

Acts 10:1-43 "God Is the Author of Missions"

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Well, it is great to be here and to be here again. I was here a few times years ago. Some of you have kindly remembered that. Our passage today is Acts chapter 10.

This is our Express Grace conference. So this is going to be a gospel-focused, gospel-driven message. In Acts chapter 10, we have a long chapter. Chapter 10 has about 50 verses.

We're going to read verses 1 to 8 and then verses 34 to 43. So if you would, listen to God's word. At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort.

Devout men who feared God were with all his household. They gave alms generously to the people and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day, he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come to him and say, Cornelius.

[1 : 1 2] And he stared at him in terror and said, What is it, Lord? And he said, Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send to Joppa and bring one Simon, who is called Peter.

He is lodging with another Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him.

And having repeated everything he said to them, he sent them to Joppa. Now I'll tell you what happens in between as we go through the sermon, but let's go to verse 34. Because he gets Peter, hears this call.

They find him, Simon Peter. Peter, Peter the apostle, goes and he preaches to this man, Cornelius, this centurion. And this is his sermon. So Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly, I understand.

Could be translated, truly, I now get it. Truly, I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

[2 : 2 0] And as for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning in Galilee, after the baptism that John proclaimed.

How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

And we are witnesses. We are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. But God raised him from the dead on the third day and made him appear, not to all the people, but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

And while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. Let's pray for a moment. Heavenly Father, I pray that your spirit would fall on us and we would hear your word.

[3 : 40] We would live it and we would love the gospel and be shaped by it all throughout our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. For many years, I felt sorry for Goldfish, living in that tiny little bowl about 12 by 10 inches, around and around and around they go, looking at the same plastic pirate ship, the same treasure chest, the same sunken palm tree.

The tedium, the tedium must be soul-crushing, I thought. And then I read a report, some scientists who studied the memories of carp, also known as goldfish, and they ascertained that except for the question of where food comes from, they have a memory, functional memory of three seconds, which means that the trip around the goldfish bowl is endlessly thrilling.

Whoa, look, a pirate ship and a treasure chest. A tree on the bottom of the ocean. Wow. A pirate ship.

A treasure chest. Now, in honor of this discovery, my family calls it goldfishing when we say something important to each other and one of us forgets it within two and a half seconds.

The sad truth is we don't just forget things like the keys are on the counter. We forget much more important things, including the gospel, including, well, not just my wife and I, but Peter.

[5 : 28] You noticed it. I said, now I understand. Now I get it. Peter says, now I understand the gospel. As if he'd forgotten the gospel.

In fact, he had forgotten the gospel. And God reminded him through Cornelius. I hope he does the same for us. We're going to talk about several things today. You have a bulletin.

You have an outline there. We're going to see first in verses 1-8 how God calls people to mission. And then how he coordinates mission between Cornelius the centurion and Peter the apostle. He's called Simon in this passage.

And then the need to answer the call. And then the stirring of passion proven by the gift of the Holy Spirit in the middle of a sermon. And I hope we live in joy in the gospel.

So here's the story. There is a man named Cornelius. He is praying. He lives in a city called Caesarea. There's two Caesareas in Israel. We talked about the other one last night. This is maritime Caesarea.

[6 : 27] And there is an Italian cohort. That means there are Roman soldiers. That means there's an occupying force. It means that Cornelius is part of the occupying force from Rome to dominate Israel.

He's not a popular guy. But somehow some person spoke to him about the God of Israel. And he became intrigued. And he began to follow the God of Israel.

That's what it means when it says he's God-fearing, some translations say. He is obeying the law of God. He's serving God alone. But he is, we would say in our day today, he's not fully committed.

Because you see, to be fully committed to Israel, you had to get circumcised if you're a male and follow the food laws. And you also had to avoid association with Gentiles. That means he would have to give up his job.

And he wasn't willing to do that. He worshipped God. He prayed to God. And yet he was holding back a little bit. And he was praying. And as he prays, in fear of God, God says, I'm hearing your prayers.

[7 : 33] And he sends an angel. Terrifies him. But the angel says, your prayers have ascended. And now I have a word for you. I want you to send some men to Joppa, which is about 30 miles, walking about a two-day journey.

Four days altogether. And find a man named Simon who's called Peter. He's living by the sea with a tanner. By the way, a tanner is not somebody who owns tanning beds.

It's somebody who takes care of animal skins, which is kind of dirty work. And work Jews were supposed to stay away from.

So Peter has been bending the rules maybe a little bit. Cornelius listens. And he says to two of his soldiers and another devout person, go find Simon Peter.

I'd love to hear how it went. There's a man named Simon Peter. Don't know who he is. Don't know why he's important. But you're supposed to bring him here. You're supposed to say something. I don't know what.

[8 : 35] Go get him. And so off he goes. That's part one. Part two is God coordinating mission. And it goes like this in verses 9 to 16. And there it is.

Maybe on the screen we'll put verses 9 to 16 or not, depending on what the people back in the, there we go, back there do. So it goes like this. Cornelius has a vision and so does Peter.

And the two work together. God is coordinating things. And it's around lunchtime. And Peter goes to the roof to pray. It was probably a hot day.

He went to the roof to get out of the heat in the house. And he's hungry. And people are preparing food downstairs. And God uses this hunger of his to give him a vision. And in this vision, something like a sheep, a large sheep comes down from heaven.

And there are all kinds of animals on it. And a voice from heaven says, rise Peter, kill and eat. And Peter says what any good Jew would say. I question this voice.

[9 : 36] Because it's telling me to break the commands of God. Which say we can't eat shellfish and we can't eat pork. And Peter has never eaten pork. He's never eaten bacon.

We may feel sorry for him. Because it tastes good. But he was willing to say no to his appetites for the sake of the Lord. And never.

God says, okay, fine. I'll send that vision again. And again, rise Peter, kill and eat. Again, he says, I can't. And then again, the vision comes a third time. Rise Peter, kill and eat.

Nope. I can't do it. And finally at the end, the Lord says, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. That's the lesson.

You're calling it impure, but I'm calling it pure. This, by the way, is really in a way one of the great motives for missions. There is no place. There is no people.

[10 : 33] There is no race that is impure. Everybody is pure or has the opportunity to become pure through Christ. And so Peter is rebuked.

There is, Jesus said, nothing that goes into a man that makes him unclean. Those laws are gone. And God is coordinating these two visions. It's because, verses 17 to 23 now, because as the vision ends, Peter is silent.

He's wondering what this might mean. And at that very moment, the men from Cornelius arrive at his door. This is a marvel of God's providence, isn't it? You know, they didn't have, you understand, they didn't have Google Maps in those days.

And they couldn't punch in the address of Simon the Tanner and say, okay, we're going to, you know, your phone just telling you, we'll arrive at 1138. They had no idea when they would arrive. They'd just go to the city center and say, are there any tanners around here?

Is there one named Simon? Is he prone to have guests? And so they just arrived in God's providence at that moment. And it says in verses 19 to 20, when as they arrive, the Spirit tells Peter, there are visitors coming, go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.

[11 : 50] And he goes down, he says, I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come? And they had to pause. How are we going to say this? We have come from Cornelius the Centurion.

That's a frightening way to begin. That's like saying, we've come from Joe the Gestapo captain. Nobody wants to hear that a centurion is summoning you.

This can only mean trouble. But they quickly add, this centurion is different. He is pious. He's a man of God. He's a God-fearing man. And the words are still ringing in Peter's ears.

Don't hesitate to go with these men. And so Peter has to be thinking, aha. Now, everybody knows what's going on here. The centurion is a man who is unclean. He's a warrior.

He is a Gentile. A Jew can't go into the house of a Gentile. The centurion knows what he's asking Peter. Peter knows what he's being asked to do. Everybody knows how tense and what a violation this is.

[13 : 02] And Peter takes the first step and he says, come on into my house. Even that is marginally illicit. Come into my house, you Gentiles, you centurion family people.

And they come into the house. They spend the night. And the next day, Peter and some of his friends get up and go as God commanded.

They walk two days. And when they arrive, Peter greets them. Sorry, Cornelius greets them and bows down as if he's an angel. And Peter sees the crowd and he sees Cornelius.

He says, no, no, get up. I'm just a man. I'm just a man like you are. And I just, I want to encourage you to think about what it took for Cornelius to get, as the passage says, all of his friends and relatives there.

Can you imagine the invitation went out? There is a man named Peter who's going to be coming to our house. Don't know who he is. Don't know what he has to say. Don't know when he's going to arrive.

[14 : 05] I'll provide all the food you need to stay all day so you're here when he arrives. That's the kind of invitation, to be candid, that is born of great faith and enthusiasm for the faith.

And I pray that there is that here. A faith, a belief that my friends, my family need to hear what is being said by God's messengers.

That's where mission begins, in the local church. You know, this is a missions conference. And I tell you, it's beautiful to care about missions in Peru and Ireland and South Sudan and India.

And a real heart for mission certainly starts here with your people and your friends. You can't really love people 10,000 miles away if you don't love your neighbor.

And if you don't love the gospel enough to tell your family and your friends and your coworkers, I don't know how there's going to be enough love to send people to Kazakhstan or wherever you send them.

[15 : 11] So Peter meets Cornelius, a man who wants to hear from God. And when he gets there, he says, so why did you send for me?

Why am I here? So Will told you I'm a professor. And professors always say there's no such thing as a stupid question, right? But some come pretty close.

And this may not be a stupid question, but it's pretty close. Peter says, why am I here? I think, Peter, why do you think you're here?

You're an apostle. Your job is to go to Jerusalem, Judea, and the uttermost parts of the earth. And guess what? The uttermost parts of the earth are coming to you, for goodness sakes. And so we want to laugh at Peter because he seems to have forgotten.

He's gold fishing. He's forgotten what he's supposed to do with his life. And yet let's not laugh because we can do the same thing. We also can forget. But Cornelius is patient.

[16 : 20] He says to him, now we're in verses 30 to 33, look, an angel came and said to send for you. And so I sent for you, and it was good of you to come.

And now, he says, we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. I've got to tell you, friends, that's just about perfect as an attitude for coming to worship.

In fact, your church would be richer and you would be richer if you read Acts 10 to 33 every day when you came to church, or before you come to church, or Saturday night.

Now we are all here. We, we're not a bunch of individuals. We're here, but we're here together. We're a community. We're not just isolated Christians. We are here. We're not here and at the football game, the basketball game.

We're not half here mentally and half somewhere else thinking about work. We are here. We are here before God. We're not here before Huntsville.

[17 : 30] We're not here watching the preacher. We're not here enjoying the choir, singers, the musicians. We are here before God. God is here. We are here before God to listen.

Not to have our ears vibrate, but to actually listen, to take it in. We're here before God to listen to everything, not just the parts we like, not just the funny stories about lost dogs who were found.

Love those stories about lost dogs. We're here to listen to everything that the Lord has commanded you to tell us. When you listen to your preachers, I'm not talking about me now. I'm talking about your pastors.

You listen to your pastors. You're actually listening to what God has commanded them to say. It's not their choice. And what God has commanded you to tell us.

And Peter hears this. He hears this preparation. He sees all these people have come and sat there for hours ready to listen to him. And he says this phrase we've all mentioned before.

[18 : 32] He says, now I get it. Now I understand. Now I see. Now I comprehend that the gospel is not just for Jews. It's also for Gentiles. It's for centurions.

It's for people who oppress Israel if God has moved and worked in their life. He is here. He says, now I know that God accepts from every nation people who fear him and do what is right.

That's not the way the gospel usually runs, is it? Is that what you usually hear? God is pleased with you if you fear him and do what is right. You hear that usually here? No.

That's what we call contextualization. That's the gospel in a way that would make sense to Cornelius' friends who haven't heard the language of Israel. Do what is right.

That is to say, don't live in hypocrisy and fear him. That is to say, have reverence for the one true God. That's how he begins. He begins by speaking the gospel in terms they understand.

[19 : 33] Then he starts saying it in ways that we understand. He says, God declares peace, this is verse 36, to all men through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all.

You can have peace with Christ. And he tells us a little bit more about how that happens. He said, well, here's how it happened. Jesus came after the baptism of John and he healed men and women who were under the devil's power.

And he preached and he taught and he healed. And we are his witnesses. What happened? What happened? They hung him on a tree. But that wasn't the end of the story. He was crucified, but God raised him.

And that's not just some fiction. We didn't just have some dream. God raised him and he was seen by many witnesses. And now we proclaim his resurrection. And not only do we, in fact, it's been foretold for hundreds and hundreds of years.

The prophets testify that everyone who believes in him, and now this is the gospel, we are used to hearing it, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

[20 : 36] So he starts off in language that makes sense to a secular person, we would say today, a pagan, a polytheist. Fear him and do what is right. And he explains what that means.

To fear him is to believe that Jesus is the anointed one who did good and the son of God who came to the earth and he died and he rose. And we saw it. It's not a fiction.

And ask him to forgive your sins. Believe in him. That's the gospel. Some of the people probably said, oh, now I realize.

I hope that you have said, now I realize. Again, Peter says, now I get it. Now I get the gospel. I think to myself, Peter, how can you say, now I get that the gospel is for everybody?

Now you can say, oh, I have to say the gospel, preach the gospel in terms that a Gentile would understand. I mean, wasn't he with Jesus when Jesus healed?

[21 : 36] And wasn't he with Jesus when Jesus healed Samaritans and Gentiles? Didn't he go, you know, to the Syrophenician woman? And to Gadara?

Those places are Gentile places. Peter, you were there. How can you forget? And the answer is he forgets the same way you and I forget. Now, I'm staying at a hotel nearby.

And the hotel is filled with young male hockey players. And up and down they go and their parents are with them. They terrorize the place a little bit.

They seem like nice 10, 11, 12-year-old boys. They've traveled for miles and miles. Hockey, like every other sport known to humanity, as far as I can tell, is a game of inches.

You look at these boys, you know that some of them are going to win and some are going to lose because the puck hit that post. Instead of going this way, it went this way.

[22 : 35] Just, you know, a quarter of an inch. And some of those boys are going to be so excited and some are going to be devastated. We lost by one inch. It's that way in every sport known to man.

Baseball, game of inches. Tennis, basketball, football. And when you lose the game, you think life is over. Grown men who have jobs lose softball games because the ball is fouled by three inches and they're crushed for a week and a half.

My life is meaningless. No, it isn't. My friends, you forgot the gospel. It's just a game. God loves you with an everlasting love.

And really, honestly, whether the ball was in or out by one inch, it really doesn't matter at all in the grand scheme of things. And anytime you tell yourself that this is life and death, you are forgetting the gospel.

So, Saji, one of our missionaries you heard from just a few minutes ago, said that he grew up in a home.

[23 : 46] Where are you? I've lost you. Where are you? There you are. Said he grew up in a home with a violent alcoholic father. So did I. And he was violent with his body.

He hit us sometimes. But he was more violent with his words. He was more violent with his words. And time without number, thousands of times, literally thousands of times, my father told me I was useless and worthless and always would be.

Over and over and over and over. And when I fail, when I am snubbed, or when I feel snubbed, whether I was snubbed or not, whether I am, you know, put in second or third place, that useless, worthless, and always will be, it's still there.

And I forget the gospel. I preach the gospel and I forget the gospel. Well, I forget that God loves me unchangingly. It really doesn't matter how I perform.

If you grew up in a home with a violent alcoholic, you get this idea. If I do everything right, it will stop. It won't stop.

[25 : 08] And it puts a kind of legalism in you. And that kind of legalism makes us forget the gospel. If I do it all right, I'll be fine.

And I forget the gospel. Saji, do you forget the gospel sometimes? I think we probably all forget the gospel sometimes. And just as Peter has to say, now I understand because I did know and then I forgot.

Now I remember. So we too have to say, now let us remember. Let us remember. That your status in this world does not depend on whether the ball was in or out by an inch or whether you did or did not get the promotion or whether you were or were not invited to that party or that committee or whatever it is you care about.

God's love does not change. It is not contingent upon what you have done lately. It is contingent upon the work of Christ finished on the cross in the resurrection 2,000 years ago.

And nothing can change that. And I hope you believe that. And I hope you know that is the good news. It is the foundation of your mission here in Huntsville, in this church, and throughout the world.

[26 : 23] That gospel drives mission. And God coordinates mission. I was a pastor of a church vaguely like yours for 10, 11 years in my 50s.

49 to 50. 49 until I was almost 60 before I returned to the seminary. And I still taught a little bit. That's how I had Will. Didn't really get to know him because I just taught one or two courses a year during those years.

And big church. Very urban, kind of prosperous part of town near a university. And for some reason, for some reason, the city fathers decided to put a very large jail about three quarters of a mile from our church.

And we, being good Presbyterians, understood this to be an act of God's sovereign grace and empowerment for ministry. A lot of people in our church, highly educated, many things went their way, like your church.

And we said, you know, it's really not natural for us to reach out to people with an income about one-tenth of ours and an education about one-tenth of ours. But God put them two-thirds of a mile away, just right up the street, one little left turn.

[27 : 45] There we are. And the people of our church have been ministering in that jail for 20 years. Thousands and thousands of hours because we said God gave us this opportunity.

And then another thing happened. Then somebody or other decided that Nepalese and Bhutanese refugees should come to St. Louis. St. Louis is not a whole lot like Bhutan.

But that's what they decided. And some people in our church said, you know what? We're good Presbyterians. We believe in God's sovereignty. And these people aren't all that far from, everybody's four miles from our church.

And there are some farmers. And we don't really have farmers in our church, but we have gardeners. And gardeners are kind of like farmers. And we've got a garden center, a lot of people. And so they adopted all the Bhutanese and Nepalese because God was coordinating mission.

Here's why I'm telling you this story. I want you to have your eyes and ears open as good Presbyterians for the opportunities God drops into your lap in his good sovereign providence arrangement of things.

[28 : 54] Have your eyes open. You don't have to labor hard to figure out what to do next. Just pray and keep your eyes open and believe God is doing something and bring you opportunities and pursue them.

I say that to you as a church and I say that to you as individuals. As I try to make eye contact with you one by one. God may be calling you to do something that he drops in your lap.

May it be so. Now, of course, Peter's preaching a sermon. And you know that a sermon is going well when the Holy Spirit falls on everybody who's there before an invitation to faith can even be given.

He doesn't even say, now, would anybody here like to believe in Jesus? The Holy Spirit says, you know what, they're all believing, so here goes. And the gospel spreads.

And I pray that that's the case for you and you'll have joy in that. One Christmas season, I was in the pew. I was actually preaching that day in my church, but I happened to be in the pew for like the early part.

[30 : 04] And there was a woman sitting next to me who was known to express her opinions aloud whenever she felt like it. And somebody announced the hymn, the Christmas hymn, which is Joy to the World.

And she said, and I quote, oh, not joy to the world. Not joy to the world again. Now, we understand what she meant.

She meant, I have sung the song Joy to the World too many times. But I thought, isn't that the way it goes for Christians sometimes? Like, I know I'm supposed to be joyful, but I'm so tired of joy.

I want to dwell in the psalms of lamentation. I want to move to Seattle and Portland where the sun comes out 14 minutes a month in December and January.

Yes, I am tired of joy to the world. The worst spiritual crime a preacher, teacher can commit is to speak heresy.

[31 : 11] The second worst is to make the gospel boring. And let people say about the gospel what that woman said about that song.

I hope you have joy in the gospel and that it's ever fresh to you. You ever feel guilty? Well, I do sometimes.

That's maybe kind of, you know, my upbringing has got to be perfect or else your life is going to fall apart. If you ever feel guilty, Jesus justifies you.

He's the judge. He says, I declare you innocent. You are not condemned. You may condemn yourself, but I don't condemn you. That's the gospel. It's a joyful thing. You ever at odds in a relationship with anybody?

Don't know how to sort it out? Maybe they don't even know there's a problem. Maybe they very much know there's a problem. Jesus gives us the gospel of peace.

[32 : 09] That's what the Bible calls the gospel, the gospel of peace. It allows us to be reconciled to God and to have a ministry of reconciliation. That's the gospel.

Do you ever feel trapped by sin, by bad habits, by guilt maybe, by circumstances in life? Do you know the word redemption is one of our gospel words?

The word redeemed means to buy out of something like slavery or entrapment. The gospel says you are redeemed. You are bought out.

You are liberated. You are set free from what binds you, whatever that may be. Are you ever restless? Again, the gospel is the gospel of peace.

Are you ever lonely? Feel like nobody cares? Jesus says he is your friend. The gospel is Jesus lays down his life for his friends.

[33 : 10] That's what he says. Ever lost? Jesus is the way. Ever thirsty? He's the water of life. Ever hungry? He's the bread of life.

Ever in darkness? He's the light of the world. In the gospel, in Christ, there is everything that should give you joy.

And we have it and we seize it and it drives us forward. It gives us a message to share. It makes sacrifices like, oh, being in India is fun.

It's the plane ride that's the problem. Being in South Sudan is awesome in a perverse sort of way. It's getting there.

And so we forget. And then we remember. Because Jesus reminds us. And if we forget and remember, don't feel bad, feel joyful.

[34 : 12] Because even the great apostle Peter said, oh, now I understand the gospel. Now I see that it's for all people. May that be so for you. May you know, and when you forget, may God remind you of all the beauties of the gospel, all the joys of the gospel, and send you out saying, I remember how good it is to remember.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I do pray that everyone in this church would first know the gospel. I pray for those who are here today who might not yet know, who might have come, not even aware of why they were coming.

I pray that everyone would know the gospel and love the gospel because we love you and the message you give us. And Lord, I pray that we would all, when we forget the gospel, say, oh, now I remember.

Now I remember. And remembering, may we be filled with joy in you and in your service. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.