

Surprised by God

Acts 10:1-11:18

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Cornelius the Roman Centurion and Peter the Jewish Apostle both have visions from God that open them to new experiences. Cornelius' men make a journey to find Peter. Then Peter and some other believers make a journey to Cornelius' house. When the two men meet, Cornelius tells his story, then Peter tells not just his story but the gospel story. The impact of this encounter is confirmed by the Holy Spirit and the community of faith (see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*).

Luke obviously sees this story as very important. He tells it in detail in chapter 10, repeats a good bit of it in chapter 11, and refers to it again in chapter 15. Let's look at some background, hear the story again, and see some of what it means for us.

We've seen the testimonies and ministries of Stephen and Philip, the conversions of Samaritans, an Ethiopian, and Saul. Now Luke returns to the Apostle Peter's ministry. He reports a mission of Peter's on the west coast of Judea. After raising a woman from the dead in Joppa, Peter remains in that town for a while, staying in the home of Simon the Tanner.

That's where Peter is when Cornelius the Centurion sends for him. Cornelius is a Roman, the captain of the Italian Regiment stationed in Caesarea. His situation may be unique—he has a house and his family is with him. Perhaps the influence of Jewish people around him has influenced him to believe in the One God rather than the many gods that Romans typically worshiped. Cornelius is what's known as a "God-fearer," a Gentile who accepted Jewish belief in God and followed some of the Jewish teachings without converting and becoming a Jew.

Cornelius demonstrates his faith by giving generously to those in need and praying to God regularly. One afternoon, he has a vision. He sees one of God's angels clearly and distinctly. The angel calls him by name. Fearfully, Cornelius asks, "What do you want, sir?"

The angel tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have come before God as a memorial. Then the angel instructs him to send some men to Joppa to bring Simon Peter to Caesarea. Cornelius immediately dispatches two of his servants and a devout soldier who served under his command.

The next day Peter is waiting for lunch to be prepared and he goes up on the flat roof of the house to pray. He's hungry and while he prays, he falls into a trance. In this trance Peter has a vision. Heaven is opened and something like a big sheet or tarp is lowered to the earth. Inside the sheet are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat. Peter replies, "Oh, no, Lord! I've never even tasted anything impure or unclean." The sheet obviously contained animals that the Jewish law prohibited eating. But the voice speaks to Peter again: "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean." For emphasis, this happens three times. Then the vision ends.

While Peter is trying to figure out what all this means, the men Cornelius sent show up and call out for Peter. The Holy Spirit tells him to go downstairs and meet these men. "Don't hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them," the Spirit says.

So Peter goes down and asks the men what they want. They tell him that Captain Cornelius has sent for him to come to his house and speak.

Now Peter invites these Gentiles into the house to be his guests. For a Jew to have Gentiles as guests was not as big a problem as for a Jew to be a guest in a gentile home. Still, this is probably a big step for Peter.

Ever since Abraham, and especially since the Exodus, the Jews were chosen and called by God. They were to be God's people, set apart for God's worship and to be God's means of blessing all people. In trying to remain distinct from the world around them, they could become exclusive and separatist. By the time of Jesus and the early church, the main things that marked the Jewish people as different were Sabbath-keeping, circumcision, and food laws (eating "kosher" foods). Most Jews wouldn't go into gentile houses in order to avoid contact with unclean foods and other gentile practices that they believed would make them unclean.

But Peter and some others from Joppa set out with Cornelius' men. The following day they arrive in Caesarea. Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends, so there's quite a gathering at his house. It's interesting that Cornelius took for granted that his vision was real and would be fulfilled. And he expected what he instructed to be done.

When Peter enters the house, Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence. This surely embarrasses Peter, who tells him to get up—"I'm only a man myself," he says. Now Peter the Galilean fisherman and Cornelius the Roman captain chat as they go on inside.

Peter speaks to the group gathered there. He reminds them that it's unlawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles and visit them. "I'm not supposed to be here." But then Peter shares the insight God gave him through the vision on the roof. "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. No race or ethnic background is better than another. That's why I came here, no questions asked. Now, why did you send for me?"

Cornelius recounts the story of his vision and the angel's instructions. Then he says, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Wow! What an invitation and what an attitude! Do you realize that we are in God's presence when we get together here? Do you expect that God will have something to say to you here? I hope you'll make that your prayer and your motto whenever you come to Sunday School or Bible study or worship. Write it down—Acts 10:33, "We're here in God's presence to listen to what God wants to say."

As Peter begins his message he says an amazing thing. Peter's experience in Samaria, the vision he had, and God's call to go to this gentile home combine to give him this insight. "God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open" (verses 34-35, *The Message*).

Peter tells them about God's message to Israel and the good news of Jesus Christ. They've heard something about it, but he goes over it again. We can't get too much gospel. Peter summarizes Jesus' ministry: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went

around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (38). The people killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross. The death of Jesus is central to what God was doing in him and it's central to our witness about him. But God raised him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is central and vital as well. Peter and others are witnesses who saw Jesus and ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. God has appointed Jesus as judge of the living and the dead. Peter supports his message by appealing to the prophets who say that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Peter hasn't even finished this sentence when the Holy Spirit comes upon all who are listening. Cornelius and his household suddenly and unexpectedly receive the Holy Spirit and start praising God in languages they haven't learned.

Peter and the believing Jews with him are surprised, stunned, amazed. The gift of the Holy Spirit is being poured out on these "outsiders" who have done nothing but invite Peter and listen to him. They are watching the proof of Peter's new insight on display right in front of them.

Peter says, "What's to keep these people from being baptized with water? They've received the Holy Spirit just as we did." So Cornelius and his family and friends are baptized in Jesus' name. Then Peter stays with them a few days, enjoying their hospitality and no doubt giving them further instruction about life in Christ.

What a tremendous story. God directs the action here. Peter and Cornelius are almost carried along in the stream of God's purpose. The church came to a turning point where insiders were willing to include outsiders. This didn't happen because of the church's own genius and ability but by a sovereign work of God through the Holy Spirit. The church wouldn't have gone this way on their own. But God led them and enabled them. Certainly Peter and others chose to obey God. God still calls the church and leads the church and enables the church to go to and to reach and receive outsiders. Will we choose to obey?

This story in Acts reminds us a bit of Jonah. Jonah was told by God to go preach to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel's greatest enemy at the time. Jonah would have been happy to deliver a message of

destruction to the Assyrians, but he knew that if they repented God wouldn't destroy them. He felt they didn't deserve a chance to repent, so he went the opposite direction from where God told him to go. He went to Joppa and got on a ship to sail away. Then, during a storm at sea, Jonah was tossed overboard by the sailors and swallowed by a huge fish. Jonah spent three days in "time out" inside the fish because he disobeyed God. Jonah acknowledged the Lord's authority and agreed to go to Nineveh. He proclaimed that the city would be destroyed because of its wickedness. But all the people of Nineveh repented and God spared them. This made Jonah angry. He still had too narrow a view of God's purpose and mercy. Instead of rejoicing at the deliverance of this great city, Jonah sulked and complained to God.

The same God who called Jonah now commissions Peter to carry the gospel from Joppa to the home of Gentile Cornelius (Robert Wall, *Acts, The New Interpreter's Bible*). Peter wasn't as stubborn and angry as Jonah. After being convinced by God through the vision, Peter goes where God sends him when God sends him. He preaches salvation and forgiveness to Gentiles, foreigners. And Peter rejoices when they put their faith in Jesus and experience deliverance and salvation. Peter follows God's lead in including these new people in the community of faith.

The point is not that Cornelius and other Gentiles are automatically "in." Gentiles still have to repent and believe in Jesus just as Jews do. But Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to become Christians. It's not that God simply accepts us as we are. God *invites* us as we are. But responding to that invitation always involves complete transformation that's acted out in repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit (N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, Part 1).

Also, notice the differences in this account of the Holy Spirit's coming from the other accounts in Acts. Usually the Spirit came upon people after a time of prayer or after their public confession of faith or after their baptism with water. Here, the Spirit simply came as they listened with receptive hearts to Peter's message about Jesus. When he spoke of forgiveness of sins for everyone who believes in Jesus, they must have believed. Faith in Jesus is the one essential for receiving God's Spirit.

We don't control or manipulate the Holy Spirit. We yield to the Spirit's control. God's Spirit comes and works in surprising, sometimes unexpected ways. I heard about one preacher who prayed, "Lord, let something happen that's not in the bulletin!"

It's good to plan and work and do what we know to do. In that process, we pray and seek God's direction. Instead of asking God to bless what we're doing, let's seek to be part of what God is already blessing. "Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, 'What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?'" (Will Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*).

Once when Jesus was describing the Holy Spirit's work, he said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going." We don't control the Holy Spirit any more than we control the wind. But if you're in a sailboat, you can make adjustments to the wind, to work with it and receive its power.

We can't make God's Spirit do anything, but we can prepare ourselves to receive the Spirit, to be filled with the Spirit, to sail with the Spirit's power. We can pray. We can go through the story of Jesus again, giving him our attention. We repent. That allows God to search our hearts. We allow God to reveal to us areas of resistance to him in our lives, things we're holding back from God. We confess our pride, our attempts to control our lives by ourselves, and whatever sins we're harboring. And we let God take them from us.

When we focus on Jesus we remind ourselves of his character, of who he is and what he does. We think about his love, goodness, faithfulness, power, lordship, death on the cross, resurrection, and eternal glory. We allow the Jesus we adore to come to us and into us. Jesus is the source of the Holy Spirit for us. Receiving the Holy Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, is not some advanced level of Christianity that leaves the cross behind. The Holy Spirit flows from the cross and leads us to the cross. The Holy Spirit enables us to follow the crucified One and bear the marks of the cross in our lives. As we focus on Jesus, the Holy Spirit who brings glory to Jesus (John 16:14) will come into our lives in his own way. God will take us to

people and places we wouldn't go on our own. God will do surprising and amazing things among us and through us.