

# THE PIGS ARE ALL RIGHT

ACTS 10:9-23    MARCH 18, 2020

In Marvel's *Black Panther*, a key theme in the plot is what the leaders of Wakanda should do with the rich resources of their kingdom when faced with the mounting problems in the nations around them. Historically, the kings had chosen to stay hidden, turning a blind eye to the needs of the wider world. In an emotionally climactic scene, T'Challa, the Black Panther, hovering somewhere between life and death has a conversation with a group of his ancestors in the afterlife and accuses them of wrongdoing. His father says, "I chose our people." To which T'Challa responds, "All of you were wrong to turn your backs on the rest of the world." He then returns to earth to try to chart a new course for the people of Wakanda, doing what *should've* been done from the beginning.

Last week we were introduced to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He was a devout man and had received a message from an angel as God began to accomplish a pivotal work in human history: Opening the Church to the Gentile world. It wasn't a *new* idea coming out of heaven. It had been the plan from the beginning that, through God's people, the hope of redemption would go out to the entire world. Sadly, the Jews had turned their backs on the Gentile nations and now the Lord was going to finally build the bridge of the Gospel from the Church to all people.

Last week, we saw the groundwork being laid on the Gentile side. Tonight we see the other side of the bridge being built as the Lord interacts with the apostle Peter.

When we look at the two representatives, Peter and Cornelius, it's obvious that it's the *Gentile* who is further from God. After all, he's not born again. He doesn't have the Holy Spirit dwelling within him. Yet, in this effort, it's *Peter* who has the longer trip to take. Though he lived with Jesus for three and a half years, though he was a leader in the church, though he was the preacher at Pentecost, a miracle worker, one of The Twelve, tonight's text shows us something remarkable: The apostle was *wrong*. He was wrong in an area of his faith, wrong in his thoughts concerning the Gentile world and wrong about what he *thought* the Lord would and wouldn't do.

Wonderfully, we'll see that his wrongness didn't make him unusable or distasteful to the Lord. God was going to lead Peter *out* of his error and into a greater experience of grace. One that would cause him to grow and have direct impact on the world. Just as Christ was drawing Cornelius into truth, so He was drawing Peter into greater truth, greater grace, greater intimacy with the King.

This episode in Peter's life reveals the fact that all of us have room for growth in our understanding of grace and our walk with the Lord. That shouldn't surprise us and it doesn't need to discourage us. It's the reality of following God in a body of flesh. *One day* we'll be finished. One day we'll be fully sanctified, fully glorified. Until then, we need the Lord to lead us forward, not only in our callings but also in our understanding. And, as we see with Peter, it's *possible* that there might be some barrier that we don't recognize that is keeping us from something the Lord desires. We'll also see that God's leading, even of mature, seasoned Christians, is not always as crystal clear as we would like it to be. We know that from experience, but it's helpful to see it in the examples of Scripture too. What we can be sure of us that God *does* want to lead us on, more and more into His grace, His peace, His truth and, at the same time, use us to minister to a needy world along the way.

We pick up the story in verse 9.

**Acts 10:9 - <sup>9</sup>The next day, as they were traveling and nearing the city, Peter went up to pray on the housetop about noon.**

Luke builds anticipation in our minds as we move from watching the hurried, urgent quest of these 3 men from Caesarea and pan over to Peter, unaware of what's coming, relaxing on the rooftop looking over the sea, in a time of quiet prayer with the Lord. It's amazing how quickly things can change, right? Peter's planning lunch at the time and has no idea a completely new era of ministry and history is about to begin. Not to mention that the Lord is going to require something very challenging of him.

Before moving on, it's worth mentioning that both of these remarkable interactions with the Lord, for Peter and Cornelius, happened during a prayer time. As we endeavor to grow spiritually, growing in our prayer life with the Lord should always be a priority.

**Acts 10:10 - <sup>10</sup>Then he became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing something, he went into a visionary state.**

The term Luke used seems to indicate intense hunger. But, in this case, God was going to put the spiritual thing first. The Lord decided that, at *this* point, Peter could wait to eat. Sometimes the Lord has us forego physical things in order for us to accomplish spiritual things. Not always, but sometimes. That principle is perhaps most emphasized in the story of the healing of the paralytic let through the roof of the house. There, at the feet of Jesus, obviously in desperate need of physical attention, the Lord said, "Your *sins* are forgiven." Of course, he was ultimately healed, but, in *that* case, the spiritual work came first. That's not always how the Lord does things, but sometimes. And we see it here with Peter. He was hungry. He needed food. That's a legitimate need. But it could wait while something spiritual was being done.

**Acts 10:11-12 - <sup>11</sup>He saw heaven opened and an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners to the earth. <sup>12</sup>In it were all the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and the birds of the sky.**

Peter, as an individual, and many of the other Jewish Christians like him, needed to understand that God had done away with the dietary restrictions from the Mosaic law. The Lord had taught that back in the Gospels, but they hadn't really gotten the message yet. This would be an issue that Peter struggled with, not only here, but later on in life too. But the wider point of this vision was that the Church, which is represented here by the sheet, is a heavenly work. And in the Church there is no exclusion. Every race. Every ethnicity. Every social class. Every background. Everyone is invited to join in the work that the Lord is doing before that time when the Church will be caught up to heaven in the rapture.

On that sheet were clean animals and creepy animals. The royal lion and the gentle lamb and the off-putting hyena. There were animals you'd like to look at and have around, and lots you wouldn't. But, in the Church, the Lord sees them all as equal. All as worthwhile. All as part of the family. And, the animals weren't killing each other on the sheet. They were there, side-by-side, living together.

**Acts 10:13 - <sup>13</sup>Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat!"**

In your Bible these words may be in red. There are in mine. It's not explicitly stated that Jesus was speaking, but it seems as though Peter recognized the voice as his Lord's.

The command was simple: Get up and devour. Now, Peter was being led out of legalism and being prepared for his work with the ‘unclean’ Gentiles, but it did give me a devotional thought: We want to be hungry for souls. It doesn’t fit in perfectly, these animals are already on the sheet. But, I know I need the Lord to work in my heart and help me develop a greater hunger for souls. He’s sent us out to go and be fishers of men, so this image was a good motivator for me.

**Acts 10:14 - <sup>14</sup> “No, Lord!” Peter said. “For I have never eaten anything common and ritually unclean!”**

Commentators are quick to point out that you can’t say both “No” and “Lord.” But the truth is, Peter kind of did a lot. Maybe not a *lot*, but 3 or 4 times in the record of the New Testament. And, in reality, we do too. Maybe we don’t say, “No, Lord,” as often, but we’re prone to say, “I *can’t*, Lord.” “I *can’t* forgive that person. I *can’t* be at peace in this uncertainty. I *can’t* not be anxious. I *can’t* love my wife the way Christ loves the Church. I *can’t* give sacrificially.” God gives us many commands and mandates in His Word, and when we think “I can’t,” it’s the same as Peter saying “no.”

In this case, Peter told the Lord, “No, I can’t obey what you said, because if I do, I won’t be properly religious.” It seems silly when we hear it like that, but Christians and churches tend to get hung up on manmade rules and traditions, sometimes choosing *them* over God’s leading. In the histories of revival there are those who won’t accept what God is doing and say that it’s all wrong. Dave Hunt, in his autobiographical book *Confessions Of A Heretic*, tells of these great things God was doing in his life - miraculous things - and how there was a great deal of resistance in his own heart to it at first. Then, there was a lot of resistance coming from his very conservative denomination. Even when the Holy Spirit fell on his local congregation in an undeniable way, the ultimate result was that Dave Hunt, a leader in their group, was excommunicated! Very sad, but all too common.

Here’s a generic example: The Bible says you have liberty in Christ and that no one can judge you for celebrating or not celebrating certain days. And yet, there are Christians and traditions who say you can’t be a true Christian and celebrate Christmas. The Bible says let no one judge you concerning Sabbaths. And yet, there are still many groups and traditions who say that *all* Christians *must* observe the Sabbath in some way. Those rigid, legalistic positions are just like the one Peter is demonstrating here, and God has gone to great lengths to usher us into grace.

**Acts 10:15 - <sup>15</sup> Again, a second time, a voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call common.”**

God does what He wants. He always acts in truth and according to His nature and character, but *He* is the decider. *He* is the definer. *He* is the director. Our part is to discover what His desire is, what His will is and line ourselves up with that. He is not subject to us or our understanding or our sensibilities, we are to subject ourselves to Him.

**Acts 10:16 - <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and then the object was taken up into heaven.**

There was *emphasis*, but not *clarity*. We’re going to see Peter pondering, wondering. He doesn’t get what this all means. So, the question is: Why not just be explicit and clear with Peter, the way the angel had been with Cornelius?

We can't understand all the ways of God, but we remember that, as Christians, we're invited to mediate on Him. He wants us to draw near to Him. He wants us to apply our hearts and our minds to Him. He wants us to think and listen and inquire and wait on Him. God doesn't want to have a purely mechanical relationship with us, and we don't want that either. Now, that means that sometimes God will speak to us in ways that aren't clear at first, but, when that happens, it's an invitation to press into the Lord, seek His face, wait on Him and anticipate more from Him.

**Acts 10:17 - <sup>17</sup> While Peter was deeply perplexed about what the vision he had seen might mean, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions to Simon's house, stood at the gate.**

We have to marvel at God's timing. His providence is magnificent. But, seeing Peter perplexed while these guys stood at the door reminds us that we can't always figure everything out before we minister to people. Sometimes we're going to have to walk by faith with *less* insight or clarity about how everything's going to work, trusting that God is preparing us and will walk with us.

**Acts 10:18 - <sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon, who was also named Peter, was lodging there.**

I imagine this was a tense moment for Simon the tanner and his family. You *probably* don't want a Roman soldier showing up to your house unannounced.

For their part, the Gentiles were being polite, not barging into the Jewish home, but waiting at the gate, respecting the Jewish sensibilities.

**Acts 10:19-20 - <sup>19</sup> While Peter was thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him, "Three men are here looking for you. <sup>20</sup> Get up, go downstairs, and accompany them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them."**

Now the Lord gives Peter some direct clarity, not about the vision itself, but about what he should do next. We should notice that this was a very matter of fact interaction with the Holy Spirit. We don't see Peter laughing uncontrollably or doing anything weird. The Spirit didn't possess him. He just spoke, like a friend, giving direction.

I do find it humorous that God didn't mention, "Oh, and the 3 men down there are Gentiles." He let Peter find out on his own. So, "go with them. Accompany them. They're from Me." *Forgot* to mention they're Gentiles. God's got a fun streak, to be sure.

**Acts 10:21-22 - <sup>21</sup> Then Peter went down to the men and said, "Here I am, the one you're looking for. What is the reason you're here?" <sup>22</sup> They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who has a good reputation with the whole Jewish nation, was divinely directed by a holy angel to call you to his house and to hear a message from you."**

Clearly, these three Romans know that Peter, as a Jew, will be hesitant to engage with them, so they immediately start making an appeal to Peter's Jewishness. "Cornelius is a God-fearer...the whole Jewish nation knows he's a good guy...the God of Israel sent an angel." Peter is being drawn into a greater grace, one that perhaps he should've anticipated but hadn't so far. For our part, we want to operate in grace in such a way that people don't feel like they have to *beg* in order to receive ministry from us. Freely we have received, freely we should give.

**Acts 10:23 - <sup>23</sup> Peter then invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and set out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him.**

Peter obeyed. And he obeyed in a big way. By inviting in these Gentiles and eating with them, he was violating terms of the Levitical code. But Peter acted with grace and compassion and care. And, notice, they didn't leave right away. Now, when Cornelius had his vision it was about 3pm. The servants and soldier left immediately.

Here, it's just about noon. But, rather than set off right away, Peter can tell these guys need rest. They need a meal. They need to refresh and get supplied. So, in *this* moment, the physical need was addressed first. They waited till the next morning to set out. And so, in the same text, we see God moving in slightly different ways. And that just reinforces the idea that we really need to be led and directed by the Holy Spirit as He works out the incredible, providential work of the Gospel. Because on the Lord knows, in a given moment, whether the best way for you to minister in a situation is through a meal or a message.

What we do know is that God doesn't want us to turn our backs on the world. He wants us to go out and minister in grace, even to the difficult, undesirable, prickly and creepy folks out there. We have a limitless supply of heavenly power available to us. Let's not hinder ourselves with legalistic traditions, human prejudice or an unwillingness to obey. Instead, let's wait on the Lord, accept His rule and invite Him to direct us into new ventures of faith.