

April 12, 2020

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LORD'S GLOBAL PURPOSE

Acts 9:32-11:18

(8 of 17 in a series through Acts)

In Acts 17—a text we'll get to in a few weeks—Paul finds himself preaching to a number of individuals who weren't simply unbelievers but who were unaware of the story of the Bible at all. So, in order to evangelize them, he actually begins by telling them that the God who made the world doesn't need anything, that he made all people from one man, etc. And he's doing all of this to set the stage for allowing them to understand the gospel. Then, at this climactic moment, he says in verses 30-31, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

In other words, Paul tells us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ split history in two. Men have always been saved on the basis of Christ's work; Abraham, David, and Isaiah were all saved because of the work of Jesus Christ. But none of these men knew the name Jesus. None of these men would have been able to articulate as clearly as we can that he died on a cross on a Friday and walked out of the tomb alive on that Easter Sunday morning. They were saved despite a certain level of ignorance. But once Jesus Christ rose from the dead everything changed. God had made clear to the world that Jesus Christ—the God-man—is the one appointed to judge the world, and everyone, everywhere must hear his name, know what he has done, repent of their sins, and bow the knee in faith to them. The resurrection split history, and now there can be no ignorance; all men everywhere must hear the gospel and bow the knee to God's appointed King—Jesus Christ—in repentance and faith if they are to be saved.

That reality is what we see in our text this morning, as we look at Acts 9:32-11:18. We're heading into a focus on the Gentiles. In fact, the rest of the book of Acts will be about that. The gospel has gone to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and now we're about to spend the rest of the book of Acts watching it go to the ends of the earth. But Luke does something really interesting in the section of text we're looking at today and will continue in the next few weeks (9:32-12:25); he focuses on Peter. You'd think he'd focus on Paul. After all, he's introduced Paul and showed us his conversion in chapter 9. And the rest of the book of Acts is largely going to focus on Paul once you get to chapter 13. I mean, just flip through the rest of the book of Acts—starting with chapter 13—and you'll see that nearly every heading has Paul's name in it. But starting in 9:32 Luke abruptly brings us back to Peter, who'll remain his focus until the end of chapter 12. And I think there's a reason for this.

You see, Peter played a main role on the day of Pentecost. As the Spirit fell on the Jewish believers there, it was Peter who preached to them and explained that they were recipients of the Spirit promised in Joel 2. Then, when Phillip took the gospel to the Samaritans, it was Peter (along with John) who was again the representative of the apostles to come down, lay hands on

them, and testify that they had received the Spirit and were genuine disciples of Christ just like those believing Jews on the day of Pentecost. And now, just as the Lord is about to bring Gentiles into the fold, our focus is turned once more to Peter, and the reason why is because he is once more going to serve as a representative of the apostles in vindicating that the Gentiles are receiving the Spirit and are genuine disciples of Christ as well.

So, here's what I want to do as we look at our text this morning. I want to walk through how Luke develops this crucial moment in redemptive history (i.e. the Gentiles coming to faith) by simply walking through the text in four sections. We might say this is a look at the big picture that Luke wants us to see. Then, however, I want to look a bit more closely and note some smaller picture details when we consider Cornelius and see the importance of calling all men everywhere to repent and bow the knee in faith to the resurrected Christ.

Let's first then start with the first move in Luke's plotline: Getting Peter and the reader in place.

Getting Peter and the reader in place

As I mentioned, Luke quite abruptly leaves Paul and focuses on Peter starting in 9:32. And in 9:32-43 he gives us two miracle stories that involve the Spirit powerfully working through Peter. One happens as he comes to Lydda and finds a man named "Aeneas" who had been "bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed" (9:33). And Luke tells us, Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.' And immediately he rose" (9: 34). That is, this is the exact same kind of miracle, performed in a very similar way, that we see performed by Jesus.

Similarly, in a nearby area, Joppa, a girl named Tabitha died, and since the people heard that Peter was in Lydda, they called for him. And he came down to the area, and after putting all the people out of Tabitha's room, Luke tells us, "Peter . . . knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, 'Tabitha, arise.' And she opened her eyes" (9:40), and he led her out alive. Once more, this is a miracle very similar to what we see Jesus doing.

Now, why throw these two stories in right before introducing us to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God? I think the answer is that Luke is showing us Peter getting in place and is getting the reader in place to understand Peter's crucial role in this story. He's getting Peter in place by literally moving him into place. You'll remember after the persecution that is recorded in chapter 8, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. But when Luke brings Peter back into the picture for us in 9:32, he's on the move. He goes to Lydda and then Joppa, moving closer and closer to Gentile territory.

Similarly, Luke is getting the reader ready to see the crucially important role Peter is going to play by showing him as a Spirit-empowered, Christ-like apostle. "His Christ-likeness is highlighted 'at a moment when his authority is decisive to Luke's argument."¹ That is to say, Luke

¹David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 320. Peterson quotes Seccombe here.

is about to show us Peter serving as a validating representative for the Gentiles to be included in the church, and right before he serves in that role, Luke shows us him as one greatly empowered by the Spirit and serving as a picture of Christ. So, that's the first move in Luke's plotline. He's getting Peter and the reader in place—Peter geographically and the reader mentally. His second move in his plotline are getting Peter and Cornelius spiritually prepared.

Getting Peter and Cornelius spiritually prepared

In the next section (10:1-23a), Luke shows us the Lord preparing Cornelius and Peter for their meeting and Cornelius' conversion. He begins with Cornelius, a centurion, which means he was an official in the Roman army. But we're also told that he's a devout man who feared God. We'll look more at this later. And the Lord gave him a vision where an angel tells him to send men to Joppa and bring Peter to him, and he did just that. So, things are getting set up from Cornelius' end.

Now, Peter's preparation is a bit longer. This Gentile, Cornelius, is prepared in verses 1-8, but it's going to take verses 9-23a to tell us about Peter's preparation to minister to Cornelius, and I think we might underestimate why exactly this would be so difficult for Peter to accept that he was about to go to a Gentile's home and preach to him the gospel. We might think, "Well, this is just first century bigotry that needed to be overcome." And my answer is, perhaps, but there's more to it than that.

You see, in Leviticus 20:22-26, the Lord had given specific instructions about the Jews being a people separated from the pagan nations. He'd said in that section, "You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nations that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. . . I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine."

You see, then, that the law called for the Israelites to separate themselves from the pagan peoples, and this was pictured in the way that the Israelites separated unclean food from clean food, and only ate the clean. Therefore, the idea that Peter should go see a Gentile and enter his home where all kinds of unclean foods was a big deal. But the Lord prepared him.

He did this while Peter was praying and became hungry. And it seems the Lord took advantage of Peter feeling hungry in the midst of praying by giving him an appropriate vision—one dealing with food. In the vision there was something like a sheet that came down and all kinds of animals were on it that were "unclean," according to the law. And the Lord said to Peter, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat," and of course Peter declines. But God answered, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (10:15).

And we're told that this happened three times, and Peter wasn't sure immediately what it meant. But that would soon be made clear because while Peter was thinking about it, the men from Cornelius showed up and the Spirit told Peter to go down with him for they had been sent by the Lord (10:20). And so Peter goes, having been prepared and instructed by the Lord, which brings us to the third plot point in the story: Cornelius's conversion

Cornelius's conversion

In 10:23b-48 we read about Cornelius's conversion. Peter comes in, Cornelius tries to worship him, Peter says, "Get up," Peter tells him how God prepared him to enter this Gentile house through the vision, Cornelius tells him how God prepared him for this moment by telling him to send for Peter in a vision, and Peter preaches the gospel, Cornelius and the others believe, the Spirit falls on them, and they are baptized. And this brings us to the fourth point in our story: Peter's declaration that Gentiles can be saved.

Peter's declaration that Gentiles can be saved

Immediately after news spread that Gentiles had "received the word of God" (11:1), there were some Jewish believers who were concerned, saying to Peter, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3), in a condemning fashion, of course. But Peter recounts everything we read about in chapter 10—the way the Lord prepared him, the way the Lord prepared Cornelius, and the way that the Spirit fell on these Gentile believers just as he had fallen on the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. Then Peter declared, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (11:17), and Luke adds, "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (11:18). And so the Gentiles were added to the church and validated as legitimate disciples of Jesus in the eyes of the church.

And this is a huge deal. There's a reason Luke worked so carefully to craft this narrative, prepare the reader, show how the Lord worked so deliberately to prepare everyone else, and to show how the Gentiles' conversion was just like that of the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. He's showing that people like most of us in this room can be saved, simply through repentance and faith and become legitimate followers of Christ and part of the church.

But there are some truths that I want to note from this story in the final few minutes of this sermon that I think this story teaches us.

First, it reminds us that God's purpose is to save people from every nation.

We can say it this way: God commands *all men everywhere* to repent. After Peter entered Cornelius's house and Cornelius shared his vision with the angel telling him to send for Peter, Peter declared, "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” (10:34). In other words, Peter was recognizing that God’s plan was to draw men from every nation to himself.

And though I’ve explained to you—from Leviticus 20—why Peter and the others might have been slow to be with Gentiles in their homes, with their unclean food, etc., it had always been the Lord’s plan to have a people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. This was clear even in the OT where God had promised through Abraham to bless every nation. Isaiah has prophesied of a day where the nations would come into Jerusalem. Jesus had already told them to make disciples of all the nations. Additionally, in Mark 7, Mark had already told us that Jesus had declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19).

So I don’t want us to think that the church being made up of all nations was some “Plan B.” This was always God’s plan, and we must never hesitate—individually—to speak the gospel to men from other nations, cultures, or languages. Nor can we as a church lose sight that we long to see churches planted not only in our local geographical area and in our nation but also to the ends of the earth. The resurrection means that God is now commanding *all men everywhere* to repent. But I also want us to see another truth this story teaches us.

Second, it reminds us that everyone must hear the gospel and believe to be saved.

We can say it this way: God commands all men everywhere *to repent*. One of the things that is clear in this text is that despite all the visions, angels speaking, and the like, Cornelius and the other Gentiles were still dependent on Peter coming and preaching in order to be saved.

Now someone might argue that Cornelius was already saved before Peter ever got to him. After all, look at what is said of him. We’re told he was “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (10:2-3). Then we’re told that when the angel spoke to him in a vision, he said, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (10:5). And finally, when Peter arrived and said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,” he added, “But in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35). Could this mean that Cornelius was already saved before Peter showed up and preached? I don’t think so. I’ll number the reasons why I think he isn’t already saved.²

1. The angel told him to send for Peter to preach a message by which he would be saved.

When Peter recounts to his fellow Jews about the event with Cornelius, he repeats the story we’re told multiple times in Luke’s narrative about this episode. He tells how Cornelius had a vision where the angel tells him to send for Peter. But specifically, listen to the words. Peter said that the angel had told him, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household” (11:13-14). In

²John Piper notes what follows in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 142-46

other words, Cornelius needed to hear the message Peter was going to preach in order to be saved.

2. Peter's preaching ends with the declaration that forgiveness comes to one who believes.

Here's what I mean. If Cornelius is already saved, Peter could have just showed up and said, "I've got great news. You're already forgiven." But he doesn't. He comes and preaches the gospel and tells them that the one who believes will be forgiven of sins (10:43), the same way that you and I would preach the gospel to an unbeliever.

3. When the Gentiles are vindicated through Peter's story, it is said that God has granted them "repentance that leads to life" (11:18).

In other words, it doesn't say that they already had life but that their repentance which was expressed with Peter's preached led to eternal life.

4. The description of Cornelius as a devout man, etc., is not sufficient for salvation.

Certainly Cornelius is presented as a man who is practicing morality. He is generous, prays, fears God, and is devout, but these things don't necessitate that one is saved. In Acts 2:5, the group of Jews that hear Peter's preaching and are saved as described as "devout men from every nation under heaven." Therefore, those Jews who had been scattered and now gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost were "devout men," but they weren't saved—just like we see with Cornelius. Also, the fact that he gives, fears God, and prays are great things. I think they are a sign of the Lord showing him what theologians call "common grace." In other words, the Lord can show unbelievers grace in restraining their sin and leading them to do upright things, but the reason it's called "common" grace instead of "special" grace or "saving" grace is because this kind of restraining grace isn't saving. But I will add this; it is clear that the Lord had shown Cornelius a lot of grace and was stirring his heart and drawing him to himself.

I mean, I said last week that before we come to Christ in salvation, we are not good and do not seek God, and I didn't say that on my own authority. Rather, I was saying that because Paul writes in Romans 3:10-12, "None is righteous, no, not one; . . . no one seeks for God . . . no one does good, not even one." Does Cornelius contradict this? A devout man, fearing God and praying sure sounds like someone who is good and even seeking God.

Well, no, Luke's description of Cornelius doesn't contradict Paul. Rather, what it shows us is that Cornelius had been an object of God's grace. In other words, on his own, Cornelius would have not been devout, fearing God, or praying, but God had begun the process of drawing this man toward himself, and it was being shown in Cornelius's life. When Peter shows up and says anyone who fears God and does what is right—like Cornelius is doing—is "acceptable" to God, he could mean one of two things, most likely. He could mean that though his works aren't good enough to be saving, they are "acceptable" in the sense that they're the result of God's grace and therefore "good works" in a sense. Or, it could mean "acceptable" in a stronger sense.

Perhaps the Lord is saying that anyone in whom he begins a work of drawing that person to himself, will be found acceptable in the sense that God will complete the gracious work he has begun in making sure that person hears the gospel and is saved.

But either way, the key is this—Peter still had to come and preach. In other words, God’s miraculous work was done in order to get Peter there and preach the message that would lead to salvation. God wasn’t saving apart from Peter preaching the gospel. And this is the way the Scripture tells us God works. Paul will tell us that we are saved through faith, but that in order to have faith we must hear the gospel, and in order to hear the gospel we must be preaching the gospel, and so he concludes, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

The episode with Cornelius sounds like the numerous stories that are reported about Muslims who are shown in a vision to go to someone’s house or meet someone at a certain place, and then when they get there, it’s a missionary’s house or a missionary arrives there, and they are told the gospel and believe. We’ve heard so many of those stories that it’s hard to believe they’re not true. But in each case, God extraordinarily works to bring about the opportunity to preach the gospel in what seems like an ordinary way.

And this is where I want to end this message today. God commands all men everywhere to repent because he has appointed a man by which he will judge the world, and he’s proven this to us by raising Jesus from the dead. Similarly, Peter declares that Jesus “commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (10:42). Let us then not forget on this Easter Sunday the mission we’ve been given. Let us remember that God commands all men everywhere to repent, and the only means they have to repent is hearing the gospel. So let us have a renewed commitment today to declare the good news that Christ lived, died, and was raised, and “whoever believes in him receives forgiveness of sins” (10:43). Amen.