

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 22nd November 2009 - 11:00am
Acts 10:1-23 – ‘Peter’s Preparation to Preach to Gentiles’

Introduction

One thing I have picked up on as we have made our way through the Acts of the Apostles, is how God not only prepares the heart of the unbeliever to hear the Gospel for the first time, but how he often has to prepare the heart of the preacher too, before he actually presents the Gospel. Sometimes as much work needs to go on in the preacher’s heart, as it does in the hearer’s heart.

Take Philip for example – God was working on him in Samaria – as he saw many of the once ‘outcast’ Samaritans coming to faith in Christ, before he told Philip to go south, to the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Then once he had him there he prompted him to go and run alongside the chariot of the Ethiopian Eunuch, who would have been another ‘outcast’ from the Jewish religion. But as he did so, he heard him reading from the prophet Isaiah, which led Philip to ask him, *‘Do you understand what you are reading?’* The Ethiopian replied, *‘How can I unless someone explains it to me!’* And from that open opportunity Philip was able to go on to explain the Good News about Jesus Christ to this high official from Africa, and see him won for Christ.

Take Ananias as another example – God had to convince him to go to the house of Simon on Straight Street in Damascus to meet with a man from Tarsus called Saul, just as much as he had to work on Saul himself on the Damascus Road to get him to go. At first Ananias protested *‘Surely not, Lord! Have you got this right? – This man is intent on killing as many Christians as he can find, and yet you want me, as a Christian, to go and witness to him!’* He had no idea that God was about to totally transform Saul of Tarsus that day, and God was going to use him, Ananias, an ordinary believer, to do it!

That brings us now to Peter in Acts ch.10. God was about to use him to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles in a remarkable way in the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. But before God could get Peter to even set foot inside Cornelius’ home, he was going to have to do some preparation work in Peter’s heart first. He was going to have to change some attitudes in this preacher!

We already touched a little on this at the end of Acts ch.9 when I pointed out to you that Peter stayed in the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa. That was something that no self-respecting Jew would ever have done. Tanners were regarded as unclean, because they worked with the hides of animals, so they would have been touching the carcasses of dead animals all the time. So apparently Peter was already in the process of ‘loosening up a bit’ as far as ‘Jewish scruples’ were concerned. But he had a long way to go in ch.10...

Acts ch.10 begins by introducing us to:

1. A Sincere Seeker who was heard by God (vs.1-8)

This sincere seeker after God was a man called Cornelius (v.1) He lived in Caesarea, which was a Roman fortified City on the coast, about 30 miles north of Joppa. This is where Philip had gone after he had completed his preaching tour after he had seen the Ethiopian Eunuch converted (Acts 8:40). Cornelius was a Centurion in the Italian Regiment, which was stationed there. So he was a Roman soldier with authority over 100 other men. He was therefore obviously a Gentile, quite possibly coming from Italy itself.

And yet, he and his family were devout people and certainly God-fearing! (v.2) He was as near to the Jewish faith as he could possibly get, without becoming a proselyte – a convert to Judaism. Such people were known as ‘God-fearers’. He gave generously to the needy, and he prayed regularly to God.

So if getting right with God depended on doing charitable works, and just saying a few prayers to God, then he would have been in there. But of course that’s not how anybody gets right with God, no matter how devout they are. The question is what have we done with Christ? What relationship do we have with God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? He is the only way to God.

It is possible to be devout and God-fearing, and yet not be saved at all. (cf Lydia in Acts 16:14f). Notice in Acts 11:14 that God clearly told Cornelius in advance that it would be through the message that Peter would preach to him that he and his family would be saved. It wasn’t through any of his good works, or even his faithfulness in prayer. It would be through the Gospel.

Nevertheless, Cornelius was sincerely seeking after God. He had never yet heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but his prayers had been heard by God, and his gifts to the poor had not gone un-noticed by God either (Acts 10:4). Turn to Jeremiah ch.29:12-14 for a moment - God does respond to seekers. It is true that our sin separates us from God, and yet we read here that those who earnestly seek God, God will be found by them. But we have to say only if they trust in Christ! There just simply is no salvation outside of Christ.

Illustrate: John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was an extremely religious member of the Church of England. In fact he was a minister, and the son of a minister. He was an Anglican of the Anglicans. He had even formed a religious club while he was a student in Oxford ‘for the perfecting of the Christian Life’. He even served as a foreign missionary, going to the Indians in the American colonies at that time. But it was on his way home on a ship, as he listened to Moravian missionaries preaching the Gospel on deck, that he

came to realise that he had no personal assurance of salvation. He had no personal relationship with God. He was extremely religious, he was very devout indeed in his faith, he was a sincere seeker after God, but he just was not saved! It was when he got back to London, and was attending a meeting in Aldersgate Street on May 24th 1738, that he again heard a Moravian preacher commence a Bible Study on the Book of Romans. It was only the beginning of the series and the preacher chose to read from the introduction to Martin Luther's commentary on Romans. And as Wesley heard those words from Romans 1:17 *'The Just shall live by Faith'* - the penny dropped, the light came on in his soul, and he *'felt his heart strangely warmed within him'* as he came to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He went on to preach the Gospel to thousands of people throughout the remainder of his life, and was used greatly by God to bring revival throughout Britain and Ireland, and further afield too.

John Wesley was a bit like Cornelius, the Gentile Centurion, up until that point. Devout, God-fearing, seeking hard after God, but just not saved. Perhaps that's like you this morning? Well, I hope you will take comfort from Cornelius, if you can identify with him. But I also hope that you will realise that you need to take that extra step – that step of faith – to put your trust, not in your own good works or your own sincerity in religion to get right with God – but to put your trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross on your behalf. That's what will save you - not your own good works or religious endeavours.

Come back to Acts 10:3 for a moment to see how God was working in Cornelius' life at this time: We're told that one day at 3:00pm Cornelius received a vision from the Lord. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and called him by name: *'Cornelius!'* Cornelius stared at him in fear, but was still able to say, *'What is it, Lord?'* The angel went on to tell him that his prayers and his gifts to the poor had come up as a memorial offering before God. So God knew all about him. Then the angel told him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man called Simon who is called Peter. He told him where to find him: *'He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.'* (v.6) N.B. If God has a job for you to do, he knows where to find you. He might have a bit of work to do on you first, but he knows where to find you. He told Cornelius exactly where his servant Peter was. He was still in Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa, where we left him last time.

So immediately Cornelius called in two of his servants and another devout soldier (one of his attendants). He told them all what had just happened to him, and then he sent them off to Joppa to get Peter and bring him back.

Cornelius was a sincere seeker who was heard by God, but secondly, notice..

2. A Prejudiced Preacher who was changed by God (vs.9-23)

It's important at this point just to say that God can save whoever he wants to save without any human agent being involved at all, and He often does. Many stories have come out of Asia in particular in recent years where people from a Muslim or Hindu background have had a vision of Jesus speaking to them. They then go looking for a Christian to tell them more about Jesus, or to buy a Bible, and they eventually come to faith. So this kind of thing can and does still happen today, especially where the Word of God is not widely available, and where Christian witness is very scarce on the ground.

But normally God chooses people who are already believers, who are already saved, to lead others to the Lord for salvation. In other words...

He uses disciples to make disciples.

In this case God had chosen Peter to be his instrument. That's interesting, because he could have chosen Philip, who was already living in Caesarea, but he doesn't, he chooses Peter, because this is going to be another important step forward for the Gospel:

Remember God used Peter back in **Acts ch.2** to open the keys of the kingdom to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, and 3000 got saved, as Peter preached that day, and the Holy Spirit fell on all who believed.

Remember Peter was present again in **Acts ch.8** as the Samaritans responded to the Gospel in great numbers. It was Peter who prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit on that occasion.

Yet again, God was going to use Peter to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles - Cornelius and his friends and family in **Acts ch.10**. Before he would finish preaching his sermon, the Holy Spirit would fall upon that gathering and many Gentiles would be ushered into the Kingdom too!

Many commentators, including John Stott, see this as a fulfilment of Matthew 16:19 where Jesus said to Peter:

'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

And that was all in the context of Jesus saying,

'I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' (v.18)

Peter was present at each of the key stages throughout the Book of Acts when a new group of people was being brought into the Kingdom and into the

Church of Jesus Christ. He witnessed the Holy Spirit being outpoured on each of these key occasions.

But before we get to all of that, we find that the Lord has a major problem with Peter. Because as a Jew, Peter did not associate with Gentiles, he wouldn't even enter their home. So had God chosen the wrong man for the job this time? A preacher with a prejudice against Gentiles!

No, of course not - God hadn't made any mistake!
You see, God wants to change the preacher's heart, just as much as he wants to use that preacher to change others. The amazing thing is that God uses imperfect servants to reach imperfect sinners. God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line! That way, all the glory goes to God, not to man.

God uses another afternoon vision to get Peter's attention...

In v.9 we read that the 2 servants and the devout soldier that Cornelius had sent, were approaching Joppa where Peter was staying. Peter has no idea they are coming, but around mid-day he goes up onto the roof of Simon's house to pray. Of course noon is the hottest time of the day, when most people would be coming in out of the hot Mediterranean sun, so it's not surprising that Peter becomes a bit faint and hungry and needs something to eat. But while his meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance.

In this trance-like state, he sees heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. And as he looks he sees that it is filled with all kinds of four-legged animals, as well as birds and reptiles! And if that wasn't enough to take in, he then hears the words:

'Get up Peter, kill and eat!' (v.13)

Peter's reply is a bit like what Ananias would have said when he was asked to go to that house in Damascus where Saul of Tarsus was waiting:

'Surely not, Lord!' (v.14)

'Are you sure you've got this right, Lord?' You see, the Lord was stretching Peter outside of his comfort zone, in just the same way as he had stretched Ananias to go to witness to an enemy of the Gospel. Their reactions were very similar. But what was Peter's problem? Well he tells the Lord in v.14:

'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'

And yet you're telling me to get up and kill and eat: birds of the air, reptiles (!) and even cloven hoofed animals. Now this wasn't just some kind of *'bush-tucker trial'* for has-been celebrities, these things were 'unclean' according to the Old Testament food laws in Leviticus 11:4-8 for example.

How could God be asking Peter to go against his conscience as a Jew?
But the voice from heaven comes back again saying:

'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' (v.15)

N.B. in v.16, all of this happened three times before the sheet was taken back to heaven. (In the presence of 2 or 3 witnesses all things shall be established)

Here God is using Peter's scruples about the OT food prohibitions to change his perspective on things. The reason why God gave those food laws in the Old Testament was to protect his people from all kinds of sicknesses and diseases that they could pick up from various kinds of animals. To this day a Jew will not eat anything that comes from a pig – no pork, ham or bacon, etc.

When I was flying to Madagascar with Air France this time last year, there was a little note in with my meal to say that my meal did not contain any pork products from Madagascar, because to this day there are parasites in the pig population on the island of Madagascar that our Western stomachs could not cope with. You see God had given these laws for health reasons primarily. But the fact that Jewish people would not eat meat from certain animals had set them apart from the other nations of the world. In fact to the Jew, simply because the other nations of the world *did* eat these things, they regarded *all Gentiles* as unclean. It wasn't just the food that was unclean, the people were unclean too because of what they ate, as far as the Jews were concerned. That's why they kept their distance from the Gentiles, and that's why they refused to enter their homes.

So **what** was clean and **what** was unclean as far as food was concerned, was very closely related to **who** was clean and **who** was unclean as far as the peoples of the world were concerned?

But here God was setting aside the OT Food Laws, now that Christ had died and we were now in the NT era. These OT Food Laws, which were part of the OT ceremonial Law, just didn't apply anymore, just as the whole ceremonial Temple ritual doesn't apply anymore either. And yet to this day there are still some groups who teach that their people should keep the OT Food Laws – e.g. Seventh Day Adventists, among others.

But just to drive the point home to Peter, in v.17, it's at that very moment, as his vision comes to an end, and he's still trying to puzzle it all out, that the 3 men who had been sent by Cornelius finally find out where Simon the Tanner's house is, stop outside the gate, and call out, *'Is Simon Peter there?'*

(v.19) Peter is still trying to figure it all out in his head, when the Holy Spirit says to him, ***'Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'***

(v.21) So Peter goes downstairs and he's able to say to the men straightaway ***'I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?'***

So because of the vision, he knew he was the one, even though he didn't know what they were going to ask him to do. God had prepared his man!

The men replied in v.22,

'We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.'

And what does Peter do in v.23?

'Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.'

Peter has got the message of v.15:

'Don't call anything impure that God has made clean.'

Before the vision, there is no way that Peter would have let these Gentile men into his house. There is no way he would have sat down to a meal with them as his guests. He would have left them standing at the door! But now he welcomes them in without any questions!

The next day he would be going to enter a Gentile house *for the first time in his life*. He would enter Cornelius' house, and there he would preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, and there he would see many of them getting saved and coming into Christ's kingdom for the very first time!

Conclusion

God had changed this preacher's heart. God had broken down his hostility towards the Gentile peoples of this world. Now God was ready to use him to see many of them won for Christ.

In a sense the application of this passage is so obvious I hardly need to say it. But just in case you've missed it:

Is there any home you wouldn't want to stand in to share the Gospel?
Is there any place you would feel uncomfortable going to share the Gospel in?
Is there any people-group you would struggle with going to share the Gospel to? Perhaps because of the colour of their skin, or some practice that they have that would offend you? Maybe it would be too outside your comfort zone.

This passage cuts right to the heart of all our prejudices:

Whether that be the old Catholic-Protestant prejudice we have all grown up with, or whether that be the Republican-Loyalist prejudice we all grew up with, or whether it's some deep-seated, racist attitude that we try to keep hidden deep within us. What is it that the Lord would need to change in your heart, so that you would be ready to go to take the Gospel to anybody in this world? –

'Don't call anything (or anyone) impure that God has made clean!' (v.15)