

Gospel Triumph: The Barrier Breaking Gospel – Acts 10:1-33

Christian history is filled with stories of missionaries who risked everything to take the gospel to unreached areas. Hudson Taylor was a British man who traveled to China in the mid 1800's as a missionary. The journey on a ship took 5 months and when he first landed, he was right in the middle of a civil war. His medical supplies were destroyed in a fire, and he was robbed of nearly everything he had.

Adoniram Judson traveled from the US to India with his wife in the early 1800's. He met resistance from British Authorities, lost multiple children, and had to relocate to Burma, which was strongly Buddhist. It took them years to learn the language, and after 12 years in Burma they had a tiny group of 18 followers of Christ.

This impulse to defy the odds and take the gospel to closed areas is built into Christianity. One author put it like this: *Mission is the necessary response to the universal Lordship of God in Jesus Christ. Mission, the act of carrying one's faith to others ignorant of that faith, was not something that pagans who lived alongside Jews and Christians in the first century Mediterranean world did.* – Dean Pinter

There are reasons that Christians have been motivated to cross barriers with the gospel and that it's been successful, and those reasons are what we want to talk about today.

In Acts 10 we have one of the defining stories in the book of Acts and a key turning point in the movement of the gospel. Up until now the church has largely grown through Jewish people coming to faith in the Messiah. Yes, we've seen outsiders like the Ethiopian Eunuch believe and be baptized, but he was most likely already a Proselyte to Judaism.

Now in Acts 10 we have a decisive movement of the Gospel across a significant barrier. But it takes quite a bit of divine guidance and initiative to get it there. So, in Acts 10:1-33 we are going to see **2 Reasons the Gospel can Reach Anyone Anywhere.**

1. **The King's Divine Reach (vv. 1-8)**

In Acts 9 we looked at two short miracle stories that took place in Lydda and Joppa. Both involved Peter and after the raising of Tabitha, Acts 9:43 says that Peter stayed in Joppa with Simon the Tanner.

Now as we turn to chapter 10 the biblical narrative takes us about 30 miles north to a city also on the coast called Caesarea. Here's a map. At Caesarea we meet a man whom Luke makes clear is a Gentile but also has some interest in Judaism and the God of the Bible. Look at verses 1-2.

Caesarea was a very Roman city and the local Roman governors lived there along with a mostly Gentile population. Cornelius is a centurion, which meant he oversaw 100 Roman soldiers, and his group was a part of the Italian Cohort, which would have been around 600 soldiers and was clearly a group of Gentiles.

We get four personal characteristics of him in verse 2. The description of "God fearing" indicates that he was interested in Judaism and the Jewish God but remained on the outside. In other words, he had not been circumcised and become a full proselyte to Judaism. But he was devoted to prayer and giving of alms to help the poor. He probably attended synagogue and was familiar with the OT Scriptures. Despite his interest in Judaism and his good works, he still would have been considered very "unclean" by the Jews. And God reaches across this ethnic and social barrier to advance his work. Look at verses 3-4.

Notice in verse 4 when the angel tells him that his prayers and alms have ascended to God as a memorial. In the OT the memorial offering was an offering of grain that reminded the Israelites who gave it that the entire harvest belonged to God. This word from the angel points to what Cornelius will become by God's work. He will be the first Gentile offering to God that indicates that all the rest will belong to God as well. Of course, Cornelius's good works do not merit his salvation. He's not yet a believer. He needs a clear explanation of the gospel for that and so God directs him to Peter. Look at verses 5-6. Cornelius obeys right away. Look at verses 7-8.

We take it for granted that Gentiles are a part of God's purposes and plans, but in the biblical story of the early church, this was a surprising barrier breaking movement by God. And we will continue to see that everything in this passage points to God's initiative and divine reach to accomplish this movement. God has this divine reach into all the world because Christ's kingdom is not bound by any

ethnic, social, geographical, or political border. And this is our next reason the gospel can reach anyone anywhere.

2. The King's Borderless Kingdom (vv. 9-33)

We'll continue to see God's sovereign guidance in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles throughout this passage. But now as Peter enters the story, we find the focus on the borderless kingdom.

Keep in mind that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have moved from the Old Covenant with Israel to the New Covenant. Christ's kingdom is a kingdom without borders and is not focused on one people group, the Jews. Instead, the message of the Gospel is meant for all human beings, regardless of ethnic or social situation. While this is true, it takes a bit for this reality to take hold in the church. Up until this point the gospel has been moving among Jews and there's a real hesitancy among Jews to understand and accept Gentiles into the people of God without them submitting to the Mosaic Law and circumcision.

This is the mindset Peter was in when Cornelius sends for him and God shows up to change his mind about Gentiles. Look at verses 9-16. Peter is staying with Simon the Tanner by the ocean. Peter went up on the roof of the house to pray around noon and he got hungry. While he was praying God sends him a vision of a giant sheet let down from heaven by its four corners. The sheet has all sorts of animals in it, both clean and unclean.

Peter is hungry and so God tells him to go ahead and get himself something to eat from the sheet. Notice Peter's reply in verse 14. This is interesting because Peter was with Jesus when this happened in Mark 7:14-19. Peter should have understood that there was no issue in him eating these animals and that the food laws as part of the Mosaic covenant were no longer required of Jews. But the issues of food laws and circumcision were identity markers for Jews and Peter has a lot of trouble letting these things go and recognizing the change brought about by Christ's kingdom. In fact, God emphasizes the importance of this vision by repeating His words 3 times. Notice verse 16.

Now, we will see that the real point of this vision isn't about food laws, but the food laws were a part of what kept Jews from interacting with Gentiles and would have kept Jews from partnering with Gentiles in the church. But Peter doesn't

initially understand the real point. Look at verses 17-18. Peter is perplexed but in God's timing he's about to start to understand quite clearly. Look at verses 19-23.

You can see at the beginning of verse 23 that Peter invites these Gentiles who have come in to be their guests. Peter has made some strides toward moving away from the Jewish food laws and rejection of Gentiles. He's staying with a tanner, a man who would have been regularly unclean because of his work with dead animals. He also invites these Gentiles in to be their guests, something many Jews would not do. But it's clear that God is directing and guiding all of this, and Peter is about to get pushed much further as it becomes clear that Christ's kingdom has no ethnic borders. Look at verses 23b-27.

Peter makes the 30-mile journey to Caesarea and finds that Cornelius has gathered a large group of people to hear from Peter. The fact that Peter enters a Gentile house indicates that change is happening. Jews risked becoming ritually unclean by entering into close fellowship with Gentiles. Remember this situation on the night Jesus was arrested? John 18:28. This is what Peter is getting at in verse 28.

It's clear that he now has put the pieces together and grasps the intent of the vision of the animals on the rooftop. You can see the change from Old Covenant to New Covenant in Peter's words here. What was once "unlawful" or unseemly and violated ceremonial laws was now not the case. Peter uses the word "but" to indicate the dramatic shift that has taken place because of Christ's fulfillment of the law and death on the cross.

In the OT the presence of God was physically in the midst of the people of Israel in the tabernacle and temple and to approach that presence required degrees of "cleanliness" which were taught through the Mosaic law. But now God's presence is in every believer in Christ, and we are the temple. Ephesians 2:11-22 explains.

Now there is one people of God, centered on Jesus Christ and brought into God's presence by the Spirit. This truth is becoming clearer to Peter and so he asks Cornelius again what he wants. Look at verse 29. And Cornelius explains to Peter and we hear the story of the vision for the third time. Verses 30-33. Why does Luke take the time to repeat it again? So it's absolutely clear that all of this is intended by God and arranged by Him. Of course, this is certainly what Cornelius believes. Look at what he says at the end of verse 33. God brought them together

and he and those with him are waiting with great anticipation for what Peter will tell them, and they are confident it will be words that come directly from God Himself.

We will examine what Peter says next week, but for now, what do we draw out of this text for our lives today?

First, entry into Christ's kingdom is not based on family background or ethnic origin. God knows no partiality. The church should be representative of the reality of Christ's kingdom. If we are honest with ourselves the history of our country has often worked against this reality. As believers we ought to make it our goal to show that the church is unified around Christ and not particular ethnic groups or family backgrounds.

Second, flowing from the first point of application, cultural differences shouldn't become the defining feature of the church. This is a bit tricky because individual churches will almost always include expressions of the culture in which they are found. The music in a church in Nepal will be different from the music of a church in Suburban Detroit. People dress differently in Peru for church than they do for church in Germany.

But there comes a point where cultural differences can be exalted to become requirements in the church and can begin to rival and eclipse the gospel. We must actively battle against this.

Third, for Peter, Jewish food laws were a matter of identity and were a major part of his life and faith. But it was vital that he recognize and live out the change brought about by the New Covenant through Christ. He needed to shift and find his identity in Christ more and more and less and less as a Jewish man. The application for us is to constantly go back to our identity in Christ because of the Gospel and seek to build our lives on Him and not any other identity marker.

Above all, this passage is about the dimensions of Christ's kingdom and the worldwide mission He still has for us. It's our privilege to be involved in it. Let's continue to pursue faithfulness to Him because of what He's done for us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 3/2/25

- Do you know any missionaries or other Christians alive today who have taken risks to get the gospel to difficult areas?
- Why is a missions impulse come naturally to Christians?
- How does the story in Acts 10 relate to what has preceded it in Acts 9?
- Was Cornelius saved before he met Peter? Why or why not?
- Is the Mosaic Law still meant to be obeyed today? Why or why not?
- What does it mean that food laws and circumcision were identity markers for Jews? What would an equivalent of this be for us today?
- What is significant about Peter entering the house of Cornelius?
- How does this passage show the differences between the Mosaic Law (Old Covenant) and the New Covenant?
- Do you think that each church should be multi-ethnic? Why or why not?
- What are some cultural differences that often become defining features of churches? What are some ways we can be faithful in our culture to reach those in our culture without letting cultural differences eclipse the gospel?

- What identity markers would you say are present in your life that can easily overtake Christ as the most important thing about you?
- Do you think that Christ calls people to Himself today through dreams and visions?
- What are some practical ways to make the mission of the gospel central without moving to an unreached people group?