 12] Friends, I am overwhelmed at how God takes these two people chosen to wait on tables and turns them into effective and sacrificial witnesses.

And I am brought to tears by the way that God works in this black Ethiopian eunuch and promises him a home.

I just love it that God promises him that there will be no dry trees in his kingdom. Instead, he will give him a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

Jesus, that's beautiful, friends, isn't it? I'm awestruck that God takes a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man and showers mercy on him and then turns him into an apostle of the faith he once tried to destroy.

I cannot believe that this God can receive me, keep forgiving me, yet I know that he does. And finally, I'm struck with God's great plan.

[43 : 22] And all I can do is ask you to rejoice with me in it and glorify God with Paul's words from Romans 11. Oh, the depths of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable are his judgments. How inscrutable are his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counselor?

Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return? For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen. Amen.