

The Gospel is for the Gentiles

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Date: 23 July 2023

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[0 : 00] Do you keep your Bibles open there to Acts? We're actually going to start from chapter 9, verse 32, and go beyond the 36 verses that Ruth has read. But I thought I'll spare Ruth for having to read even more than that.

I'm sure you all agree with this, but it's never nice to be excluded. It might be something small, like just not being invited to a party, or something bigger, like being denied entry at the Melbourne Cricket Club, just because your parents didn't put your name down when you were born, or like the Aborigines, not being given the vote until 1967.

You feel like an outsider, don't you? Looking in, wondering about all the good things that are happening inside. And then when you're allowed in, finally, perhaps one day, that feeling of being then included, welcome, that's wonderful, isn't it?

Well, for many years, that's how the Gentiles were. And if you don't know, the Gentiles are whom the Jews considered to be non-Jews, people that were outside, as Paul writes in Ephesians, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

Today, though, in our passage, all that's about to change. Now, as I said, we're going to have a long passage, so I will probably fly through most of it.

[1 : 42] But I want to encourage you to just go back and read it over again in your time, get into the detail of it. But if you were here last week, you'll remember that we finished with Saul in Tarsus.

Tarsus was in what is today modern Turkey, just by the Mediterranean Sea. Saul, as we found out, will be the apostle to the Gentiles. He himself a Jew, but called to the Gentiles.

But here, it's the apostle Peter who makes the breakthrough with them. Why? Because, as Jesus said, he appointed Simon Peter to be the rock on which he will build his church.

And so, beginning back in chapter 9 and verse 32, which we didn't read, we find Peter no longer in Jerusalem, but out of it, doing ministry, gospel ministry, in the surrounding area.

The church had been scattered because of persecution, and so in verse 32, as Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda.

[2 : 50] Now, there are going to be two other places besides Lydda that we're going to look at today. So, on your side, you'll see that they're all outside of Jerusalem, to the north, actually, in Judea and Samaria.

Lydda is just inland, but close to Joppa, which is on the sea, by the sea, and Caesarea, just north to Joppa. So, Peter, as we see, is preaching in Judea and Samaria, but at this time, only to the Jews.

As the passage tells us, Lydda is where Peter heals Aeneas, a paralytic, and then he goes up to Joppa, where he raises Dorcas, a lady from the dead.

Now, I just want to point out a couple of parallels here in this passage. And the first thing to notice is that these miracles mirror Jesus' own miracles in the gospel. So, Luke himself records Jesus as healing a paralytic in Luke chapter 5, and then raising a widow's son from the dead in Luke chapter 7, and also Jairus' daughter in Luke chapter 8.

The latter, Jairus' daughter, has many similarities, actually, with Peter's miracle here. Because, like Jesus, it happens when Peter is summoned to a house.

[4 : 09] Then Peter asks others to leave the room, and then finally, as he was raising her, just like Jesus, held her by the hand and brought her to the feet. All this, I think, is meant to show with the parallels that Jesus is the one.

His power is at work through Peter, healing Aeneas and Dorcas. Peter himself even says in verse 34, Aeneas, Jesus Christ, so not himself, Jesus Christ heals you.

Get up and roll up your mat. Secondly, we ought to notice, too, that Peter is doing what he's already been doing in Jerusalem. And there, back in Jerusalem, God had given the apostles signs and wonders to testify to their power, to the power of their preaching.

And likewise, here we find that as Peter does his miracles, people turn to the Lord on both occasions. So, look again in verse 35, after Aeneas' healing, all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him, that is Aeneas, and turned to the Lord.

Likewise, verse 42, after Dorcas is raised from the dead, this became known all over Joppa and many believed in the Lord. And so, what we're seeing is then that God's plan of salvation is being fulfilled.

[5 : 34] Now, not just with the Jews living in Jerusalem, but outside as well. And this now sets the stage for the next thing, which is that the Gentiles, those who are not Jews, are brought into God's kingdom through Peter's ministry.

And so, as we look at the very last verse in chapter 9, we find Peter staying with Simon the tanner. Now, I'm sure all of you know this, but a tanner is not someone who just loves sun-baking.

Alright? He's someone, or she, maybe even, who dyes and colors animal skins for leather products. So, if you're carrying one of those now, there's a tanner who actually made that possible for your handbag.

But if you think about it, being a tanner requires Simon to handle dead animals, right? And many of you have been coming along for the series in Leviticus, we know that someone who touches unclean animals, dead animals, becomes unclean, right?

And so, by rights, Peter, as a Jew, is not meant to stay with Simon. Now, I think this is an indication, perhaps, that even at this point, there has been some relaxation on the keeping of the laws by the Christians, although not the food laws as yet, as we shall soon see.

[7 : 02] So, that sort of all sets the scene for chapter 10 at the start, verse 1, where we meet Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman soldier, who, like Dorcas, is generous, giving to the poor, and whose whole family, not just him, everyone in the family, is devout and God-fearers.

And just as last week we had two visions, remember, God again here provides two more visions. He's over-communicating again. In order to corroborate both visions, to initiate the contact between Peter, the leader of God's church, and Cornelius, God's chosen first fruits, if you like, among the Gentiles.

Now first, the vision to Cornelius is pretty straightforward. An angel appears to him and says in verse 4, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering.

Note this sacrificial type language. A memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon, the tanner, whose house is by the sea.

And so, encouraged by that, Cornelius sends three men to Joppa. Peter's corresponding vision is slightly more complicated. And that's because of the huge barrier, the huge war between the Jews and the Gentiles in the minds of all the Jews that had to be first brought down.

[8 : 30] This was despite Peter already being an apostle of Jesus. You see, for them, just being a disciple of Jesus does not mean that they immediately forsook the laws of the Old Testament.

In fact, Jesus himself had said when he was on the earth that he came not to abolish the Old Testament but to fulfill it. And so, even as believers, they considered that it was ill-important to obey the law and therefore, as a result, not associate with Gentiles.

So, I can imagine that there were no playdates between their children. No eating barbecue pork together. Bit sad, but anyway.

Now, it's also true that I think a few weeks ago we saw in the Gospels that Jesus did declare, didn't he, that all foods were clean when he said that it's not what went into the body that made one unclean but what came out of our mouths that made us unclean.

But you have to notice that that was a realization that came afterwards. It wasn't that the, I don't think the disciples understood fully at the time when Jesus said it. But it took event and events such as this for them to later on as they were writing the Gospel of Mark to insert that comment as something they came to understand later on.

[9 : 51] And so here at this point Peter needed this vision or else he would have been hesitant to go and visit Cornelius. And so it occurred when Peter was hungry and as the meal was being fixed for him he fell into a trance and verse 11 as he did he saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

It will contain all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him get up Peter kill and eat.

Now this would have puzzled Peter because the voice was from heaven and so it has to be divine. But this instruction from the Lord was against the law.

These were unclean animals and so Peter says surely not Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. Someone was saying are you trying to test me here?

Well the voice spoke to him a second time. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. And then it's repeated three times just to reinforce and show that this is indeed from the Lord before the sheet is taken back up to heaven.

[11 : 10] And then right on cue three men from Cornelius appear. Now the timing is such that it's got to be divine intervention isn't it?

So that Peter is able to then put the two and the two together and work out what's going on. Now God again provides a further assurance by then verse 19 having the spirit say Simon three men are looking for you so he's up there now on the rooftop and he's saying Simon three men are looking for you get up go downstairs do not hesitate to go with them for I've sent them.

And again the vision is given or the words are given so that it confirms when he goes down and sees that indeed this must be from the Lord. Now this itself is a simple instruction not too many details because the men now are the ones to provide that detail.

Verse 21 Peter says I'm the one you're looking for why have you come? The men replied we have come from Cornelius the centurion he's a righteous and God-fearing man who is respected by all the Jewish people a holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.

Now Peter at this point would have wondered what? I don't even know where I'm going how do I know what to say? But no doubt I think the vision that he just had is all trying to coming together isn't it?

[12 : 36] If not all at once. What is clear however is he knows now that he needs to follow them but again being late that day Peter then now invites them to stay as his guests and again if you've been going through Leviticus you'll be sort of ticking over in your mind that hang on Peter's not meant to do this these are Gentiles not meant to invite them to stay with him but again I think it shows isn't it that Peter is beginning to understand that something has changed anyway coming come the next morning they set out together and they arrive in Caesarea the following day then comes the return visit doesn't it to Cornelius' house and what we find Cornelius is already there waiting he's even invited his relatives and his close friends it must have been really expected isn't it it's not like they had mobile phones at that time where the three men could be calling hey we're on our way make sure you get your family there they might have been waiting there for hours isn't it and he sort of invited them everyone gathering not quite a Tupperware watch party but something better isn't it this is going to be a gospel party and so when

Peter enters he's greeted by Cornelius who falls to his feet in reverence and Peter says no no don't do that I'm just a mere mortal myself get up and then as he enters and sees the large gathering he says in verse 28 you're well aware that it's against our law for a Jew to associate or visit a Gentile but God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean so when I was sent for I came without raising any objection may I ask why you sent for me he's traveled the whole day why am I here but again we're beginning to see aren't we that Peter is getting the vision he now knows that this is not just about eating unclean food is it rather this is a symbol of something much deeper that God is now allowing the Jews to fellowship with the Gentiles and hence Peter raised no objection to visiting to staying with Cornelius but as we will soon see this is not the end of it just yet there's actually a bit more to go but first

Cornelius reveals something a bit more than what his men have told Peter so verse 30 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 sent to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter he's a guest in the home of Simon the tanner who lives by the sea so I sent for you immediately and it was good of you to come now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us now what's this something more it's the fact that isn't it that he now doesn't just say that the angel has appeared to him but that actually the word that was given was that God had heard his prayer God has remembered his gifts to the poor therefore the Lord has recognized Cornelius' piety and faith and is sending Peter with a word to him as a result and even though the visions don't tell us what Peter is to say

I think Peter now knows because here was Cornelius with his family a believer even though he's a Gentile he believed he even acknowledges that he's in the presence of God and so Peter knew that therefore what they needed to hear was the gospel the good news of Jesus and so this vision of his is not even just about Jews not you know being able to eat with Gentiles but it's something more radical isn't it this vision that he's got is the Lord telling him that now in Christ Jew and Gentile are now united because of the gospel that they can come together not just to eat but actually to be one to be one people God's holy people together what they had thought they were separated for so many ages now is God's going to bring them all together that's good news isn't it that's wonderful news and so in verse 34

Peter gives them what I think is an excellent summary of the gospel so I'm going to read it pretend or not don't pretend Peter is now preaching the gospel to you listen Peter says I 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 you know the message God sent to the people of Israel announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all you know what has happened throughout 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 were 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

[18 : 20] God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen he was seen not 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 about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name now if you ever wanted to know how to share the gospel with others tell people about the good news of Jesus well let me recommend you just studying these verses because all the elements of the gospel are here aren't they Jesus death and resurrection witnesses to both of those things his power and preaching freedom from the bondage of

Jesus now one thing that's unique here though is the very first sentence Peter declares that God does not show favoritism anymore but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what's right it's the declaration isn't it that the gospel the good news of Jesus is not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well that is it's for the whole world now some however to Israel because he's only revealed himself to them up to now you know why had he not shown that to the Gentiles as well well the thing is that by right even Israel shouldn't have been favored right from the moment Adam sinned everyone was excluded all was banished if you read in Genesis from the garden of Eden and therefore from God's presence no one had a right to come into

God's presence not even Israel and as we've seen in Leviticus we had to God had to show them how they were to keep their distance didn't they for their own safety lest they were consumed but God in his mercy provided a way for us to come back to him but this plan required time to unfold didn't just happen overnight first as we read last week from Genesis by choosing Abraham through whom the Messiah would come so that this Messiah can be a blessing not just to Israel but to all people and in our reading today from Isaiah that was confirmed as well on the slide there God told this servant this Messiah it is too small a thing for you that is the Messiah to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept no I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth so

God's plan was always to save the entire world the gospel is for the Gentiles too for us but it needed time to unfold but the plan required that God had to choose one nation from many in order for it to be fulfilled because the plan involved sending his son to be a human and as God's only son one and only son Jesus could only become a human incarnate once right so God had to choose a nation and a culture to send Jesus too right can't say to the Chinese and the Asians and the Japanese give the gospel and have the Japanese Jesus and the Chinese Jesus can't have that right because it's only one son one incarnation and so he had to pick one and it just so happened it was Israel but once this was accomplished in

Christ's coming after he did then everyone now can enter God's kingdom kingdom no one is excluded anymore there's no favoritism only faith in Jesus is required faith in his work on the cross is what is needed for us to enter God's kingdom well it seems now here at this point that God sort of couldn't wait for Peter to wrap up his sermon like come on Cornelius and his family already believe you know if you watch Jerry Maguire Peter had them at hello but Peter had to preach the gospel that's good but God I think said that's probably enough now and so just as on Pentecost at that right time God's spirit came down on the Gentiles as well and importantly we see that some circumcised believers were there to witness it and that will be important in the next section the prophecy to

[23 : 58] Joel is now being fulfilled isn't it not just to the Jews but even among the Gentiles and if you remember this prophecy all the way back in Acts chapter 2 Peter quoted it in his sermon when he said in the last days God says I will pour out my spirit on all people that is including Gentiles they will see visions which Cornelius did and everyone that is not just the Jews everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved and so 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 heard them speaking in tongues and praising God just as it happened in Acts chapter 2 then Peter said surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have so he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days so just as it occurred in

Acts chapter 2 Peter now knows that he cannot deny these Gentiles the waters of baptism because it was clear that God had poured out his Spirit on them the gates as it were to God's kingdom are now wide open for everyone Jew or Gentile but as often happens not everyone gets the memo right in this case the circumcised believers in Jerusalem didn't now we don't know whether these were just a sect within the Jewish Christians or all the Jewish Christians but nevertheless they were circumcised believers and what they did was that when Peter returned to Jerusalem they confronted and criticized him if you like I would call these new covenant believers because they believe in Jesus with an old covenant mindset and we're on to chapter 11 now you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them imagine them doing this and

Peter himself I think would have rightly thought the same things until recently right so it mustn't be too harsh on them but like Peter what they needed then was a re-education or education in full of the implications of the gospel you see when we believe the gospel it's very easy for us to understand how the gospel benefits us what's in it for me but actually God wants us to understand what the gospel does for the whole world not just what about me but what about the world and so what Peter does now is he recounts all the events again from the start I won't read it again verses 4 to 17 but essentially the events are retold now for the third time Peter then Cornelius vision the two visits to Joppa and Caesarea but again as with the early accounts one more detail is now given we see that in verse 16 that as the spirit was poured out

Peter remembered something he remembered that the Lord had said John baptized with water so if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ who was I to stand in God's way that's right isn't it who was I to stand in God's way now these words from Jesus you can find in Acts chapter 1 verse 5 but Jesus already had foreshadowed that all who believe will have the Holy Spirit and so now that the Gentiles clearly do Peter cannot stand in the way of God but had to offer them water baptism so what we end up at the end is that there is no denying that the Gentiles were part of God's kingdom and so when the Jewish believers heard this verse 18 they had no further objections and praised God saying so then even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life so that's really the story in 20 minutes over three chapters or two and a half and

I guess I wanted to just end by asking ourselves what does this now mean for us today well I guess the first thing to say is that as humans we often have a tendency don't we that when we are on the outside we are so acutely aware aren't we of being excluded or unfairly treated even as a young child I'm pretty sure you knew that when you were left out of something you knew that you were being unfairly treated or you wanted to know why am I excluded now the thing is that often once we find ourselves on the inside we can sometimes get a bit protective can't we and start to put up barriers that prevent others from coming you know you can join us but you do this first or you have to be there or you have to be more time this that whatever we're very good at doing that aren't we but let me just say that when it comes to

[29 : 24] God's kingdom when it comes to God's church that's not how it works God not us decides who's in and who's out and so yes Peter and the Jews they were allowed in first not because they deserved it but only by God's grace and instead once they were in their job was to share the truth so that others can join them and the truth is no one deserves to enter not even the Jews yet by God's grace now anyone anyone who calls on the name of the Lord can will be saved God now welcomes all into his kingdom if they repent and put their faith in Jesus so there is still a condition some are in and some are out but the condition is that of faith in

Jesus which anyone anyone can put their can do and put their faith in so God's promises and words are clear isn't it and he's already shown it tonight by giving his spirit not just to the Gentiles but to not just to the Jews sorry but to the Gentiles as well and so if anyone here today has not put their faith in Jesus you can and once you do you're welcomed by God into Christ's body there's no argument that you're in no other criteria that is needed you don't need to compare yourself with those that are in the church and go how do I measure up have I done enough am I good enough none of that God welcomes you with open arms if you put your trust in Jesus whether you're Jew or Gentile and then once you're in and once we're in then what we're called to do is to be generous to all who believe in fact we're to be welcoming even to those who have not yet believed because that's that's the means by which

God uses to bring them in we're to be generous and welcoming to those that we don't normally associate with by being welcoming to them by loving them by caring for them because when we do that we reflect what God has done for us we reflect who God is who showed us his welcome even when we're undeserving by giving us his son Jesus and then pouring out his spirit on us so that we can put our trust in Jesus and enter his kingdom let's pray father thank you for the mystery of the gospel that is now revealed to us that in Christ both Jews and Gentiles are welcomed into your kingdom and even though it was hidden for many years it's now revealed to us and therefore we are blessed to have forgiveness of sins through faith in your son as a response help us to be welcoming to all so that they may find grace hope and belonging in the body of

Christ in Jesus name we pray amen