

New Family

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[0 : 01] Well, good morning everyone, great to be with you. Back in 2005, November 2005, I was in Alice Springs on the invitation of the Bible Society to speaking at an event to raise awareness for their ministry to remote areas around the country. In particular, this message was to be about the importance of all people having the Bible in their own language and therefore encouraging the work of the Bible Society in Bible translation, especially to remote Aboriginal communities.

I was to speak on a Friday night at an aircraft hangar at Alice Springs Airport because the Bible Society's aeroplane was behind me at the time. And then I was to preach at a local church on the Sunday morning. A friend of mine came along for the trip and it was the first time that either us had been to Alice Springs. So we spent the afternoon, sorry, all the day Saturday exploring the Outback. On the Saturday evening, I and my friend went into Alice Springs to have dinner and then we sort of explored a little bit and we're walking back to our hotel and by which time it was fairly late at night. And we noticed as we were walking along this pathway to a hotel, was it a fairly sort of dark area. There wasn't much light at all, but there was a little bit of moonlight. And we noticed off to our left, there was a group of Aboriginals sitting in the riverbank and there was a bit of arguing going on. They'd obviously had been intoxicated. We could tell that from where we were. Up ahead of us as we walked along our pathway to the right was a very large group of Aboriginals. And there was a lot of yelling and arguing coming from that area. We could completely see everything. It was pretty dark over there. Now it was probably at this point, it's fair to say, that both of us started to get a little bit nervous. Both of us grew up with a reasonable amount of prejudice against Aboriginals. It came from the rhetoric of our culture of where we both grew up and from our own personal experiences at both schools and at work. It would be fair to say that my friend was probably somewhat more prejudiced, I think, more acute. He grew up in an area, a place called Walgett, where race relations were quite troubled, had a long history of troubled race relations.

And so at this moment for us, as we walked along, our prejudices rose to the surface. And I said to him as we walked along quietly, do you see the group over at the riverbank on the left? And he said, yes, he did. And then this large group from the right over here in the darkness started to appear and were heading towards the riverbank from our idea. It looks like they're heading to that group over down on the left. And it became obvious to us as we were walking along that we were going to be crossing right in the middle of their path, or they were going to cross right in the middle of our path.

[3 : 15] Two white guys and 40 or so Aboriginals. And we were kind of a little nervous at this point, being rather new to town.

We were both silent as we walked along. Our hearts were racing, it would be fair to say. Our minds were thinking about an escape plan. And we were hoping that they would notice the two white guys. And our moments, our worst fears in that moment were realised they did in fact see us.

And as this large group of Aboriginals came across to us, as we walked along the path line, as we were just about to, you know, have to stop to let them go through, the elderly Aboriginal lady, beginning of the group, put her arms out like that. And she stopped. These whole group of Aboriginals, they just stopped in their tracks when she put her arms out. And as we, this was put our arms out to allow us to walk along the pathway. And as we walked along the pathway, she said, good evening, gentlemen.

We turned, wished her well, and walked along quietly for the next 20 metres. And my friend said to me, how bad do I feel? And all I could say was, yep, me too. You see, God used that moment to expose something of the sin of a racial prejudice that lurked within my heart. It didn't escape me that the night before that I was speaking about the necessity of God's word going to all people, such

as remote Aboriginal communities. And yet I had that prejudice revealed in my heart in that moment towards the very people who were to receive that ministry. Prejudice is something that we all have. Secular evolutionary theory will tell you that it's in fact a something that is part of our evolutionary process. Every single human being has prejudice in their heart, and they would declare it's a good thing in some ways. The Bible calls it sin. Prejudice is an unfavourable opinion or feeling formed beforehand without knowledge, without thought, or without reason. Unreasonable feelings, opinions, attitudes, and especially of a hostile nature regarding an ethnic, racial, social, or religious group. And it's the intention of the book of Acts, through in the last number of weeks, to show us one society, one group, in which the divisive poison of cultural prejudice is neutralized. And that's the church. That's us. So hear the words of Acts 10, just read out to us, verse 34.

[6 : 09] This is the Apostle Peter. I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right. It cannot possibly be overstated the mind-blowing revolution such a statement was for the first century world. The Apostle Peter was a Palestinian Jew.

The leaders of this group had interpreted God's covenant relationship with them through Abraham in such an exclusive way that any contact with a non-Jew was regarded as sinful.

It was against their law to even assist a Gentile mother in childbirth for doing so was just to bring another pagan into the world. In the words of one rabbinical proverb of the time, Gentiles were created by God simply as fuel for the flames of hell. That's Peter's world.

This is the culture that he has been marinating in since birth. And what's remarkable is he says these words to a Roman soldier.

There was no group of Gentiles more obnoxious to first century Jews. The Roman army was an oppressive instrument of colonial occupation in Israel.

[8 : 01] And so what Peter says here to this soldier is nothing short of a miracle. What changed Peter's mind and heart? What did that? What changed his mind and heart so much that he overcome his prejudice and could declare, I now know that God does not show favoritism?

Well, three things I want to see really quickly from this, not so quickly from this text. If you've got your St. Paul's app in front of you, I've got it there, a bit of an outline for you.

We want to see three things. His experience of other people, number one, the work of God in his own life and the work of God in the lives of others to collectively shape Peter to become the man that he is, a kingdom-focused man, not a culturally driven man.

So first of all, his own personal experience. His travel schedule most likely opened his eyes to God's purposes. Chapter 9, verse 32, we read, As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda.

Peter didn't leave Jerusalem with the other disciples at the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7. He left Jerusalem as a direct result of the success of Philip's ministry to the Samaritans.

[9 : 27] Peter and John traveled to Samaria to find out what was going on and to ensure it was consistent with everything that had been handed down to them from Jesus himself and what was happening in the church in Jerusalem.

It must have raised a question for him as he ventured into these places and saw the extent of God's work. Unlike us, see, we get to read the accounts.

We've read Philip and what happened there. Peter would most likely not have known of Philip's later encounter with the Ethiopian or of Paul's conversion and call to be missionary to the Gentile world.

He probably knew nothing of those things. And maybe it was questions like this that caused Peter to extend his leave from Jerusalem to visit other groups of Christians scattered by the persecution to see what responses that they were receiving in their new locations.

And so Luke mentions two places, Lydda and Joppa. Lydda and Joppa are towns in Western Palestine. It is known in the Old Testament as Philistine territory.

[10 : 46] It was decidedly pagan. And yet the Christian gospel is having a significant impact in this Gentile world. And so Peter's Jewish straitjacket is slowly being loosened.

In fact, in chapter 9, verse 43, we read that he stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

Now, tanning of animal skins was regarded by strict Jews as an unclean occupation because it involved handling animals that were not kosher.

Simon is a Jewish Christian who has let go of some of his Jewish cultural baggage, having become a Christian.

And God is using his experience in Samaria and now in the coastal plains of Western Palestine to make Peter aware of some of his Jewish prejudices.

[12 : 09] It was seeing people from other cultures embracing the same faith that he began to see the foolishness of his discriminating attitudes. Now, I've got to say for myself, in the 11 years I've been at St. Paul's, that the more I mix with people different than I am, the more I see the prejudices in my heart.

That is, the deeper I go with others that are different from me, the deeper I understand myself. Parochialism feeds prejudice.

As we look to the future together, I am very keen for us as a church to develop strategies for more intentional cross-cultural discipling of one another.

Now, of course, Peter didn't just deal with his prejudice because he travelled. That in itself doesn't change the heart at all. But let's have a look at his own personal work, God's work in his life, and he's changed by his revelation that he received from God.

The real power is God's work in his life. Have a look at chapter 10, verses 9 and 13 with me, if you've got your Bibles there. About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approached the city, Peter went up to the roof to pray.

[13 : 41] He became hungry, wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. And then a voice told him, get up, Peter, kill and eat.

Now, although this is a revelation from God, it was cryptic and puzzling for Peter. We are told in verse 17, he was left wondering about the meaning of this vision.

That is, the vision didn't directly speak to him about his racial prejudice. It was addressing Jewish food regulations.

Pious Jews believed that by observing these laws, they witnessed to the world of their special privilege as a chosen people.

[14 : 45] And yet the people Peter mixed with on his travels were bad Jews. But they were people who were becoming Christians like him.

Or that they were Christians getting rid of their, some of their Jewish practices. Where did all this fit? He's up there in the midday sun.

He's falling into a bit of a, he might have diabetes or something. His sugar drops low or something. He's got this conflict going on in his mind about his cultural heritage and what he's seeing amongst these believers.

And he has this vision. You could imagine him up there on Simon's house, up on the roof of the midday sun. The stench of the animal skins rising to the roof as the prawn cocktails being prepared with the roast pork.

And he's, and he's, what is this all about? And then, then, he gets in his sleepiness.

[15 : 45] He has this strange dream of animals on a sheet. And he hears these words, get up, kill, eat. And he says, surely not, Lord. Surely not.

I have never eaten anything impure, unclean. The voice spoke to him a second time. Do you not call anything impure that God has made clean?

And this happened three times. And immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. This is a, a transformation moment for Peter right here.

Three times he denied Jesus. Three times Jesus asked him, do you love me? Three times he affirmed his love. And now three times, do not call anything unclean that I've called clean. This is a major transformation, moment in the life and the heart of Peter, the apostle.

He sees a variety of animals. Some approved, some forbidden by Jewish laws in Leviticus 11. In the mix is probably pigs and owls and seagulls and eagles and reptiles and lobsters and insects and prawns and whatever else.

[16 : 59] He was disgusted by the sight and the command to eat this unholy smorgasbord. How could anything unclean for God's people, something that's been unclean for thousands of years, how could it possibly now suddenly be clean?

Twice more, this grotesque sheet is lowered, only compounding Peter's disgust and his misery. And at this moment, this exact moment, there appeared to be a coincidence by which Peter later discovered it was divine synchronization.

As he was pondering the vision, the trio from the Roman soldier Cornelius turned up looking for him.

And in verse 20, the Holy Spirit says to Peter, get up, go downstairs, do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them. It's interesting in the original language of the New Testament, the word translated, hesitate there, do not hesitate, can in fact be translated, do not discriminate, do not evaluate.

[18 : 21] Interchangeably, easily. Don't discriminate against them, Peter, go with them. You see, if Peter's vision here was far more than revolutionary food laws, far more revolutionary than food laws, the four corners of the sheet that was descended to him, correspond to the four points of the compass, the north, the south, the east and the west, and the contents of the sheep are the swarming millions of people that populate the earth.

All of humanity bound up together in one loathsome bundle in front of Peter. And he's standing above them all, surveying them, spitting out revulsion and rejection from his heart.

And what he says when he arrives at Cornelius' house, reveals he understood the vision for the first time. In Ephesians chapter 2, we read that God's aim is to create one new people, to reconcile each other across bloodlines, through the shedding of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It started, first of all, with the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, no longer strangers, aliens, prejudices, no enmity, one family together, a new family with whom God himself will dwell.

That is God's purpose, according to Ephesians 2, to make himself a family that he will dwell amongst. God ordained the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile alien people's groups to each other as one body in Christ.

[20 : 16] Christ died to take enmity, the anger, the disgust, the jealousy, the self-pity, the envy, the fear, the hatred, the malice, the indifference, the pride, away from our hearts that we have towards all other persons, whatever their race, whatever their status is in Jesus.

God's plan is not just that the gospel will go to all peoples, but that all peoples would in fact be brought together through the gospel, as one people in Christ.

Christ. And that's what Peter understood at Cornelius' house. The third thing that really gripped him was God's work in the lives of other people, not just his own life.

There could hardly be a more favorable opportunity to speak about the good news of Jesus than Peter is presented here at Cornelius' house.

I mean, Cornelius is pious. He's a conscientious worshiper of God who's been instructed by none less than angels themselves to invite Peter to his house and guarantee that he will come.

[21 : 42] Cornelius even bows to Peter when he comes. He's held in such high esteem. He even gathers his entire household together to hear what Peter would have to say to them.

But there's one thing that's a problem for Peter as he walks up to the door, and that is Cornelius is a Gentile, and he does not belong to the covenant people of God.

And he does that. You know, like the first things that come out of his mouth as he arrives, you kind of go, you know, a bit more EQ would have been great here. A bit more emotional intelligence.

Verse 28, But he has learned a lot and has made the connection with his vision.

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. And then what he does is he launches into a three-point sermon to the gathered Gentiles.

[22 : 56] He stresses the life of Jesus in verses 36 and 38. The death and resurrection of Jesus for which he is an eyewitness and must proclaim this news to all of humanity. 39 to 41.

And the coming judgment of Jesus by Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, which is available only through him in verses 42 to 44. These Gentile believers are baptized and become members of the church.

In verse 34 and 35, Peter says he knows that God does not show favoritism, but it says people from every nation who fear him and does what is right. Let me be really clear here.

Peter is not saying that morally respectable people go to heaven. That's not what he's saying. If that were true, he wouldn't have told the respectable, pious Cornelius that he needed forgiveness of sin.

Neither is Peter saying that all religions in the end lead to God. If that was so, he wouldn't have instructed Cornelius in the entire household about the unique office that Jesus has as judge of all humanity and that he is Lord of all.

[24 : 12] In verses 42 and 43. There is no nice thought here that pious pagans get to relate to God without Jesus.

Jesus is the only hope for a reconciled humanity. Not political correctness. Not the United Nations. Just Jesus Christ. And Peter now sees the marks of God's grace. Just readily seen in the Gentiles as it was in the Jewish lives.

Peter has been changed from being a man of his culture to a man of the kingdom. And the same Holy Spirit is poured out on these Gentile believers as it was on the Jewish believers.

This is a crucial moment in the life of the church. The pouring of the Holy Spirit here is meant to take our minds and our hearts back to Acts chapter 2. It's there that the church was born.

[25 : 24] And now this church includes both Jews and Gentiles. One gospel. One spirit. One faith.

One body. The good news of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ is for all people. And has now come to all people. Let me just wind up really quickly by just mentioning three things about our new family.

By way of application. Firstly, if you're a Christian. And if you're a Christian here today without a gather with us online wherever you are. If you do not have Jewish heritage. You want to give thanks for Peter.

You want to give thanks that he responded to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. And allowed his prejudice to be overturned.

Rejoice that God has included you in his covenant people. He was under no obligation to do so. No obligation to extend his promises to you and to me at all.

[26 : 32] And yet in his infinite mercy God reached out to us. In the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And through a variety of people.

To offer us freely. His gospel of grace. And mercy. Secondly. There are still 3.23 billion people in this world.

That are part of unreached people groups. Just think about that for a moment. 3.23 billion people in this world.

Still part of unreached people groups. 20 centuries. After Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations.

There are places all over this world. Where that gospel has not even touched. How on earth is that possible?

[27 : 29] 20 centuries. 20 centuries. And we travel all over the globe.

And there are still places. Including 3.23 billion people representing in those places. That have no vibrant Christian witness to this day.

Peter's vision. 20 centuries. Peter's vision and his encounter walk with Cornelius. Isn't just an abstract point about the character of God's church.

It's a call for us to take the gospel to the nations. We are called to pray for that mission. To give to that mission.

And even to go on that mission. Wherever God calls you as his child. We are called to be on that mission. Now apart from our own mission here at St. Paul's to other cultures in our neighborhood.

[28 : 33] We support the advance of the gospel globally through mission partners. Let me just raise one of those partners with you right now. The Klintos family working in sub-Saharan Africa.

Strengthening churches. Raising up and equipping gospel workers for the local church.

Phenomenal work that they're doing there.

However right now their support fund is so low. That they're eating into their personal savings. In order to pay their bills to continue that work. We and a number of other churches are rope holders for them.

And we're letting the rope go. We can't allow that to happen. Please donate to them via our mission account by the end of this week.

You get the mission account details in our weekly news out there in the connect desk on our website. Do it by the end of the week so that they no longer need to access their savings to continue that crucial work.

[29 : 38] Thirdly. The local church must reflect our eternal home. And therefore we must overcome our prejudice towards other groups and peoples. Our sheets easily fill with educational, cultural, social, ethnic, economic rejects.

And we cry, by no means Lord. They are not my type. Our vision at St. Paul's is to be a transcultural church.

A transcultural church community is a community that reflects, embraces and enjoys the diversity of its mission context. But by the power of the gospel. It transcends that.

Transcends its cultural context. And creates one new community in Christ. Where we treasure Jesus together. This church is not about obliterating cultural distinctions and all its diversity.

Jesus broke down the barriers between people. He didn't obliterate the differences. All of humanity are fallen and sinful beings who have been made in God's image.

[30 : 51] And yet redeemed and transformed through Jesus. And by the work of the Holy Spirit into a new humanity under the lordship of Jesus forever.

He is our primary point of loyalty. And that news will be true and will be true for every person irrespective of their cultural heritage.

Every single person needs to come to Jesus. And so I want to leave us with a challenge from another preacher. Alexander White was a pastor and leader in the Free Church of Scotland a bit over 100 years ago.

And he made this comment in a sermon on this passage. It will change your whole heart and life this very night.

If you would take Peter and Cornelius home with you. And lay them both to heart. If you would take a four corner napkin when you go home.

[31 : 55] And write the names of the nations and the churches and the denominations. And the congregations and the ministers. And the public men and the private citizens and the neighbours and the fellow worshippers.

All the people you dislike and despise. And do not. And cannot. And will not love. Heap all their names into your unclean napkin.

And then look up and say, Not so, Lord. I neither can speak well. Nor think well. Nor hope well. Of these people.

I cannot do it. I will not try. If you acted out and spoke all the evil things that are in your heart in such a way as that.

You would get such insight into yourself. That you would never forget it. Prejudice runs deep in the sinful heart. I discovered it that night in Alice Springs.

[32 : 55] My chosen place as a child of God. By the grace of God. By the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Had not produced a humility and a compassion in me for all people.

Ironically, it meant that I was not aligned with God's purposes for all of humanity. Even though I was there to preach about that very thing. I needed Jesus to change my heart.

I needed to repent that very night. Let's do that now. Gracious and merciful Heavenly Father.

The one from whom all humanity derives its image and being. Please forgive us for not allowing your great love to flow through us to others.

For refusing to love and to win over to your kingdom. Those we deem to be dangerous. Or dirty. Or unworthy. Or those who have hurt us. Or those we consider beneath us.

[33 : 58] Humble us that we might be aware of our sin and unworthiness. But in Jesus you came to us. May your grace burst through our walls of pride and prejudice.

May your love conquer our selfishness and the sinful rebellion of others. So that together in the name of Jesus. Is exalted by us. And through us.

For your glory we pray. Amen.