

Extending Gods Gift

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] I wonder if you would take your Bible out to Acts chapter 10 and 11.

Sarah read just the last little section. We are going to try and cover all of Acts 10 and 11 this morning. And as you find that on page 122 and 123, I want to tell you that on Thursday I became a Canadian citizen.

And I should be applauding you, shouldn't I? I've developed a sudden politeness.

I feel very apologetic about most things now. So I want to begin with an apology. There's far too much to say in this sermon.

Again, this is a long passage and I've bitten off more than you can chew and I can chew together. But seeing as you've made it out in the snow, we're going to try it.

[1 : 08] So it'll be a little bit longer. Are there any high school students here this morning? Just one. Well, we try not to leave our brains at the door.

So we're going to work hard here today. And I encourage you at any time the preacher goes offline to just read somewhere in Acts 10 or 11 and you'll find out what's going on.

Now, this is probably the most important section in all the book of Acts. It is the vision that God gives to Cornelius and to Peter about including the Gentiles.

It's so important. Luke tells the story not once, not twice, but three times and then again in chapter 15 a fourth time. It takes up so much room because Luke wants to show us that Christianity is not a Jewish cult, but is a universal worldwide religion.

The faith is not confined to the Jews. It's the fulfillment of Jesus' words. And it's very interesting that here the word of God goes across a national boundary and progresses against the strong opposition, not of those people outside the faith, but of those inside the faith, which is something to ponder, isn't it?

[2 : 26] That the great resistance to the word of God often comes from those of us within the Christian church. It's a major turning point in the history of Christianity. Christianity.

It totally changes the character and direction of the Christian church. It shows what God's purpose for it is and explains why you're here in church this morning, because I'm guessing most of us are Gentiles.

We meet Cornelius, chapter 10, verse 1. I'm not going to read every verse, but let me just touch down at the beginning. We read this. At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God and all his household gave alms liberally to the people and prayed constantly to God.

He's an important man with an important role. What's more important about him is that he's devout, a God-fearer. He admires the God of Israel.

He admires the law. He had not become a Jew, but he observed the law and prayed and was generous and taught his household to do the same. He's right on the boundary line.

[3 : 35] He's on the border between Judaism and paganism. He's not a pagan, but he's not a Jew. In fact, an observant Jew wouldn't even eat in his house.

But he prayed and he sought the God of Israel. And God answered his prayers. In the middle of the afternoon, you look down in the next verses, an angel appeared to him and said, God has answered your prayers.

Send to Joppa, where we were last week, and get Peter to come and tell you the message of salvation. So he sends off two military orderlies, and they go to Joppa.

At the very moment the orderlies arrive at the house where Peter is staying, Peter falls into a trance. Why was Peter staying with a tanner? That would have been unclean.

Anyway, he falls into a trance. He sees heaven open, and something like a sheet come down from heaven, and all sorts of animals, kosher, unkosher, clean, unclean. A voice says, get up and eat.

[4 : 38] Peter says, not a chance, Lord. I've never, ever disobeyed the food laws. Three times the voice comes back and says, take and eat, and three times Peter rejects it and refuses.

Now it's very difficult for us Gentiles this morning, sitting here, to understand the power of what Peter is feeling. All the externals of the Jewish life, circumcision and food laws and ceremonies, they weren't just incidentals, they came from God.

And one of the storylines through the book of Acts is how the Christians come to realize that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, those externals are no longer needed.

They are the shadows. They're the symbols pointing to the reality that they now have in Jesus Christ. But it's not easy to let go. The food laws, like circumcision, are a mark that they were set apart by God.

All the nations on the earth, this one shall be holy. The problem was, you see, that what was intended as a privilege quickly became a source of pride. And what becomes a source of pride becomes prejudice.

[5 : 52] And instead of remembering that when God gave his promise to Abraham, it was so that all the families in the earth should be blessed, the externals became a wall that they hid behind.

Peter has to come to see that the death of Jesus removes that wall and removes all barriers to people hearing the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

But I want to say this. It's not that God has changed. There's still a deep moral separation between all that's evil and the holiness of God. But through the death of Jesus Christ, the way of cleansing and forgiveness is now open to everyone in all nations.

The death of Jesus cleans away and erases all the external boundary markers between what is clean and what is unclean and shows us what the real issue is, and that is the infinite chasm between sin and salvation and the wonder of God's forgiveness.

Do you remember in Mark chapter 7, Jesus himself said, that what defiles you and me has nothing to do with our race or nationality or color of our skin or our diet or anything else external.

[7 : 08] It's in our hearts. And the stain is so radical, it cannot be cleansed by any external ceremony. It needs the deep heart change that comes only from the Spirit of God himself.

So there is Peter in a trance, and when the doorbell rings, he's deep in thought, he's not sure what to do, and just in case he misses the point, the Holy Spirit actually speaks to him directly and says, go with them.

So, he goes with them. And they arrive at Caesarea the next day in verse 25, and they get quite a reception. Look at verse 25, if you will.

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. He called all his friends and relatives together. Peter said, stand up, I'm just a man. And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered, and he said to them, you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean, for when I was asked to send you, for when I was sent to you, I came without objection.

I asked then why you have sent for me. So Cornelius in verse 30, he then begins to tell Peter about the dream that he had, or the visit from the angel, I should say.

[8 : 38] And then in verse 33, he says, so I sent you at once, and now you've been kind enough to come. Now, therefore, we are all here in the presence and the present in the sight of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.

It is the preacher's dream. I just, I think we should include that in the liturgy somewhere. Don't you think at the end of verse 33?

So verse 34, Peter opened his mouth and said, truly I perceive that God shows no partiality in every nation. Anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

You know the word, and then he starts preaching the gospel. Now, Peter is not saying that Cornelius is acceptable because of his great prayers and piety.

He's not saying that God accepts everyone irrespective of what they believe and what they do. He's saying God accepts people now irrespective of what nation they come from. Cornelius is ready to hear the message of salvation.

[9 : 45] It's not that Cornelius is already saved and needs a minor tune-up. You know, some local, some late news, late breaking news of what God is doing. He needs to hear the gospel, he needs to come to repentance, and he needs to place his faith in Jesus Christ.

So here is the great opportunity for Peter. He steps up to the tee and he gets out his biggest club in the bag and he preaches a magnificent sermon, but something interrupts it in verse 44.

He gets halfway through his sermon when God interrupts. Verse 44, Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard and they began to speak in tongues, just as on the day of Pentecost.

And Peter and the other Jewish Christians are astounded and so they baptize these Gentiles in the name of Jesus Christ and they get into all sorts of trouble for doing it with the Jerusalem Christians. And so we come to the end of the story in chapter 11, verse 17, as Peter defends himself, he says, if then God gave the same gift to them, that is the Holy Spirit, as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?

And then now speaking about the Jerusalem Christians, he said, when they heard this, they were silenced and they glorified God saying, then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.

[11 : 09] It's a magnificent story and I wish we had more time this morning, but I want to draw out three pivotal lessons. And not surprisingly, all three lessons are about mission.

And the first is this, it has to do with the source of mission. You see, where does the impulse and the motivation for mission come from?

It comes from God. I don't think Jesus could have been any clearer. You remember after he rose from the dead, he said to his disciples in Luke 24 that the gospel has to be preached to all nations.

And in the first chapter of Acts, he said, you're my witnesses to the ends of the earth. But it's very interesting. The apostles did not spontaneously obey Jesus' command.

In fact, they stayed in Jerusalem until they were forced out by persecution and only after the gospel had gone to the coast did Peter travel around and start visiting these churches.

[12 : 20] Do you find that interesting? There was no intentional, deliberate and organized attempt to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And unless God had intervened, Peter would not have been caught dead eating with Cornelius.

Because there are two conversions in this chapter. Not just Cornelius' conversion, but Peter needs to be converted to the Gentile mission. And at every point in the chapter, the action is triggered by and initiated by God because God is the source of mission.

God sends the visions. God speaks by the Holy Spirit. God sends the angel. God sends the Holy Spirit. It's very important for us to see that when God intervenes, he doesn't do all the work himself.

He wants us to be involved in mission. And don't you think, don't you think it would have been much easier for the angel to have told Cornelius the gospel?

I mean, don't you think the angel would have done a very satisfactory job of preaching the gospel to Cornelius and it would have been irresistibly impressive to have heard the gospel from a shining angel. But that's not what God does.

[13 : 41] He arranges it so that Peter has to tell the message to Cornelius because he wants his people engaged with mission. And again, when God appears or when God sends the vision to Peter, he doesn't put a neon sign in the sky which says, go to the Gentiles, go to the Gentiles, forget the food laws, go to the Gentiles.

He doesn't make it so obvious. Peter has to think hard. In fact, Peter has to think very, very hard. It takes him a great deal to get it.

Peter is perplexed and he resists. And he hasn't even decided to go to Cornelius until the men turn up. And God tells him to go because God is the source of mission.

Again, it's in the middle of the sermon that God interrupts and pours out the Holy Spirit so that Peter doesn't get to finish his sermon. Now, if mission is God's initiative, I think this passage has an edge and a challenge for us this morning, doesn't it?

I mean, we need to ask ourselves as individuals and as a congregation, are we looking for ways to spread the salvation of God or are we satisfied with just coming to church?

[15 : 02] What is, what's the unique opportunity that we have in 2005 to bear witness to the gospel, to extend the gospel? What initiatives ought we be taking?

Or should we be satisfied with really great programs? It's very striking that the Jerusalem church never responds to God's initiative for mission.

We're going to see next week, the church up in Antioch does. And what happens is that Antioch eclipses Jerusalem and Jerusalem falls away precisely because they are not engaged in mission.

But in Antioch, they keep giving away their very best people. And because of that, God blesses them. God is the source of mission.

That's the first lesson. The second is the message, the message of mission. This is my most important computer disk. It's called Disk Warrior.

[16 : 07] When my, I'm a Mac user, when my computer starts acting strangely, I put this disk in, I don't know how it does it, but if things are not in their right places, it picks them all up and puts them back in their right places, and hey presto, the computer works properly.

Well, I want you to look at verses 36 to 43 with me, if you would. Because here we have Peter's sermon to Cornelius.

And I ask you, what would you say to someone who desperately wants to hear the message, who says to you, how can I be saved? And I think these words, there's only 191 words in his sermon.

Far too short if you ask me. And I wanted to act as a disk warrior in a way for us, to see if we have things in the right place. You could do worse than committing it to memory. And I want to point out to you that the apostolic gospel has four points.

We're just going to look at them briefly. Jesus' life, Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection, our response. Very simple, isn't it? Look at his life, verses 36 to 39.

[17 : 25] You see in those verses, Jesus, the gospel began in Galilee. He was anointed with the spirit and power. He went about doing good, healing those oppressed by the devil.

God was with him. We are witnesses. It's a picture of the life and the loveliness of Jesus Christ. His power and his compassion. Full of the Holy Spirit.

He comes to liberate people from Satan and evil. Everything he does is good. And we witnessed it firsthand, said the apostles. And we have their testimony in the gospels today.

Jesus' life. Secondly, his death. Verse 39, Peter says, they put him to death by hanging him on a tree. Which is an odd way of saying it, isn't he? He doesn't say that he died on the cross.

And the reason for that is that Jesus' death is not just a historical event, but it has a very deep significance. And I think if Peter had more time in his sermon, he would speak about the fact that Jesus bore our sins.

[18 : 29] And then the resurrection, verse 40. God raised him from the dead, made him manifest. This is a key point. It's a bodily resurrection in verse 40.

The one we ate and drank with him. And then fourthly and finally, you need to respond to this. And there are two sides of response.

Verse 42, and he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. It's a very important verse.

I wonder if I asked you all to write down what you think the core of the gospel is. What is the heart of the Christian message?

What's the one thing you think Jesus would command us to communicate to our friends? Would it be that Jesus was the one who is the judge of the living and the dead? My guess is we'd mostly write Jesus, God is love, Jesus is saviour.

[19 : 26] And he is. But the gospel response, the gospel in the first place teaches us that Jesus is judge. Since Jesus is Lord of all, since God has raised him to his right hand, he is the judge of the living and the dead.

He is the universal judge. And every person living and every person who has ever died will have to face Jesus Christ as judge. This is the apostolic gospel. That is why repentance is the primary response to the gospel.

To repent is to recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord and that I haven't lived under him as Lord. I haven't treated him as Lord and God. I've done what I've wanted. I've thought what I've wanted. I've said what I've wanted.

But I've ignored the fact that God has made him the most important person of all, my judge. That's the first side of the response, to repent to him as judge. And the other side is in verse 43, to trust in him as saviour.

To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in his name receives forgiveness of sins. Again, it's universal. Anyone who believes in his name, Jew or Gentile, there is forgiveness in no one else.

[20 : 44] For there is the apostolic gospel. Jesus' life, Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection, our response to him as saviour and judge. Is there any part of that that's unclear?

Is there any part of that that you might be tempted to leave out? Because if you do, it won't be the apostolic gospel. And it's this gospel that Cornelius needed to hear, despite him being a generous and devout person, irrespective of the fact that he was religious and respected, Cornelius needed to hear the gospel.

He needed to hear that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, that Jesus Christ is saviour and judge, that he died for him. And he needs to repent and place his faith in Jesus.

Only then does he receive the forgiveness of his sins, salvation, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And I just need to ask you this morning whether you know the reality of the Holy Spirit in your own life.

I mean, you can be a devout, generous, and respected person, but not forgiven. You can be a religious, prayerful, and compassionate person and not be saved. Salvation is in Jesus Christ, who is revealed in this gospel, Lord of all.

[22 : 05] He's come to die for you and to rise again. Lord and saviour. Put your faith in him and be saved. That is the message of salvation. So the initiative of salvation is God's, the message is Jesus Christ, and thirdly and finally, the dynamic of mission.

We're nearly finished. How does the mission go forward? Through us, in us? And the answer from this passage is by the word and by the spirit.

If you look down in chapter 11, verse 1, how did the early Christians understand the conversion of the Gentiles? Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

That's what had happened. They'd received the word of God. When did the angel tell, what did the angel tell Cornelius that Peter would do for him? In chapter 11 he says, he will declare a message by which you will be saved.

How is the gospel going to go forward? It is as Peter brings a word, a message, something commanded by God. That is how salvation works. It comes through the word of the gospel.

[23 : 24] And I think we're so familiar with this, we miss it. If you look at the beginning of Peter's sermon in verse 36, in chapter 10, we read, you know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all, the word which was proclaimed throughout Judea, etc.

What did God do to save us? He sent a word. Jesus Christ comes as the preacher to announce that he is Lord of all. But it's not word by itself.

And we mustn't separate the word and the spirit for they work together. The Holy Spirit falls on all who hear the word and opens their eyes.

And it's like a great Gentile Pentecost. They speak in tongues to show that the Holy Spirit is for all who are Christian.

And the falling of the Holy Spirit is described twice in verses 44 in chapter 10 and 15 in chapter 11. And both times it's explicitly tied to the preaching.

[24 : 33] Because it is through the preaching of the gospel that God sends his Holy Spirit. And that is the dynamic of mission. Well, this week I sang the Canadian National Anthem for the first time as a Canadian citizen.

And I've always loved the words that we sing three times in the National Anthem. We stand on guard for thee. And I want to say to you this morning that I am committing myself afresh to do that.

And I want to do that by following God's initiative in mission. And I want to call on you to do the same. To grasp and to share the message of our mission.

And to be faithful to the dynamic of mission. For the progress of the word. For the glory of Christ. And for the growth of the kingdom. Amen.

Now let us kneel for prayer. Good. Good. Good. That's good. Good. Good. Thank you. Good. We're here. Thank you. Amen. Hello.

[25 : 39] Come. Hey. Hey. Hey. Go. Thanks. Love. My name. Oh sure. Hey. Somebody's holding me down confused. Come. Hey. I'm having me down the wrong way. ■ in the whole world. Everybody's doing this morning is a good holiday.

And for the love Comey.