

In our passage last time, Luke introduced us to a man named Cornelius. He was a Gentile, Roman, Centurion, who worshiped Yahweh, the God of the Jews. By all accounts he was a righteous, upright man, as well as a spiritual leader among his family and friends. He believed in God, and to the best of his ability, lived a life of faith.

His problem was that he was still lost in his sins, because he had not come to the saving knowledge of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross. But, because he sought the Lord with all of his heart, God made a way for his salvation. An angel of God came in a vision to Cornelius and told him to send for Simon Peter so that he could hear the gospel message.

There are those in the world today who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are others who have heard about the gospel, but have never been impacted by the personal testimony of a born again Christian. Some say that it is unfair of God to condemn these people assuming their innocence for not knowing better. But the two great biblical truths we saw in our previous passage is that we are all guilty and deserving of condemnation because of sin, and that when a person seeks God with all of his or her heart, God makes a way.

God spoke to Cornelius, in a vision, through an angel, and told him to send for Simon Peter. In a first step of faith, which eventually led to his salvation, Cornelius obeyed the revealed will of God. In our passage this evening we will see how God at the same time worked in Peter's life so that he would be the witness to share the good news with someone he might not otherwise have had any association. As we observe the dynamics in this passage, I pray that we might be open to how God might use us to reach those who seek God, but need the knowledge of how to be saved. Please read along with me, Acts 10:9-33.

In our passage last time we saw how God prepared Cornelius' heart to receive the gospel message, and in this passage we see how God prepared Peter's heart to deliver the message. We know that Peter was a godly man. He was in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. He became the primary leader of the early church. In verse 9 we see that he was a man of prayer as he went up on the housetop at noon to pray. This suggests that he followed the Jewish tradition of getting alone with God three times a day to pray.

This passage reminds me of the movie War Room. When Christians take serious our responsibility to pray, God works powerfully in our lives and circumstances. Fighting spiritual battles in prayer can change the circumstances surrounding whatever concerns we may have on our hearts, but it can also be a time when God shapes us, molds us, convicts us, or corrects us, so that we are better prepared to do His will.

The bible says that Peter was hungry. Often a weakened state of the body can help us to be more open, spiritually, to the will of God. This is why the discipline of fasting can be productive in our prayer lives, and our spiritual growth. In Peter's case, being physically hungry made the vision all the more powerful.

In his vision, Peter saw all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds of the air. In the Jewish tradition, these were creatures declared by God to be unclean, and forbidden to the people of Israel. These dietary laws were very practical, and necessary, for the people when they wandered in the desert for forty years, and this was a part of the law of Moses.

Avoiding anything declared to be unclean was a tradition handed down through the generations and fervently defended by the Pharisees. Peter, being a man of God, and growing up in the Jewish tradition, would not think of eating something declared to be unclean, nor would he

be comfortable eating at a Gentile table where such foods might be served. The Gentiles were considered defiled by eating these foods and thus unclean as a people, and off limits to the Jews. In Peter's mind and heart, he was in the center of God's will when he obeyed the law, and followed the traditions of his faith.

You can see how God had to work in Peter's heart in order for him to be an effective witness to Cornelius. This reminds us that we too must remain moldable in the Lord's hands. We have to be careful about traditions and dogma that might get into the way of being effective witnesses for Christ. In the 1840s, the Southern Baptist Denomination formed out of the conviction that Negro slaves did not have a soul. That does not mean that the founding fathers of our denomination did not love Jesus, but it does show an incredible lack of understanding of the gospel message. Traditions can be a good thing, but we must never allow them to supersede the word of God.

There are those who say you must use the KJV in order to be saved. Others declare you must speak in tongues. Still others hold to the dietary laws of the Old Testament, or prohibit the use of musical instruments in their praise to God. People in the churches that teach these traditions, believe in them with all of their hearts, yet their dogma is a stumbling block to those who simply need to come to Jesus in faith. We too need to be careful not to allow tradition to snuff out the light of Christ to the lost world.

Notice that the vision repeated three times. Peter rejected the vision three times, and it left him perplexed as to what it meant. When we see things repeated three times in scripture, it often symbolizes completeness, or establishes something as being firm or steadfast. This account reminds us that Peter denied Jesus three times on the night of His arrest, and Jesus restored Peter to ministry by asking three times if Peter loved Him. The three-fold vision here helped Peter to see that God had made all the food that He provides clean for consumption, and as we learn in verse 28, Peter also understood that no person is made unclean by the foods they eat.

God had to convict Peter, and challenge the convictions of his faith, in order to prepare him to share the gospel with a Gentile, Roman Centurion. Before God gave him the vision, Peter would not have defiled himself by going into a Gentile home, eating unclean foods, or fellowshiping with the man who was to become Peter's brother in Christ.

The scripture casts the same vision for the church today. There is something in human nature that gives us the tendency to push away from people who are different than us. If a person has never associated with people of another race, or they grew up in an environment of prejudice, there may be great conflict in their heart about reaching out to that group of people in the love of Christ. Sometimes people judge others as not coming from a good family, or that they live on the wrong side of the tracks. The wealthy tend to stay somewhat isolated from the less fortunate, and the poor sometimes resent those who are blessed financially. These are things that divide us, and they are the prejudices that we must overcome, if we are to become effective witnesses for Christ.

The love of Christ, and the gospel message, overcomes the circumstances of life that divides us. Is my sin any less offensive to God than the person who steals in order to feed himself, or the person who is held captive by the demons of addiction. Did Jesus sacrifice Himself only for white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who come from a good family, or did Jesus shed His blood for the sins of the whole world? Peter had to get his heart right before God in order to be an effective witness to who people were different than he was, as do we.

Notice that at the same time God was working in Peter's heart and life, He was also working in Cornelius' life and circumstances. God is the all-time, greatest, multi-taker.

Elsewhere, Paul wrote that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Cornelius loved God and was seeking Him with all his heart, but he remained lost in his sin, because he had not heard the gospel message. Meanwhile Peter loved God with all of his heart, but his prejudice would have kept him from sharing the gospel with Cornelius. Peter was in Joppa. Cornelius lived in Caesarea. The two men would have probably never met, or associated with one another, had not God been at work to accomplish His purpose.

Each man had a vision, but neither understood how everything would play out. Both men were given specific instructions, and each of them took the necessary step of faith required to fulfill God's will. Notice too, that God's timing was perfect. God in His sovereignty brought all the circumstances together so that Cornelius, his family, and his friends, might hear Peter share the gospel. At the same time, God shaped and molded Peter's heart, and sent him on a mission to share the love of Christ with an influential Gentile who in turn would lead his whole household to faith in Jesus.

Verse 24 tells us that when Peter and the others entered Caesarea, that Cornelius had already gathered his family and friends because he was expecting them. This is another demonstration of faith. He trusted the vision. He obeyed God. He sent for Peter, and he knew in his soul that Peter would come.

The bible says that when Cornelius met Peter, he fell down and worshipped him, but Peter said, "Stand up, I too am a man." This verse reminds us not to put people we see as spiritual leaders up on some pedestal. We worship Christ alone, and trust His sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Brother Carl and I are spiritual leaders in this church. We are called by God to preach His word and to offer our own lives as examples for others, but we are sinners, saved by grace, through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, same as every other believer. We are all sinners by nature and by choice. We all have to discipline ourselves against the power of the sin nature, but with the word of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the encouragement of other believers, we are able to live a victorious life through faith in the One who gave Himself up for us.

When Peter and Cornelius finally met, they began to compare notes. They shared the content of their visions with one another. They were able to see clearly what God was up to, and how He was working in their lives and circumstances to carry out His will.

As God works in our lives and circumstances, it is good for us to reflect on what he has done, and share our experiences with others. It is good for us to recognize God's hand at work, so that we can praise Him, and grow in our faith. We grow in our ability to exercise spiritual discernment, and it becomes easier for us to see what God is doing in our lives and circumstances, and to understand His will for our lives. So much of what we might otherwise think of as coincidences, can be understood as God's sovereign hand at work.

With this passage as the backdrop, if there is anyone here who has not settled in his or her heart that Jesus is Lord, let me ask you, "Are you here by accident, or do you think that God may have orchestrated your presence, so that you might hear this sermon?" I am just the messenger, doing what God told me to do, saying what God led me to say. But what if God in His love is reaching out to you, and calling you to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Since God is so good at multi-tasking, perhaps through this message He is speaking to some born again Christians about sharing the gospel with others. The message is the same for the lost person and the witness for Christ.

Jesus was God in the flesh who came to offer His physical life as a sacrifice for sin. He surrendered His life as they crucified Him on a Roman Cross. He died and was buried in a tomb for three days and three nights, but He arose from the grave, just as He said He would, in order to give victory over sin and death to all who place their faith in Him.

The bible says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Your circumstances, your sins, and your past does not matter. All that matters is right now, and what God speaks to your heart.