

GOD'S MISSION, SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT

ACTS 10:24-48 APRIL 1, 2020

In Tolkien's classic book, *The Hobbit*, Gandalf, the wise wizard, foists a situation on the narrow-minded Bilbo which offers him a chance at adventure, importance and great rewards. The journey will be challenging and unpredictable, bringing Bilbo into company of new friends, dangerous foes and out of his own comfortable way of doing things. By the end of the story, the hobbit has grown and developed in ways he never could have predicted, he returns home with wonderful treasures in tow and his world is better for his having gone. Victories were won, lives were saved and right was reigning over middle earth.

The broad strokes are not so unlike the story playing out in Acts chapter 10. God had a great adventure in mind, sending His people to go with Him and do battle against the dragon, to take back what he stole. In the Lord's case, we're not talking about mere silver and gold, but about undying human spirits. And here, we drop in as God starts an amazing new era of Gospel work which would ultimately cover the whole earth. Like Gandalf, He wants to bring those along who wouldn't have naturally signed up. In reality, *none* of us would *naturally* sign up to take up our cross and follow the Lord, but our Father knows that that is exactly what we need to do. And so, after bringing an unexpected party to Peter's front door, God sends him down a road that would change his life, change the Church forever and change the course of human history, to our direct benefit by the way.

God invites each of us to follow Him on our own Gospel adventure as we continue the work of Acts. As we go with Him, He doesn't leave our progress to chance or to our own ability. Instead, we know from the revelation of Scripture, in passages like this one tonight, that the Lord has intentional plans He wants to execute in our lives. We see some the character of these plans as we read about Peter bringing the Gospel to Cornelius at what some refer to as the Gentile Pentecost.

We start in at verse 24.

Acts 10:24 - ²⁴ The following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

In this verse we first see that God's mission is to get us intermingled with people who need ministry. In the midst of this pandemic, the governments of the world are all about isolation and separation. As a general principle, God's plan is to mix us up with others. Already we've seen Peter interacting with Jews and Samaritans, with Scribes and sorcerers, with cripples and converts. Sometimes he talks to one person, sometimes to a crowd of thousands. Of course, none of these encounters were by *his* design, but they were part of his adventure as he followed the leading of God the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we get the feeling that, to be a *real* Christian, we've got to go to some strange and far off land. And, it's true that in some cases, God does great work through people far from home, among a people altogether different from them. Certainly, in this text, there is a wide gap between the subjugated, Jewish fisherman and the Roman Centurion. But we just as often see people ministering to those immediately around them. That's what Cornelius did, for example. He gathered friends and family. Andrew had a family ministry. So did Timothy's mother, Eunice. The principle is not that we must travel a certain number of miles, but, rather, that God's intention is to get us *mingled* with others, be they many or few, near or far, so that we can bring the Gospel to them.

Now, Peter and his fellows from Joppa still didn't know exactly what was going on. I'm guessing it was an interesting couple of days walking to Caesarea. The Gentiles didn't know what to expect either. And yet, they all pressed on in anticipation.

In verses 25 through 33, we see God's mission is not only to *intermingle* us with others, but also to get us into *right relationship* with them.

Acts 10:25-26 - ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, fell at his feet, and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter helped him up and said, "Stand up! I myself am also a man."

Some commentators try to say Cornelius was only giving Peter an oriental-style welcome, but it doesn't seem like that's what Peter thought. To Peter's credit, he immediately lifted Cornelius up and declared their equality, which is an astounding statement, no matter what angle you look at it. On the one hand, Peter is an apostle. He is a miracle worker. He's one of the 3 in the inner circle of Jesus Christ the Messiah. He had just raised a woman from the dead. He held the keys to the Kingdom. But, looking on this misinformed unbeliever, who clearly assumed Peter was much *higher* than him, he said, "We're the same." From the other angle, his assertion is just as remarkable. Cornelius is the strong arm of the occupying power. He was a man with wealth and prominence and position. A man of valuable skill and strength. Peter was a penniless, semi-retired fisherman who frequently had run-ins with the Jewish authorities.

But in God's eyes, we are all His most precious creation: Man. Each loved. Each hand-crafted in the womb. Each of us are the object of His fervent affection. Priceless pearls in His eyes.

As we go out as representatives of Christ, we're to be in right relationship with the people we encounter. There's no place for pride or prejudice in Gospel work. We note that Peter didn't think he needed to be hailed as 'great.' He wouldn't try to pocket any of Christ's glory for himself, like Elisha's greedy servant Gehazi. No one needed to kiss Peter's feet or prostrate themselves. The Bible explains that being in right relationship with others means we place their needs before our own, that we treat others the way we want to be treated and that we do so with humility and kindness. We're not to lord over others or put burdens on them. We're to "help them up" that they might be fortified and encouraged and brought nearer to the Lover of their souls.

Acts 10:27-29 - ²⁷ While talking with him, he went on in and found that many had come together there. ²⁸ Peter said to them, "You know it's forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner. But God has shown me that I must not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ That's why I came without any objection when I was sent for. So I ask: Why did you send for me?"

Being in right relationship with people means being honest and forthright with them. Peter, perhaps, was a bit short on tact in his words, but he was by no means dishonest or unkind. He didn't posture or parade. He didn't scheme or seek to impress. Neither did he demean or berate. He spoke the truth of what God had done for him. But then he asks a key question: Why did you send for me? What were their expectations? Were they hoping to see a wonder worked before them? Were they hoping to be entertained by this man who knew things about Jesus others did not?

We should commend this group of Gentiles for their hunger for the truth. It's clear they were all well-versed in Judaism, particularly Cornelius who, we know, though short of fully converting to the Jewish faith, went as far as he could as a God-fearer. Yet, as Peter pointed out, "they *knew*" that

they were *outside* of Israel, seen by many Jews not even as humans but as animals. And yet, they gathered there that day, in hopes that the God of Abraham would, perhaps, show them mercy. He *is* the God of mercy. The God who loves the undeserving sinners of this world who have no claim to Him. This scene is a good reminder of the mercy of the God we preach. He offers salvation not to those who work for it or bribe for it. It's not for popularity or for merit. It's the free offer of grace to any and to all who will call on Him and believe on His Son.

God's plan to put us in right relationship with others demands that we value them the way He does. And we see that His call on our lives must supersede any bias we have, any trepidation. It must precede our own pre-conceived schedules and plans. We are to respond as soon as we are sent for. Because we are the agents of grace sent on God's mission of mercy.

Acts 10:30-33 - ³⁰ Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this hour, at three in the afternoon, I was praying in my house. Just then a man in a dazzling robe stood before me ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your acts of charity have been remembered in God's sight. ³² Therefore send someone to Joppa and invite Simon here, who is also named Peter. He is lodging in Simon the tanner's house by the sea.' ³³ Therefore I immediately sent for you, and you did the right thing in coming. So we are all present before God, to hear everything you have been commanded by the Lord."

We can imagine the anticipation in the house as they waited for Peter's arrival. Maybe someone in the group had gently suggested to Cornelius, "This man is a Jew. He *can't* come here, let alone speak with us." But Cornelius would've simply said, "He'll come. He'll be here." Thank God Peter did the right thing and *obeyed* when the Lord sent him out.

Many of you have heard of a Christian named Brother Yun. In his autobiography he tells the story of how, as a young man in China, he became desperate to get a Bible. No one they knew had one. His mother walked him to a village where she had heard a man had a Bible. The man was too afraid to show Yun his copy, but told him to pray for one of his own.

For *100 days* Yun fasted and prayed for a Bible. "One morning, there was a knock at the door. Two men had brought a Bible to Yun. Three months before, an evangelist in another town had been instructed by the Lord in a vision to give his Bible to Brother Yun. Although he did not know this young boy, the Lord had showed him the village and house where Yun lived in a vision. It had taken him *three months* to decide to obey the Lord."¹

Thank God Peter didn't wait, but obeyed when he was sent. Now, God's mission is not *only* to send us, but to speak through us. Peter was not meant to only *come* to Cornelius' house, but to *communicate* to him and his family. We cannot always anticipate when God will use us to preach or to minister in some way, but we can *ready* ourselves to deliver the truth when called upon. What has the Lord commanded? What is the Way by which a person might be saved? How can someone receive forgiveness for their sins? These are questions we can prepare ourselves to answer.

There are countless, rousing speeches in movies just before a battle breaks out. The general stands before his troops or the hero rides along in front of his fellow soldiers, stirring their hearts with talk of valor and honor and glory. Imagine those scenes if the leaders had nothing to say. "Well, I'm *here* at least." Peter had done the right thing in coming, but the purpose was to deliver revelation to them.

¹ <https://villagebible.church/event/2008-09-21-brother-yun/>

In verses 34 through 43 we see that God's mission is not only to *intermingle* us with others and to get us into *right relationship* with them, but also to lead us into a *deeper understanding* of truth.

Acts 10:34-43 - ³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “Now I really understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, ³⁵ but in every nation the person who fears Him and does righteousness is acceptable to Him. ³⁶ He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know the events that took place throughout Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John preached: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were under the tyranny of the Devil, because God was with Him. ³⁹ We ourselves are witnesses of everything He did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem, yet they killed Him by hanging Him on a tree. ⁴⁰ God raised up this man on the third day and permitted Him to be seen, ⁴¹ not by all the people, but by us, witnesses appointed beforehand by God, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to solemnly testify that He is the One appointed by God to be the Judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about Him that through His name everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.”

On that long walk to Caesarea, in light of the vision he had received, pieces of a puzzle began to fall into place in Peter's mind. Suddenly, he was realizing that his perspective on many issues were incomplete or askew. Suddenly, passages from the prophets and scenes from his 3 years with his Lord were all coming together in a unified picture of God's unlimited grace.

Peter and Paul would both later write about their hope that we, God's people, would *continue* to grow in our knowledge of the Lord and His truth. Not so that we could be puffed up or keep some cosmic scorecard of who is more right, but so that we would be more useful in His service and have a greater appreciation for what God has done. Here, in our text, we see that a purpose for growing in our understanding of the Lord's truth is so we can *proclaim* it and testify that Jesus Christ is the One Messiah, the One Way to everlasting life.

Acts 10:44-46a - ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other languages and declaring the greatness of God.

God is on a mission to intermingle us with others, to get us in right relationship with them, to lead us into a deeper understanding of His truth and to fill us with the Holy Spirit. That baptism was not meant only for the 12 or the 120 in Jerusalem, but for *every* Christian everywhere. It is the regular operation of the Spirit in the life of a believer. Not that we demand an experience of tongues or some other visible manifestation, but we should expect the Holy Spirit to fill and infuse us in a life-changing way. Because, as this passage makes altogether clear, God does not class certain Christians high and others low. The Jewish brothers, listening to the same words Peter had just been speaking, were *still* astonished that the Gentiles really were being saved the same way that they had been. That God didn't have multiple tiers of access. But what a marvelous thing that God has the same Spirit and the same grace and the same love for you and for me that He had for Peter or for any other great Christian hero of history.

In passing, we note that the filling of the Holy Spirit here was manifest, not just in a miracle of languages, but in the passionate overflow of *praise*.

Finally, in verses 47 and 48 we see that God's mission is to get us *obeying*.

Acts 10:46b-48 - Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.

These Gentiles had earnestly sought after God. They had believed in their hearts unto salvation. And now, their life of obedience was to begin as they set out on their *own* adventure of faith, following after the Lord. Peter led the charge to, in a sense, make it official: "Let's get these people baptized!" Of course, it wasn't necessary for their salvation - they were already saved - it was to start them off in their life of obedience to Christ *and* to make it official *to the Jews* in the group. They had been saved the same and so they were to be *treated* the same. As the Gentiles were being commanded to obey, the Jewish believers, too, were given the opportunity to obey God's leading - to get on board with this amazing work of grace. Not only were they to agree to it, they were to *do* it. The 6 Jewish brothers from Joppa would be the ones baptizing Cornelius and his family.

The road from Joppa to Caesarea is relatively straight. You go right up the coast from one town to the other. But, for Peter and his friends, the trip had some surprising turns. But they were turns that lead to the immeasurable expansion of God's mercy through the Gentile world. They were not only agents of that wonderful change, but were changed themselves, as they were brought into a deeper understanding of grace and brought out of their narrow mode of ministry.

We look forward to how God will lead us on, in His grace, to continue the ministry of the Gospel in whatever ways He desires, and making us more like Him as we go along.