

Life to ALL who Believe

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[0:00] It's all one story, so it all goes together. But why did Luke, the writer, have to make it so long? I mean, why couldn't he just summarize and say something like, Peter had a vision that God shows no favoritism, so even Gentiles can have forgiveness of sins for life eternal.

The end. I mean, that's a whole lot shorter, isn't it? And it's the point of the passage. In fact, on your screens are the key verses for the passage from verse 34 and chapter 11, verse 18.

That's the point of the passage today. So why couldn't Luke have said it a whole lot shorter? Or if Luke had done a social media post, then perhaps he could have just said, no hashtag, no faves, Gentiles too.

The end. I mean, that gets the main point as well, doesn't it? And a whole lot shorter. In fact, I can just imagine my kids at home shaking their heads at my attempt of doing a social media post.

But the question is, why does Luke spend so much time on this event? Well, because it's such an important but hard lesson to learn and live out.

[1:22] You see, we all find it easier to favor people who are like us, don't we? And inadvertently keep the gospel to ourselves.

Or perhaps if we're to share it with a non-Christian and with those non-Christians who are like us. This was especially true for the early church, which was predominantly made up of Jewish Christians.

And people who had grown up being taught to stay away from non-Jews or Gentiles. Like us, actually. And part of this came from the Old Testament law, which said Jews were God's people and were to be set apart from the nations.

Set apart morally and spiritually. So to help remind them and remember, God gave them food laws that were different to the nations.

Certain foods like beef were clean and you could eat. But other foods like bacon were unclean and you could not eat. But the Jews took this even further and they added their own laws and customs like on your screen.

[2:32] Which said that they had to stay separate from Gentiles, not just morally, but physically too. They could not eat Gentiles, eat with Gentiles or even associate with them.

But as we heard in our first reading on the next slide, Jesus was always meant to be a light to the Gentiles. And to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus said back in Acts chapter 1 verse 8.

Yet after thousands of years of division and unbiblical Jewish custom, it was a really hard lesson to learn and live out.

But it was a vital lesson if the gospel was to go to the ends of the earth. That's why Luke spends so much time on it. But because it is long, I won't have time to work through all the verses.

So that you can see it all for yourselves. Instead, you'll have to trust me and I'll have to skip some and skim others. I like verses 1 to 6 where we see God's intervention.

[3:44] So point 1 and verse 1 where we see his intervention with Cornelius, a centurion. He's in charge of 100 troops in the Italian regiment, we're told, which was normally stationed in Austria.

But we have Roman sources that back up. It was in Palestine at this time. Then in verse 2, we're told he's a good man. He fears God, gives to the poor. But he's not yet counted as one of God's people.

So in verse 3, God intervenes by sending an angel, doesn't he? And did you notice in verse 3 that Luke even adds that it was at 3 in the afternoon?

Why? Well, to help us know it really happened. It may be a supernatural vision, but it happened at a real time in history. And then in verses 4 to 5, the angel tells Cornelius to call for Peter, whom on the next slide we learn.

Then the angel also told Cornelius that Peter had a message that would save him and his household. And so he sends for Peter. But then the next day, God also intervenes with Peter too.

[4:54] So down in verse 9, it's noon. The roof was a quiet place to pray, which is why Peter's on the rooftop. But I'm not sure why he prays at lunchtime, because in verse 10, he gets hungry.

Perhaps that's why he falls into a trance. Either way, God gives him a vision, doesn't he? And somewhat appropriate for a hungry Peter, it's a vision of an all-you-can-eat buffet, complete with a tablecloth.

But it seems some animals were unclean, perhaps like a pig, because Peter refuses to eat. And then the voice responds in verse 15.

Let's pick it up in verse 15, chapter 10, verse 15. The voice spoke to him a second time, Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back into heaven. You see, God gave the food laws to remind Israel to be set apart from the nations, remember?

[6:01] It was a visible reminder to be morally clean. But when Jesus came, he fulfilled the law. In fact, he died for our sins.

His blood cleanses us. And then he gave us his spirit to remind our conscience to be set apart, to be morally clean.

And so we don't need those food laws anymore. In fact, back in Mark chapter 7, Jesus actually declared all food was clean. Peter was actually there.

But Peter is not the quickest off the mark, if you know anything about Peter. He denied Jesus three times, was told to feed Jesus' sheep or the church three times, and he had this vision three times.

And so God intervenes again, because he hasn't quite got the connection. So have a look at verse 19. Let's pick it up there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you.

[7:08] So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them. Here God intervenes again, and the spirit plainly tells Peter, go.

And notice the spirit also says, three men are waiting. How many times did Peter have his vision? Three. Ah, I think Peter now gets the connection.

If he can eat unclean food, then he can go with these unclean Gentiles. That's what he now says the next day.

So skip over to verse 28, where he meets Cornelius. So verse 28, Peter says to Cornelius, you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.

But God has shown me in the visions that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.

[8:18] May I ask why you have sent me? And now when Peter says here it's against our law, he means the Jewish customs or Jewish law and not God's law in the Bible.

It's like what I showed you at the start. But did you notice he's now made the connection between being allowed to eat unclean food and associate with unclean Gentiles?

Yet he's still not sure why God has brought him here. He's just going with God's guidance, isn't he? And Cornelius isn't sure what message will save him.

He too is just going with God's guidance. It's as though God is pulling all the strings here. Why? Because God is determined to see his gospel go global to the ends of the earth, to even Gentiles.

You see, without this moment in history, the gospel would have continued to go to just the Jews with just a few Gentiles sprinkled on top like Aeneas last week.

[9:28] Which means we would probably not be Christians today. Did you realize? Our church would probably not be here today. But God intervened at this moment in history because he was determined that the gospel go global to even us here in Melbourne at the ends of the earth or to wherever you're tuning in from this morning.

For God wants all people to hear the good news. And that's what Peter now realizes. So point to verse 34.

Have a look at verse 34. Then Peter began to speak. 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.

Do you see Peter's realization? He realized that God offers life to all people who believe. That's the lesson. He doesn't show favoritism to the Jews.

Rather, he accepts or welcomes people from every nation. Now, it was important that Peter, of all the apostles, learnt this lesson because he was a key leader in the early church.

[10:55] The one whom Jesus told three times to feed his sheep, his church. The one on whose confession Jesus would build his church, if you remember.

It's why on your screens, Luke goes from Paul's conversion in chapter 9, where Paul is converted to go to the Gentiles, back to Peter in chapters 10 to 12, before back to Paul again and going to the Gentiles on his missionary journeys.

In fact, from chapters 13 to 28, Peter only appears one more time. But Luke does this because before the gospel can go global, Peter, of all people, needed to learn these lessons.

Lessons like last week that Jesus still lives and gives life. And this week, life to all, even Gentiles, who believe.

For God welcomes people from every nation like Cornelius, who fears God and does what is right. Not that fearing God and doing right is what saves Cornelius, by the way.

[12:05] Otherwise, why does he still need Peter to preach a message? Rather, fearing God and doing what's right shows an openness, an eagerness to listen to Peter's word about Jesus.

And so God welcomes people from every nation who have an openness to come and hear the gospel. And that's what Peter now preaches. So in verse 36, Peter says, God initially sent the good news to just Israel.

But if you look at verse 36 there, you will see that Peter also says that Jesus is Lord of how many people? All people.

And so after telling them about the miracles they knew about, Peter speaks of how Jesus died and rose again as Lord over all people. So let's pick it up in verse 39.

Verse 39. Peter says, We are witnesses of everything Jesus did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross.

[13:15] 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, 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. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Here is the historical message about Jesus. He wasn't seen alive by all people, but certainly by enough people. For the apostles witnessed all he did, including his resurrection.

And in fact, on your screens, we're told elsewhere that he appeared to more than 500 people at the one time. He really did die and really did rise.

And in doing so, proved he really is Lord of all. Or in the words of verse 42, he is the judge of the living and the dead.

[14:26] I mean, that's everyone, isn't it? You know, the living and the dead. Who else is there? He's the Lord and judge of all, you see.

But verse 43, those who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins, a life eternal instead of judgment.

But did you notice who this offer of forgiveness is for? Verse 43, do you see it there? Not just the Jews, but everyone who believes.

Here is the lesson again. Life to all who believe. We have some people at our church, like a lady from this 9am service called Bonnie, who works with prison fellowship.

And not only because there are Christians who, you know, sadly made serious mistakes and are in prison, but also because God does not show favoritism. But welcomes everyone, even criminals, to hear the gospel that they might believe and find forgiveness and life eternal.

[15:36] Now, Peter's realization of this will wobble in the future when he withdraws from Gentiles. But he's got it here.

And to help him know it, the Spirit confirms it. So point three on your screens, verse 44 to 46 in your Bibles. Have a look at verse 44.

You see, the Spirit confirms that life is for Gentiles because the Spirit is poured out, even on Gentiles.

Back in Acts chapter 2, it was the Jewish day of Pentecost, where the Spirit came upon Jewish apostles, and they spoke in different languages or tongues, praising God.

And the same thing happens here. Only Gentiles. This is the Gentile Pentecost, if you like. Now, Peter says as much later on in chapter 11 on your screens there.

[16:55] Have a look there. Notice in verse 15 on your screens that the Spirit came on the Gentiles just as it did on the apostles at the beginning, on the day of Pentecost.

This is the Gentile Pentecost here. But also notice in verse 16 that to receive the Spirit is to be baptized with the Spirit.

I may have mentioned to you before, Michelle and I have some friends who have been sucked into false teaching that says you need a second baptism of the Spirit to be a real first-class Christian.

And so for us who haven't had that kind of experience, we are second-class Christians. But that's not what the Bible says here.

Because to receive the Spirit is to be baptized with it. There is no second baptism of the Spirit. And if you notice on your screens again, this happens, you know, baptism in the Spirit happens when we believe in Jesus.

[18:05] That's what Peter says. And so the Gentiles are on the same level as the apostles, you see. There are no second-class citizens in God's family.

God gives His Spirit and life eternal equally to all who believe. And now the apostles recognize it. Point 4, chapter 11, verse 1.

Have a look there. Chapter 11, verse 1. The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God, the gospel.

So when Peter came up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers, that's the Jewish Christians, criticized him and said, You went into the house of Gentile men and ate with them.

But starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story, which we know and Luke repeats. But let's skip down to verse 17 towards the end of our passage.

[19:06] Verse 17, Peter says, So if God gave them the same gift He gave us of the Spirit, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, So then, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

You see, the apostles now recognize the lesson, don't they? That God gives life to all Jew and Gentile who believe.

Now, you might think Luke has spent way too much time teaching that simple lesson. The social media posts on your screens would have sufficed.

You know, no faves, genties too. Done. After all, we're a church full of Gentiles from different nations. The gospel has come to us.

[20:12] We know this lesson. But are we living it? Are we taking the gospel to others?

You see, I could talk about how we should be thankful the gospel has come to us as some application, and we should be thankful. Or that we should love one another equally, since there are no second-class citizens in God's family, and we should love one another equally.

But if Luke spent all this time recording God's intervention, Peter's realization, the Spirit's confirmation, the apostles' recognition, or so that we might learn the simple lesson that God gives life to all who believe, then I really think Luke's main application is to live it out.

To do our bit, to take that gospel to all people that they might believe. How? Well, let me suggest two don'ts and one do.

Firstly, don't show favoritism, because God doesn't. You see, we can look at our neighbors or work colleagues or people in prison or whoever, and think, oh, they'll never believe.

[21:38] And so never take any opportunity that comes our way to say something to them. I remember as a young adult, we're having an outreach service at my church, and the minister at the Times asked us to pray for someone whom we could invite.

And I remember sitting in the pew and thinking through my work colleagues, and thinking, oh, no, he swears too much. No, he's a smoker. No, he's an Essendon supporter.

No, that last one was a bit of a joke. But I went through and thought of all these people and just dismissed them out of hand, and then thought, oh, actually, that person's nice. I'll pray for an opportunity with them.

In other words, I showed favoritism. I decided who would and would not believe simply based on outward behavior. But only God knows people's hearts, doesn't he?

Of course, if they say they're not interested, then they're not interested. We can move on. But if Jesus gives life to all who believe, then don't all deserve a chance to believe?

[22 : 45] After all, who knows how God will use us and work in them? And the second don't is don't stand in God's way. As Peter said, who was I to think I could stand in God's way?

Christmas is still the best time of the year to share the message about Jesus. But even with today's announcement, I'm guessing we won't be able to do a massive outreach carols service at church.

So do we then think, oh, an online COVID carol service won't be the same? And so let's not bother trying.

If we did that, isn't that standing in God's way? Who wants all people to hear the gospel? So don't show favoritism.

Don't stand in God's way. And thirdly, on the flip side, do make the most of every opportunity. A lady from our Wednesday afternoon service earlier this year had to see her GP about severe hip pain.

[23 : 52] She didn't really like the idea of surgery, so she asked her GP if she could try physio instead. She said to the doctor, I think I'll be okay between physio, my family and JC.

And the doctor kind of went, JC? And she said, oh, don't you know Jesus Christ? He's been good to me. Now, the doctor smiled.

He didn't bite. And she didn't push. But who knows how God will use that? Or a lady has joined my Wednesday night Bible study group on Zoom.

And she turned 95 years old at the other month. And she's using Zoom. I'm very impressed. But what was more impressive was a prayer point of hers one week where she prayed she might get to know a neighbor she hasn't yet gotten to know.

So that in due time, she might say something about Jesus or church to them. In fact, she's even decided to give some lemons from her tree and drop them off to her neighbor as a way of starting a friendship, a relationship with them.

[25 : 00] Because she knows that Jesus gives life to every person who believes. And so she wants to make the most of every opportunity that they might believe.

You see, we actually need a long time on this lesson. Because living it out is hard to do, isn't it?

So we need to keep remembering this lesson that Jesus gives life to all who believe. So that on your screens, we won't show favoritism.

We won't stand in God's way. But we will make the most of every opportunity that comes our way. Why don't we pray? Let's pray.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this long lesson that even we still need to hear. That you give life to all who believe.

[26 : 03] So help us, Father, we pray to live out this lesson. By doing what we can to see all hear the gospel that they might believe.

Father, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.