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When God Stretches Our Comfort Zones

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Acts 10:1-8 (ESV)

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, 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 in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one 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 related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The famous 133rd Psalm begins under God's inspiration with these words: *How good and pleasant it is when God's people dwell together in unity.*

What is unity in a biblical sense? Some say it's this: the state of being in harmony with others, of being in a oneness of heart and mind. Christian unity is a community that is of one heart and one mind.

In that context, in the community, it's not an outward uniformity where people all try to look the same or dress the same or act the same. It's more of an internal, unseen spiritual unity—a spiritual oneness—and it's rooted in very unique and differently created people sharing in the same faith in Christ, according to the Bible.

There is a unity found in our faith in Jesus, in our love for him, and our love for one another, and our sharing in what he has said to us and the mission he has given to us. It's not likeness in an external way. It is a one heart and one mind, brought about miraculously by the work of the Spirit—bringing people to faith in Jesus, love for God, love for His Word, love for his people, and love for what he's doing: his mission in the world.

Which, of course, we see in the book of Acts. We are called by him to bear witness to him in the world, to be his lights in the world, to go, as Jesus said before he ascended, and make disciples of all people.

And so the psalmist said it's good and pleasant to God when his people are unified. In doing this, there's unity in us in our work before him.

And then he describes what it's like. He says it is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.

Oil in the Old Testament, of course, is a symbol of anointing. It's a symbol of the Spirit. When God's people dwell together in unity, the psalmist is saying, it's good and pleasing not only to us—not only do we feel it—but God himself enjoys it.

And he describes it this way: it's like the Holy Spirit coming down upon our heads. We have a conscious awareness of the Spirit of God being present. Wherever two or more are gathered in unity before God, his Spirit is there with them. We start to have a conscious awareness of God.

When God's people gather together in unity, it comes down onto our head. And then it says unto the beard, unto the face of Aaron, down into his chest. It goes deeper than mental awareness. At some level, when we're gathered together as God's people, seeking him together, and the Spirit is creating a unity to us—not only do we become consciously aware of that—it reaches down into our soul and touches us right in our very chests, in our hearts.

And we start to sense him—not intellectually—but we start to sense him in our souls and our spirits, and then we're encouraged within.

This is a great description of something that happens in the spiritual realm when, on this side of heaven, God's people come together and they're unified in faith and love and mission. There's an anointing there. There's a power there that stirs people in their chests, that reaches into the center of who they are—their spirits and their souls.

There's refreshment. He says it is like the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion, and that which is alive on the mountain is refreshed and renewed. This is God's people being renewed here as they gather.

And this is what we're called to do: to gather together, to encourage each other, to stir each other up. And the psalmist ends, saying, *For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even everlasting life.*

We start to taste of the goodness of eternity when we gather like this.

Doesn't this sound good?

I have loved this psalm for many years because of what it symbolizes, what it brings into our hearts and souls when we gather in unity. This is what the early church did. It says many times in Acts they all joined together constantly in one accord. It's a description of one heart and one mind.

It says in Acts chapter two, before they were anointed by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were all together in one accord in one place. They continually and daily prayed together in the temple after that in one accord.

Over ten times it says this in the first five to six chapters of Acts. After the first miraculous recording of a healing—and there were many healings going on—they lifted up their voice to God in one accord. And so there was this supernatural oneness in the church.

And then the church expanded from Jerusalem and spread out, and that unique togetherness started to change as the church grew. But they did a miraculous job of maintaining a oneness of heart and mind as a church in the world, even though it was tested many times.

And our text today sets up a testing for the church and its oneness. So we read: *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed continually to God.*

I always pause a minute when the Scriptures, inspired by God, take a moment to spend this much time on a single person. God himself chooses people whom to honour and whom to highlight. And here, out of nowhere, he's picked out a man in Caesarea, under the inspiration of Luke's pen, to say a few things about that I think are significant.

Sometimes we're wondering in our culture what makes a man. God has shown us in His Word many times what He honors in manhood and masculinity.

Notice what He pulls out about Cornelius. Here is a great father highlighted here: *There was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort.* He had a job, and he worked, and he was a leader. He had applied himself. He was a devout man, a disciplined poor man. He worked hard in his labor.

Do you know that work and labor was given to us before the fall? It's not a bad thing. It's not a—*it's not* a curse in and of itself. It is a gift to contribute, to work, and to serve. And here Cornelius is highlighted as a disciplined worker, a leader in a military complex. And it says about him he feared God, and he brought his household into reverence and fear before God.

Here is a man who is not only pursuing leadership in his community, he is pursuing leadership in his family and is bringing his family into reverence and fear before the Almighty. This is a father who is taking his role seriously as a leader in his family. *He feared God and all his household.*

Some versions say he often brought his household into worship before God. It says also he was a generous man who gave offerings often and prayed continually.

Here is a soldier who is an initiating leader in his community and his family. A strong man—not just strong physically—but he's strong spiritually. And he's exercising his spiritual muscles frequently: praying often, coming into worship with God's people, finding the encouragement of unity before God together.

I just love this. I love reading about what God honors in a man and what God lifts up in a man. And then saying in my own spirit, God, help me be more like that. Help me be a father like that, a grandfather like that, someone in the community like that.

And I just want to encourage all the men here today: if you are doing any of these things, praise God. Praise God for your efforts in reverencing Him and fearing Him, in serving in our community and initiating—all you men who have come to church with your families.

Give fear before God—to console Him, to pray to Him. Our world needs more like that. We need more men who will be like Cornelius.

And let me say something. He doesn't even know that much about God. We're going to find that out. But he understands, in reverence through what's been created, that God is to be honored and God is to be feared.

It's written on his heart, and he's just doing what he knows to be right in his conscience.

And so let's read what happens here. *He feared God with all his household. He gave alms and offerings. He prayed continually.* About the ninth hour—it's a time of prayer back in that day—he must have been praying.

He saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, *Cornelius*. Do you know that God knows our names? He knows your name.

God decided to send a messenger to this man—an angel. He knew his name. He said, *Cornelius*.

And he stared at him—Cornelius did—in terror and said, *What is it, Lord?* And he said to him, *Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.*

Think of it. Just think of it.

James would pen these words: *If we draw near to God, He will draw near to us.* Here is a man who doesn't know much about God. He's a Gentile. He's not a Jew. He's been outside of the realm of this for some time. Yet he has a reverence for God, and he prays to God as best he knows how. And he's generous, and he's bringing his household before God, and God hears him.

He's outside of the faith, but God responds to him and sends a messenger to him who calls out his name and says, *Your acts, your bent, your life has come up before the Almighty. Your alms have ascended as a memorial before Him.*

In the Old Testament, there's a prophet named Hananiah—kind of an unknown prophet—and he prophesies this under the Spirit of the Lord. At one point he says this: *The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth.*

God is looking. God is watching. His eyes are scanning the earth, looking for those whose hearts are devoted to Him, who are inclined to Him—those who are loyal to Him.

God is just watching the world, looking for people's hearts that are bent towards Him, that He might—here's what it says—*make Himself known to them.*

If we draw near to God, He'll draw near to us.

God is showing Himself strong here to this centurion named Cornelius. God Himself, in His kindness, draws us to Him. And when we respond to it, it's just this mutual attraction. As we draw near to God, He's watching. He draws closer and closer to us.

And Cornelius—his work towards God had come up. And so God sent a messenger to him and said, *Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.*

So then God gave him some instruction through this angel. He said, *Send men to Joppa and bring one Simon, who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.*

God knows everything, and He instructs him to go to this house. It's about a 12 hours' walk south of there, where they are.

An angel spoke to him, and after he departed, he called two of his servants—Cornelius did—a devout soldier from among those who attended him. He told him everything the angel said to him.

And then the next morning, he sent them down to Joppa, where Peter was staying—at a different Peter's house—and they went the next day.

They must have left early, because they got there about 3:00 in the afternoon, and they knocked on Peter's door.

Now something unique was happening to Peter. If you read this in Acts chapter ten, Peter was in a time of prayer. The same thing at 3:00 that next day. And Peter sees a vision from God of this sheet coming down before him, and it's filled with animals that Jews were restricted from eating in the Old Testament law. And as this sheet comes down before him and these animals are there, something inside him says, eat. And Peter says, I will never eat of those animals. And then the sheet ascends and comes back down again three times. And then a voice says to Peter, whatever you think is unclean that God has cleaned, you are free to eat. Acts chapter ten. Peter's confused. He doesn't understand it.

But while this vision is happening, these three men knock on the door. They come in and explain to him what Cornelius has heard from the Lord. Peter welcomes them. They spend the night, and Peter goes back to Caesarea the next day. They travel back. All this unfolding just by God's sovereign hand. Cornelius has been honoring God. God has heard him. God has sent him on a message to receive Peter and bring Peter back to Caesarea.

Now, on this third day in the afternoon, they arrive. Cornelius is waiting for them. He's brought his household together. He's brought his friends together, this leader, and he's saying, we want to hear what God has to say to us through Peter, whom we sent for. And Peter explains to them the work of Jesus. When we get into the Bible, it's all about Jesus. Cornelius didn't know. He had a reverence in his heart. He was living in a God-honoring way, but he didn't know Jesus. And so God arranged for him to hear about the sacrifice of His Son for the forgiveness of sins.

And they were also astounded. They all came to believe, and they had a great celebration that day. Revival broke out there in Caesarea. His family, his friends came to the Lord, and they were baptized. At this, here we have the second Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came out upon them. They were encouraged, renewed with the anointing that came upon Mount Zion in the Old Testament, the refreshing of their souls.

Because they gathered together in unity, they found faith in Jesus. The Spirit was poured upon them, and they understood the work and the mission of God. And here the church would continue to spread from here.

But here you have the tension. Now the apostles and brothers who were throughout Judea, a part of the church, heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God. They heard about this, and quite frankly, they didn't like it. The church is growing over there in Gentile land.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, certain parties in the church decided to complain to him, criticize it. The circumcision party said to him, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them. And so Peter had to explain himself—his vision, his dream, his journey, his message, the pouring out of the Spirit, the salvation of the Gentiles—just like they had received earlier.

And then the text says Peter said this: if God gave them the same gift as He gave to us when we believed, who was I to stand in His way? The unstoppable church. God was on the move, and it was outside of their bounds. The text says when they heard these things, they said no more. They fell silent. They held their peace. They had no further objection. They stopped arguing with Peter and glorified God together in one accord, saying, then to the Gentiles, God had also granted repentance and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I love this whole story because it speaks to the church in the world. It speaks to all of us who are a part of it.

Three quick observations. First of all, God is often unpredictable, hard to understand, and completely uncontrollable. Who knew Peter was going to get a vision that day against so many of the Old Testament covenant laws? Who knew Cornelius was going to be visited by an angel on that day? You ever been surprised by God in such a way where God just unpredictably shows up in your life?

I remember when I was working just after college at Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camp, late in the summer around the 1990 year, and I woke up one morning with a vision in my mind, a dream in my mind. And in that dream, I was standing before a group of people, holding a Bible, and I was explaining the Bible to them. And it was horrifying to me. Out of nowhere, I had no intention of ever being a minister, a preacher, teaching the Bible to people. And here I was, having this dream of me teaching the Bible to people in this crowd of people. And I was so sickened by the dream, I got out of bed as fast as I could, went to the camp dining hall, and just started to eat cereal. Just tried to forget about the whole thing.

Three weeks later, the camp director came to me and said, Tim, our minister for Sunday morning has cancelled. I wonder if you would like to give a Sunday message? I wanted to throw up. I was a simple

farm boy who liked living on a farm and working with animals, and I didn't talk much. I wasn't much of a communicator. But God is often unpredictable, hard to understand, and completely uncontrollable.

And then we see this: when God decides to do something new in our lives or in our space, outside of our normal history of experiences or comfort zones, we often resist Him at first. I for sure didn't want to become a preacher of the Bible back then. I thought for sure God had it wrong.

Peter, when he first saw that dream, he said, no, Lord, I will not eat anything unclean. Are you sure, Peter?

When the Jews in Jerusalem heard about the message going to Gentiles, they were like, not going to happen. They went to criticize Peter. When God decides to do something new, sometimes we're slow in getting on board with Him. We cling to the past, but are mindful of what the prophet said in the Old Testament: don't you see it springing forth? God is doing a new thing.

I believe He's doing some new things in our world. Matter of fact, I believe God is always up to something new. And the prophet in the Old Testament said, don't dwell so much on the former things, but look forward into the future. As one of my mentors has said, don't look so much into the past. You're not going that way. Look into the future for what God might be doing. And be open to Him, for He's always up to something new. He's always working to make for His people a new way in the wilderness, with new streams of nourishment and new flows of His Spirit to new generations to rise up.

But when He does these things, in our stubbornness and our pride, we often resist Him at first. I know I do. I've resisted so many things He's led me into at first.

But then we see this, and this is really miraculous what these people did. We see that a humility and an openness to God and His Word is crucial for the people of God to maintain a unity and an empowerment in our mission.

Peter humbled himself and said, okay God, I'll go. And the Jews in Jerusalem humbled themselves and said, we won't get in His way either. And they prayed together, and they were open to whatever God wanted to do. Humility and openness makes fertile ground for the Spirit of God to move.