

Acts Series #11

“A Wider Harvest” - Acts 10

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Critical Moments*

1. As you study history, you discover that things tend to go along at a slow pace for long periods of time
2. But then, at a critical moment and at a crucial place, one person will rise above his or her times and begin to blaze a new trail
3. Often, at first, these trailblazers are mocked and misunderstood by their peers
4. But a short time later, people begin to see the value of what they have done and begin to follow
5. And the course of history is turned into a new path

B. *Today*

1. We are going to read of just such a trailblazer and his critical moment in our study today
2. We're going to be doing things a bit different today, in that rather than focusing on a short part of the text, we're going to be taking a look at a larger passage and covering it verse by verse, more as we do on Wednesday evenings

C. *Setting The Scene*

1. About 10 years have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus
2. The church has grown strong in Jerusalem and because of persecution has been scattered throughout all of Israel, Samaria, and even up into the region of Syria
3. But as we read in Ch. 11, v. 19 - up to this point, the believers were only reaching out to their fellow Jews with the gospel
4. The idea that God intended to also save the Gentiles was utterly foreign to their way of thinking
5. As Jews, they had been raised with the idea that Gentiles were completely beyond either the love or concern of God
6. In fact, the rabbis said that God had created the Gentiles just so that they could be used to fuel the fires of hell
7. There have been many very serious forms of prejudice and bigotry in the world, and while the Jews have often been the object of some of the worst, it must be said that their hatred of Gentiles at this period in their history was every bit as great
8. So as the early Christians spread out from Jerusalem to where ever the Lord led them, they shared the good news of Jesus Christ, but only with other Jews

9. They did manage to share it with the Samaritans, but that could be excused because the Samaritans were at least *half*-Jewish
10. Ch. 10 tells the story of how God broke through the prejudice of the Jewish church and showed them His master plan to evangelize the entire world

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-2

{1} There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment,

{2} a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

1. Caesarea was the Roman capital of all Israel
2. It was built from scratch by Herod the Great and at this time was one of the most modern cities of the world
3. Everything was brand, spanking new and incorporated the newest technology of the day
4. There was no natural harbor there so Herod had built his own, using engineering methods and materials that are a complete mystery to archaeologists today
5. Caesarea was Pontius Pilate's home base and housed the center of Rome's armies in Israel
6. The Roman Army was divided into legions of 6000 men apiece
 - a. each legion was further divided into 10 cohorts or regiments of 600 men
 - b. a cohort was then divided into 6 companies of 100 each
 - c. a centurion was the commanding officer over one of these companies of 100 men
 - d. they were the real backbone of the Roman army because they functioned as the sergeants
 - e. battles were won or lost on the quality of the centurions
7. As a result, Rome only promoted trustworthy men who were of great courage and integrity to the level of centurion
8. We see this in the NT as well—for every centurion is spoken of in a positive light
 - a. centurion with sick servant who asked Jesus to come and heal him, commended by Jesus for his great faith
 - b. centurion at the cross who recognized the deity of Jesus
 - c. here
9. Notice how this man Cornelius is described . . .
 - a. devout man who feared God with all his house
 - 1) not only religious in word -
 - 2) he was religious in action
 - 3) he was *devout*, meaning he lived a religious *careful* life
 - 4) and his example was so genuine and powerful that his entire household, his family and his servants, were influenced by his life

- to also devote themselves to God
- b. gave alms generously
 - 1) religion for Cornelius was no private affair
 - 2) he knew intuitively that a faith without works is a dead faith
- c. he prayed always
 - 1) the chief aim of his life was to know God
 - 2) so he tried to stay in continual touch with Him through prayer
- 10. Cornelius seems to be the kind of guy you'd like to have as a neighbor
- 11. History tells us that there were many Greeks and Romans who came to faith in the Jewish God during this time
 - a. they came short of becoming complete converts to Judaism
 - b. but they did attend the synagogue services and would sit in areas in the back that were specially reserved for them
- 12. From all appearances, it seems Cornelius was one of these "God-fearers," as they were called

B. Vs. 3-8

- {3} About the ninth hour of the day [3 PM, one of the times Jews would pause to pray] he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"**
- {4} And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.**
- {5} "Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.**
- {6} "He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."**
- {7} And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually.**
- {8} So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.**
 - 1. God took note of Cornelius' life and saw that he was truly seeking after truth
 - 2. He was living by the light he had been given, but it wasn't enough
 - 3. And God set about to bring him too more
 - 4. And this reveals something of importance to us:
 - a. Cornelius was a good man, a truly religious man
 - b. but that wasn't enough to save him
 - c. no, only the gospel could save Cornelius so God sent an angel to tell him to call for Peter
 - d. there is a funny idea abroad in the world that says that it isn't really all that important what you believe, just so long as you are sincere and that you be true to your beliefs
 - e. and even if you shun all *religious* belief, just as long as you are a good person, that's good enough and God will accept you
 - f. well friends, I'm sorry but that just won't cut it
 - g. you'd be hard pressed to find a better or more religious man than Cornelius,

- h. but God sent an angel to give him instructions on what to do because Cornelius, though good, was still lost in sin
- 5. We might also ask why the angel told Cornelius to call for Peter
- 6. Why didn't the angel just share the gospel with him?
- 7. Very simply, because that is not the angels' job
- 8. The gospel has been given to men and women, boys and girls
- 9. It is *believers* who have been given the task of world evangelism, not angels
- 10. It may be slower, but it's sweeter
- 11. You see, while the angels may know God and heaven better, they cannot say to a hopeless sinner, "I was once lost and hopeless like you, but Jesus Christ rescued me and now has given me the hope and promise of heaven."
- 12. Think of it; just an average, run of the mill angel could do circles around even the most learned theologian
 - a. he could out-speak the most gifted pastor or preacher
 - b. he could perform signs and wonders to boggle the most powerful miracle worker
 - c. but when it comes to evangelism, he can't hold a candle to the newest Christian
- 13. Cornelius needed Jesus, so God sent an angel to tell him where to look
- 14. Cornelius then called in 2 of his servants and one of his trusted soldiers whose life he had influenced and sent them to Joppa to find Peter

C. Vs.9-16

{9} The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. [Noon]

{10} Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance

{11} and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth.

{12} In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.

- 1. At noon, while the servants of Simon the tanner were making the mid-day meal, Peter went up on the flat roof of his house for a time of prayer
- 2. He was hungry and as he prayed, thinking about food, he had a vision
- 3. In the vision he saw a large sheet lowered from heaven
 - a. the word sheet is literally "sail"
 - b. it was a large piece of cloth that was folded over into the shape of a bag,
 - c. with the four corners tied together in a knot
 - d. in pictures, a net on ground that is caught up, trapping something" like that
 - e. in this bag-like sheet are dozens of animals
 - 1) all kinds of them
 - 2) a miniature zoo
 - 3) regular four footed animals

4) reptiles - bugs - birds

{13} And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

4. Most or all of the animals in the sheet were unclean, meaning they not permitted in the Jewish diet
5. As well, the Jews had very strict rules for butchering animals and unless it was done properly, the meat wouldn't be kosher
6. But God tells Peter to get up and go kill and eat
7. We might guess what his reaction would be . . .

{14} But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”

8. In order to get in touch with just how radical this challenge to eat these unclean animals would have been for Peter, let me use an illustration
9. Hold up a mouse in a cage and invite someone to come eat it
10. Repulsive, vile, turns the stomach
11. Basically - UNTHINKABLE!!!!!!
12. Peter may have thought God was testing him
13. But if so, he was sadly mistaken - for you see, God never, ever tests us this way
14. He never commands us to do something evil
15. No, if God tells us to do something, the only right response is , “Yes, Lord.”
16. Peter says something here that really cannot be said
 - a. “Not so, Lord.”
 - b. if He is *Lord* then He is master
 - c. you cannot say “No” and “Lord” at the same time
 - d. but Peter does and God immediately corrects him . . .

{15} And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.”

{16} This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

17. Three times Peter had the same vision of the sheet, hears the voice commanding him to eat, and he refuses
18. And each time, the vision ends with God telling Peter not to resist
19. You see, the real problem was this
 - a. God was about to confront a major error in Peter's thinking
 - b. and not just Peter's, but in the entire church's
 - c. as Jews, they had a very narrow understanding of the plan of God
 - d. and God was preparing Peter for a dramatic reworking of his understanding
20. Peter, as a Jew, was being hindered by some of the traditions of the Jewish religion
21. But God was moving beyond the boundaries of Judaism
22. How fitting that He should take the *leader* of the apostles there *first*

D. Vs. 17-23

{17} Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen

meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate.

{18} And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.

{19} While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you.

{20} "Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."

1. You know, God's timing is always perfect
2. He is never late, nor early
3. He always brings everything to pass at exactly the right moment
4. And so it was that while he was pondering the meaning of this strange vision 3 Gentiles knock at the door of the house, and God tells him to go with them

{21} Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?"

{22} And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you."

{23} Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

5. Joppa is a full day's journey from Caesarea so since it was too late to start the return journey, Peter invites the men to stay overnight
6. Then they took off the next morning

E. Vs. 24-33

{24} And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.

1. Cornelius was excited, and we can easily understand why
2. An angel had appeared to him and given him very clear instructions
3. Cornelius knew that a man named Peter would come to his house and share words with him that were appointed by God Himself
4. So he invited everyone he could think of to be there when Peter arrived

{25} As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

{26} But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man."

5. Cornelius was a little too excited it seems
6. He made the mistake of worshipping Peter, but Peter quickly corrected him
7. He may be a divinely appointed messenger, but he is just a man
8. And worship belongs only to God

{27} And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.

{28} Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

{29} “Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

9. Peter confesses to Cornelius and all those gathered to hear him that this situation is extremely uncomfortable for him
10. Jews did not enter the homes of Gentiles - it just was not done
11. To have any contact with Gentiles was taboo
12. And Peter knew there was the potential for great harm to his reputation by being there
13. We almost get the hint that Peter is trying to hurry things along so he can leave as quickly as possible (“I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”)

{30} So Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing,

{31} “and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.

{32} ‘Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.’

{33} “So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”

14. So Cornelius rehearses for Peter all that had happened two days before
15. And as he finished, he turned the floor over to the apostle . . .

F. Vs. 34-43

{34} Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.

{35} “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.

1. It’s beginning to dawn on Peter that what is going on here is two-fold
2. First of all, God saw that Cornelius was a true seeker after truth and so Peter had been sent to share the Truth with him = JESUS CHRIST
3. Second, Peter began to see that God was confronting his own prejudices
 - a. you see, like his fellow Jews Peter thought Gentiles were outsiders
 - b. and that God had some alternative plan for them
 - c. now he is beginning to realize the true scope of the gospel and the true nature of grace
 - d. it is for ALL, whether Jew, Samaritan, or Gentile

{36} “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ; He is Lord of all;

{37} “that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached:

{38} “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

{39} “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and

in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree.

{40} “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,

{41} “not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.

{42} “And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.

{43} “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”

4. This message was short
5. But it contained all the essentials of the gospel
6. And when Peter spoke of faith in Christ as the basis of forgiveness, Cornelius and those with him made an instant response . . .

G. Vs. 44-48

{44} While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.

1. How rude for God to interrupt Peter like this
2. Peter didn't even get a chance to give an invitation
3. All of a sudden, while he was still speaking, they began to speak in tongues
4. A sure sign that they were born again and filled with the Holy Spirit

{45} And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

{46} For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered,

{47} “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

5. No doubt God worked in this way because Peter had no idea how the Gentiles were to be dealt with
6. He thought there would be some *other* way for them to come to faith in Christ
7. Maybe that they had to become Jewish converts first or something
8. God poured out the Holy Spirit on them to show Peter and the other Jews that came with him that Gentiles enter into eternal life the same way as Jews
9. Now, in Christ, the distinctions of Jew and Gentile lose their meaning and force
10. Peter was a quick learner and recognized that if they were already baptized with the Holy Spirit, if God already showed His acceptance, how could he and his fellow Jews reject them from becoming a part of the church
11. So he pressed for their acceptance to be baptized

{48} And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Two Issues

1. Friends, this passage speaks powerfully to two important issues
2. First: Peter was the most experienced and mature Christian of the church at this time
 - a. but there were still things he had to learn and unlearn
 - b. there were still issue in his thinking that needed to be transformed
 - c. at first, when the Lord began to reveal to him what He was doing, Peter was resistant
 - d. but God kept on him till he gave in and was renewed in his understanding
 - e. no matter how far you've come, no matter how much you know, no matter what place of importance you have in ministry, God has more for you to learn
 - f. there are areas in every one of our lives that God still wants to change
 - g. don't resist - don't hesitate - don't say "No, Lord."
 - h. rather, turn to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to make known to you what issues of your understanding fall short of His glory and grace
 - i. as Paul says, "To the measure I have attained, I press on."
3. Second: The abiding and major lesson of this chapter is this—as Peter says in v. 34, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality."
 - a. the debate over racism and prejudice is once again coming to the forefront of our times
 - b. it was one of the defining issues of the 60's, and we are seeing a return to it today
 - c. racism and ethnic strife is tearing not just our country, but our world apart
 - d. in Bosnia we have the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians slaughtering each other
 - e. in Africa we have the Hutu and the Tutsi murdering each other by the thousands
 - f. in the Mid-East the Palestinians and Jews are at each other's throats
 - g. the Turks and Kurds are locked in conflict
 - h. right here in our own nation, in the military they are screening service people to see if they are members of hate groups
 - i. and while many are crying out for tolerance and good will among the peoples of the world, we need to understand that apart from Christ, there will never be peace
 - j. the abiding lesson of this passage is that God loves all men and women equally and that in Christ there is no such thing as Jew, Gentile, slave, free, black, white, yellow, red, or brown
4. The great challenge of this passage is this:
 - a. we may be like Peter
 - b. we may be good, mature believers who have known, loved, and served God
 - c. but are we bound by prejudice?
 - d. Peter was, and didn't know it

- e. in his mind he was fully justified in his view that Gentiles were different and to be treated differently
 - 1) he had been brought up that way
 - 2) he had even had the religious instruction of the rabbis who reinforced these ideas
 - 3) for him, it wasn't prejudice
 - 4) it was just the way things were
- f. but the problem was that he believed that somehow God saw them as different too
 - 1) that they weren't as important as he and his fellow Jews
 - 2) that God wasn't as concerned for their eternal fate
- g. that day when we arrived in Caesarea, a corner was turned in the history of the human race
- h. you see, when Peter stepped across the threshold of Cornelius' house, a boundary was crossed in the outworking of the plan and purpose of God
- i. in simple faith, following the Lord's leading, Peter laid aside his prejudice and trusted God
- j. and God opened wide the doors of salvation to billions and billions of people
- k. when Peter left his home, Cornelius was no longer a Gentile to Peter, he was a brother

B. Us Too

1. God is calling each and every one of us to take that same step
2. You may not think you have a problem with prejudice
3. But are there others, whether defined by
 - a. the color of their skin
 - b. their ethnic background
 - c. their social or economic level
 - d. their education or lack thereof
 - e. their address
 - f. the style of their clothing
 - g. the music they listen to
 - h. the car they drive
 - i. where they work
 - j. whether or not they have a bed to sleep in
 - k. that you somehow think are less deserving of God's love and care?
4. If we are to faithfully follow Jesus, we must go where ever He leads
5. Prejudice, no matter how subtle is a sin that needs to be rooted out and repented of
6. We are called to love and grace
7. Love draws no line at externals and grace is not limited by someone's outward appearance