

Introduction

This is a great story. I tell you, it's been a great series. I don't know about you, but I have attended all of those, and I have learned something from the Lord with every one that I have attended, through God's grace and how He reaches out to people. I have so appreciated it. The Gospel is this: The Gospel of Christ is very, very simple: Jesus became a man, He came to die on the cross for our sins... really, the sin debt of the world. Then God raised Him from the dead so that anyone who confesses... just simply agrees with God that Jesus is Lord... will be saved. You know, every time that I see that, this thought comes to my mind. I just picture God walking into that tomb. We talk about the sacrifice, and God walks into that tomb because it said that God raised His Son from the dead. All He had to say was "Arise." Guess what happened? He arose! Man, He rose victorious over sin, death, Satan... the world. He rose victorious over everything. That's what we're here to celebrate. We're going to look at, today, the breaking down of barriers. Barriers in this situation aren't between the lost, as the others were. These are barriers that stand between believers. They can be some of the biggest barriers that we know, so it's a vitally important section of Scripture that we need to look at. We've looked at how God has broken down and brought salvation to the religious, the cultured, the seeker, and the irreligious, and now it really refers to the outsiders. How has God broken down that barrier to outsiders? "Outsiders" here is really referring to the Gentile Christians as opposed to the Jewish Christians. There was no love lost, shall we say, between the Jews and the Gentiles: which were just the Jews, the chosen people, and those that were anyone except the chosen few.

We're going to be reading about Cornelius. He's the first character in action. Let's read verses 1 and 2: *"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."* Now there's some debate among some scholars if Cornelius was a believer or not. Pastor Steve and I and probably the majority believe that he was already having a faith walk with God because we need to remember, there are several words in here that key off a real knowledge and faith walk with God as opposed to just knowing there is a God. We need to remember that this was a transition time. It's called the Apostolic Era: the transition from Law to grace. It just didn't come overnight, as far as people's knowledge of what grace was all about. God used many things: He used angels, He used visions, He used laying on of hands, He used the anointing of gifts, which we'll see in chapter 10 here, to help visualize this coming new era of grace. Because Peter was a devout Jew, he still had a lot of hangover from the Law... hangover, not in as in a drunk, but hangover as far as memory and what was locked into his head. So it's a transition time of getting away and learning grace as opposed to Law. But Cornelius apparently was someone who had come to faith in God. He just hadn't received the Holy Spirit yet, as the other Gentiles hadn't. We need to remember the Law was given to man to do what? ... Draw him to Christ... to show his need for Christ, that he couldn't gain salvation by works. The Law was never given to save mankind. No one has ever been saved through Law or works... no one. Everyone... from the first created man... everyone comes to the Father by faith. That's it. The Law doesn't save; it never did. It was to point men to Christ. So as we look at that, we really need to see that God was orchestrating this phenomenal meeting between Cornelius and his family and friends and Peter and his group of believers that he was going to bring and teaching Peter also some important lessons about what's clean and what's not clean.

1. Drawn By The Same Spirit. (vv. 3-4)

The first thing is that everyone is drawn and convicted by the same Spirit. If you look at verses 3 and 4: *"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 started at him in terror and said, 'What is it Lord?'" Now, I don't know about you... that's about three o'clock in the afternoon, but if I'm just going about my routine about three o'clock in the afternoon, and all of a sudden I hear (in a deep voice) "Tom..." (Laughter) ...and I look around and there's an angel standing there... Cornelius summed it up really well: He was terrified. But do you know what's amazing? Even though he was terrified, he listened to what the angel said, and he believed it because he believed God. He believed that God was directing this angel to give him the message because he said that. Again, that faith walk is evident in Cornelius's life because he trusted God. He really had that kind of faith and walk with the Lord.

Here's the thing. How many times do we try and understand God instead of trusting Him by faith? Do you ever have an issue with that? I think we have a really bad habit of saying, "Well, if the Lord wants me to do that, how is He going to work all this out?" To me it's like, if you were standing at the cave when Jesus walked up where Lazarus was buried, and all Jesus had to say was "Lazarus, come out." And all of that old crud, dead, decayed material comes back together and Lazarus walks out whole. Now here's how most of us would have been..."How did He do that? I don't understand that. How can that happen?" Listen... God can do anything, any way, any place He so desires. This is the faith that we are wanting to get across here: No matter who receives Christ Jesus as Lord, we all are equal. We're all on equal footing. No one is going to really understand God more. It's that walk of faith that's important. So as we continue to develop this... and what's so neat about how God orchestrates this... He's not only working in Cornelius's life through the angel, He's now working in Peter's life through the vision. Look at verses 9 through 13: It says, *"The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray..."* (that's about noon) *"...And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: 'Rise Peter; kill and eat.'"*

Now, here we go. It's amazing because when I started studying this, that first part where Peter went up to the rooftop to pray, and he became hungry... how often does that happen? Seriously. God was using this hunger in a special way, because Peter's mind was on being hungry, so God was going to bring this vision to him of this sheet being let down with all these various animals in it, and we see Peter's reaction. When God says, "Rise, kill and eat" because Peter was this devout Jew and according to Jewish customs there were animals and there were various things that were designated "clean" and "unclean." This again ties into the lesson that God is going to be teaching Peter and the group of Jewish believers that had come to him to Cornelius's house.

2. All Barriers Broken By The Same Spirit. (vv. 34-36)

The fact is that the Gospel is for everyone, number one... and the Gospel breaks down all those barriers that you guys have grown up with. The second point is in verses 34 through 36: *"So Peter opened his mouth and said: '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. As for the Word that He had sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)..."* The second point we want to hit is all barriers are broken by the same Spirit. The same Spirit draws all men; the same Spirit breaks all those barriers down. We have to be faithful to walk through those. Listen... Jesus Christ died for all people, regardless of beliefs, backgrounds, religious affiliations, color, or creed, and He draws and convicts all men regardless of where they're coming from. Praise God for that. You know, that is so vital.

The first church I worked in was a really large church, about an 8000-member church, and we served about 450-500 people Wednesday evening meals before all the activities started. I was not in charge only of the counseling ministry there, but I was in charge of the benevolence ministry. I really did love it. It was a huge downtown church, and we saw a lot of benevolence people. We had people coming in from living on the streets and under bridges, in every which way. Most would filter through my office, and I'd put them to work and give them different food vouchers and things like that or just help them out. I think God really laid on my heart this idea that for the Wednesday evening meal, we would invite those homeless people. We would give them a Wednesday evening free food voucher to come in and start coming because I thought it would be tremendous. We filled a room twice this size full of people for dinner on Wednesday nights. If they could come in and we could help them feel a part, then we could get to know them better on an eye ball-to-eye ball situation. We could eat right with them, across the table from them, and get to know them... if they didn't know the Lord, share Christ with them; if they did know the Lord, help them grow spiritually in Christ. So I was really pumped because we had given away about 30-35 tickets to people who said they would be there. So I walked in. Man, I was pumped. I was floating in on cloud nine. I walked into the big fellowship hall, and here's all of our people eating and dining and having a good time. Over there in the corner, if you can get a vision of back in that corner, here's about 25 or 35 people. You could tell they were dirty because they were living on the street... and someone had put a partition around them... ("Ohhh"- response of congregation) "Oh" is not what I said. (Laughter) Today, to the lady who orchestrated that, I blame her for my bald head. (Laughter) I think I became so angry and so hot, I think it singed all the roots in my hair. But I tell you... I could see her back there; she was patrolling up and down those partitions like the Gestapo. So I walked up and I said, "What in the world is going on?" And she looked at me... I'm surprised I'm not in jail... She looked at me and said, "Well, Tom... you know we've got to be careful with who we let into this church." Guys... that shouldn't ever even be thought, let alone spoken or believed. (Clapping) After I got over my anger, which was this week in preparing for this... (Laughter) ...remembering that, it spoke volumes to me in studying chapter 10. I guess one of the greatest things, when grace started becoming real to me... it doesn't matter what a person wears, it doesn't matter how dirty they are, it doesn't matter how filthy they are, it doesn't matter where they live... under the bridge, in a small house, in a mansion... anywhere. Listen, if they put their faith in Christ, they are on equal footing with every believer on planet earth. (Clapping). That is the grace of God.

You know, I used to hear that sang all the time... "it's all level ground at the foot of the cross." Listen... it's more than level ground because if you can just picture in your mind the worst offender, the most vile person that you've ever even heard about on the news or anything... the worst child offender, molester, rapist, murderer, serial killer... You know, we were no more righteous than they were before we came to know Jesus Christ. Do you realize that? Scripture says, "Even their righteousness, those works of good acts without Christ were seen as filthy rags." Listen, before any of us accepted Christ, we were seen totally, totally unrighteous by God the Father. I tell you what... even if that worst offender, the most vile offender, comes to know Christ, do you know the beauty about what God says? We are all pronounced righteous, holy, and above reproach by Jesus to the Father. That's how clean God makes us through Jesus. That's why this table is so significant. When we take of the bread and the blood, we're looking at that sacrifice that put every person on equal footing in the righteousness of Christ: No one better than... no one worse than. As believers, no one is unclean because Christ Himself has cleansed us and cleaned us up and given us, imputed to Him, His righteousness. And guess what? Even the person who commits the most heinous crime, if they are a believer, they still stand righteous in front of Holy God. Some will say, "Well that's not fair." You bet it isn't and you better praise God for it. ...Because if God held one sin to your account, you could not stand righteous in front of Holy God. It's all under the blood of Christ.

3. Saved By The Same Spirit. (v. 43)

There is no partiality with God and His Gospel... None. So, when we see that with each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to see that we are on equal, righteous footing in Christ. So, man, what a powerful impact. In fact, that's the third point, in verse 43: *"To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His Name."* ...trusting and believing by faith in Jesus Christ and who He is."

Now, here's where, again, this is this personal growth record... when Peter saw this vision and God tells Him, *"Rise, Peter; kill and eat."* Look at his response in verses 14 through 17: You see this learning going on: *"But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again..."* Now here's where... can you relate to Peter? I can, in so many ways. My wife says, "Tom, when you speak this morning, slow down. You speak so fast, you mumble your words and you get jumbled." So I really slowed down in the first service. And so I go back and she was the last one to leave... she goes, "You were too slow." (Laughter) Okay... I love her with all my heart. Here's the thing... and what's said in the second service outside of the Gospel stays there, okay? (Laughter) We see Peter... too often, he speaks before he thinks. We all deal with that at times. He puts his feet in his mouth... both at one time. He says things that he regrets later on. I like this because, again, we get a glimpse of old Pete in the flesh here too. Look at verse 15: *"And the voice came to him a second time."* It goes on ... and really it came a third time, but the third time was the charm. Peter got it the third time because he says, "Man, I've never done that. I've never eaten anything common or unclean." But we see, again, where later on that God really taught him... "Listen... all believers... don't call anything unclean that I've cleaned up." That's an incredible fact here that we need to keep reminding ourselves. As we grow in grace, as we continue, we still have... like Peter did, Peter had some old information locked in his brain of what was important for worship or about the Lord or religion or whatever. Listen, we still have a lot of garbage programmed in our old heads. Right? So, as we continue to grow in the Word... and that's why it's so important that we get into this Book... that we don't leave it on the table because this is what God has given us to get to know Him... right here. It's in these pages. So as we get in and we read what happens to us is just like what happens to Peter. As we put truth into our minds or hearts, it throws out those little customs... it throws out those old human ways of doing things that we kind of default back to normally, if we're not programming our mind with the Truth. What we do then, as we get into the Word and we grow, God grows us in that grace, just like He grew Peter and He was growing Cornelius in these things... that we don't want to let biases, prejudices, and ways that we were raised possibly interfere with creating any kind of barrier between us and other believers... or nonbelievers. Listen; we're not here just to relish our Christianity and our walk with Christ. We're here to allow the Lord to live in us and live through us to affect lives because it's not really us. We're just the old vessel that God uses. It's what's in the vessel that's important; it's what's in the vessel that can change lives. The vessel doesn't change anything... it's the Creator of the vessel that changes things. God was breaking this incredible hatred down between Jews and Gentiles, and by the time they got it together, He really had broken it down.

We went to the UT game yesterday. We went to a wedding and then we went to the game... by the time I got home, I didn't know if I was going to be ready to preach or not this morning. But it kind of reminded me... you know how UT and OU kind of clash at times, as far as rooters for UT and OU. When Gentiles had to deal with it... even if they were to walk across into a Gentile country... when they left, they would kick the dust off their feet. It's kind of comical because what I envisioned was a bunch of UT people coming back from an OU game, stopping at the Texas-Oklahoma border, getting out of their trucks and kicking the dust off their feet.

But that's that division that was between these two groups, so there was an intense hatred. They wouldn't really dream of having a Gentile come into their home or go into the home of a Gentile. It was that much of a division. Again, by the time you see how God was working in Cornelius's life... then you see how Peter was believing and God was changing him... because by the time they got to Cornelius's house, they were both in for a surprise. Peter was sent for, but Peter... when he came, he brought a bunch of his Christian brothers with him to go with him. In fact, with Dwight and those on mission, that's kind of the first evangelism training period because here goes Peter with a bunch of his crew, and Peter was just told that Cornelius wanted to talk with him... but guess what? Cornelius had invited his whole family and a bunch of other Gentile believers. So here are these two groups of people. Now, when I was first studying that, without doing some research... I was thinking, "Here is a rumble ready to happen." ...But, for the grace of God, God had orchestrated this meeting for a purpose to clarify His Kingdom that had come through grace. He was orchestrating this meeting of changing minds and hearts to help other people see this barrier being broken down and to get this meeting where the Jewish believers could actually see the manifestation of the Holy Spirit come upon the Gentile believers. Because, again, in this apostolic era... this change from Law to grace... the Holy Spirit was not given to all believers at the same time. It was given sometimes with the laying on of hands, at Pentecost where it was visual, and people were given the manifestations of the gifts where they could hear their tongues being spoken and things like that. The transition time lasted a while, and this was one of those meetings where it was visually seen where the Holy Spirit was enabling and manifesting His gifts upon people which demonstrated to the Jewish believers that they were empowered by the same Holy Spirit we are... which is incredible.

Don't we all have to learn by sight too much? What's one of our favorite sayings? Hindsight is 20/20. No it's not! Don't believe that garbage! We can look back... we think it is... but look back on yesterday. Do you still fully understand why something happened? No; but God will give you a glimpse sometimes into that. It's incredible to see this meeting being orchestrated and that God's hand really was behind it.

4. Empowered By The Same Spirit. (vv. 44-46)

Now here's the last point that we'll end with. Listen: All believers are empowered by the same Spirit. Again, the vessel is not the key... it's the person owning and utilizing the vessel. Look at verses 44 through 46: *"While Peter was still saying these things..."* One of the reasons Peter was going to speak with Cornelius was to teach Cornelius a little bit deeper meaning of the Gospel... that Jesus came to earth. He walked, He performed miracles, He interacted with people, He came to die, God raised Him from the dead after three days, and He sits at the right hand of the Father. Peter gave him a first-hand Gospel encounter. Not only that, then they both got to witness this effect... But if you look at verses 44 through 46, and I'll complete that: *"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the Word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed."* You see, again, this was shocking to them. They didn't know what God had in store. I'm so glad I don't know everything God has in store for me, but it's always neat to learn. *"They were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out, even on the Gentiles."* They were standing amazed at that *"...For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'"* Boom! Peter becomes enlightened. *"They had received the Holy Spirit just as I received the Holy Spirit."* What an important lesson. If anyone puts their simple faith in Jesus Christ, through His grace, receives the Holy Spirit the moment they do it. We all have the Holy Spirit. We have all been given the Holy Spirit, number one, as Ephesians says, *"...as a guarantee of eternal life."* It is God's guarantee, His down-payment to us, implanting His Spirit within us to guarantee we're one of His kids, and we have eternal life with Him. *"I'm leaving Myself with you... I'm your*

guarantee. "Our guarantee is in a person not a feeling. Our guarantee is in what Scripture says. God cannot lie; it's not how you think or feel. That's why you've got to get into the Word. Get into the Word and know those things. Just as that barrier was broken down, again, through the Gospel... through the Holy Spirit, through them growing in grace knowing what the Gospel was about. Listen; God wants to break any barriers down in here today.

As we get ready to close out and as Shawn and his group come up... Listen... The Word of God really shows us that God's desire is that no one should perish but have everlasting life. If we could just see the actual fullness of God's heart for all of us... if we could just sense the real compassion and heart of God for the lost and dying. We see people through the flesh and what they do. God sees them through their need for Him. God sees them through His love; we can't really even comprehend it. When someone does something nasty to me, my heart isn't to love them back. But God, even when we were all filthy sinners destined for hell because we deserved it... that's when God sent Jesus to die for us. In fact, Scripture says that Jesus was crucified... when? ...Even before the foundations of the world...even knowing what mankind was going to do... even knowing everything that mankind was going to say and do and how many times He would be rejected... that's when God loved mankind enough to sacrifice His own Son. If there's anyone in here today, I pray... I have been praying and others have been praying... that God would convict you of that kind of love... that kind of grace... and that kind of life to step into. It's solely by grace that God will save you, through your simple faith that He will give to you and has given to us. Just think about it: The price has already been paid. Your sin debt... your total sin debt... my total sin debt... the sin debt of the entire world was totally paid for at the cross of Calvary... paid in full, one time for all time. It will never have to be paid for again. For those of us who have received that gift of forgiveness, we received it when we received Christ into our life. The sin debt for you, if you have never received Christ, is there, and you receive it solely through you receiving Christ, acknowledging Jesus as Lord, believing by faith.

There will be people down here in the front that will be anxious to talk with you... will be excited to talk with you if you have any thoughts, any concerns... if you want to know a little bit deeper knowledge about what it takes to become a believer... a follower of Christ. Please come down and talk. They will pray with you... any kind of prayer need you have. Please come down. The altar is here to be used by anyone who wants to use it, whether it's speaking with somebody and praying with someone or just coming down and praying, spending time with the Lord. We can do that anywhere, but I want you to know the altar is open. As we come to this, I'm going to pray. I just want the Lord to lead you. Why don't you stand with me at this time, and let's just ask the Lord to work in each of our lives, the way He so decides to do.

"Father, I do thank You for Your grace. God, I thank You for the love that You had for us that You sent Your Son Jesus to put on flesh and to become man... all God but all man. He felt like we felt, He was tempted as we were tempted, but Father, He sinned not. Father, I pray that You will work in each heart here today. I pray that You will just show each person the love You have for them, that you are a gracious God, a merciful God, a just God... and Father, this incredible gift... Jesus Christ is the gift, and through Jesus we receive all these incredible other grace gifts. We receive forgiveness of sin. We receive your imputed righteousness. We receive a new Spirit, Father... one of righteousness, one of holiness... and You came to indwell our new righteous Spirit. Father, You are within us... You are in us. God, as the music plays, as You convict hearts, as You teach us as You draw us to You... Father, I pray that people will respond according to how You have dealt with them. God, thank you for this incredible opportunity that You give us. I pray all of this in the Name of Christ. Amen."