

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 10:23 as we plug along on Wednesday nights through the history of the early church.

We have about thirty years of history that God gives us in the book of Acts written by Luke, and it is designed, I think, for a couple of purposes. Number one - you get to learn what the church should be like, and when you get too far away from God's ideal, the church starts to suffer. But also God shows us very clearly what kind of people He used, and you'll find that, in the book of Acts, there are tremendous amounts of focus upon individuals and those that the Lord used - some of them with really big names, we know them very well; others almost no-names, and yet God used them greatly.

Well, back in chapter 9:31 we had turned to Peter, and really these last chapters are Peter's final farewell, if you will. We will certainly (in the middle of chapter 12) say goodbye to Peter for good. We really won't see him anymore, except he will show up at a meeting in Jerusalem in Acts 15. But for now the Lord has used Peter to teach us about how God prepares us for ministry. Back in chapter 9:31 Peter had left Jerusalem where the apostles were still staying, though the church had been scattered because of Stephen's death, and Peter went down the coast to see how the church was doing. He went to a place called Lydda; he then went a little further to Joppa along the coast. He was a witness to the remarkable work that God was doing in the church. He was able to pray for a fellow named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for some eight years and bedridden. He was called to Joppa because there was a woman there, Tabitha - very sick; they didn't expect her to make it, and Peter didn't make it there in time. And by the time he got there, she had died, and Peter, though he had hastened to be there, was too late. He prayed and said, "Lord, what would You have me to do?" and the Lord had him pray for this lady, and God raised her up. And the power of God's Spirit was certainly upon Peter's life. He eventually ended up and stayed in Joppa for quite some time at the house of a fellow named Simon, who was a tanner (which was, as we mentioned to you, quite a step for Peter). In fact, these last few chapters about Peter's life have a lot to do about growing up in the Lord and being broken free of your prejudice. Because Peter, like most folks, grew up with some prejudice; some of it, and most of it, for him was religious. But it took a long time for the church to be

comfortable with God's plan of salvation for all men. And so to see Peter at a house where there're a lot of dead animals - which is very un-Jewish, if you will - Peter had been set free, at least in part, from all of those things. Peter had been the fellow that God chose to preach the first sermon to the Jews. He had been called from Jerusalem to go to Samaria, where salvation was happening through Philip's ministry. They were kind of half-Jewish, half-nothing - a lot of mixture of things over the years. He would now, tonight, be sent to the Gentiles to preach there. But it took a lot of doing in Peter's life to get him ready for the work God had for him, and I think that's true for us, too. You can't just jump right into ministry. You should be ministering wherever you are. But God prepares you often for the things He has laid out for you.

So last week, as we went through the first part of chapter 10 and then beyond, we looked at God's work in saving Peter from the mindsets that he grew up with and moving, really, the prejudices of his past. And that was true for Peter, the Jew - saved. It is also, and was, true for Cornelius, a Gentile who had been living a life far removed from the Jews. And God orchestrated this meeting between a Gentile centurion and this apostle that He had chosen. In preparation for the big day of getting the gospel to the Gentiles - and understand that the church might have been fifteen or twenty years down the road by now - God began to work on both sides. It required lots of revelation, lots of movement of God's Spirit. It took a lot of work, if you will - first in the heart of Cornelius. He was a God fearer, the Bible says, which means he believed in the God of the Jews. In other words, he believed in one God. But he had no relationship with God. It was a religious position of sincerity without really a relationship with God. He was a God fearer, which means he could go to the Temple, but he didn't join, if you will, the Jews. He prayed every day with his family. He was described (last week) as being a very godly man in terms of his commitment. And he lived forty miles away from Joppa in a place called Caesarea, which happened to be the headquarters for the Roman government. It's where all the big shots lived. It was beautiful. It's a beach city, it's a port city. And one day, as he is praying, the Lord gives him a vision; tells him that his prayers have been heard on high and that he should send for a fellow named Peter; that he would come to him there from Joppa, and he was staying with a fellow named Simon - he was a tanner - by the sea; and, "Tell him to come here and talk to you, and he'll tell you what God wants for you."

So we assume, as we read on, that what Cornelius was praying for was a relationship with God. "How do I get to know You? What can I do to draw closer

to You?" That was his concern. Cornelius, after the vision he was given, sent two of his good friends that he trusted in, along with one soldier, those forty miles; took about two days, if you will, of walking to Simon's house. And he explained to them the extraordinary circumstances that caused him to send them. I don't know if he explained the whole thing to him, but he obeyed the vision from the Lord, and he went and sent for Peter. "He'll tell you what you must do." Cornelius is a lot like Nicodemus - he seeks salvation, he cries out in prayer, he seeks the Lord, and God meets him. And that's always the case. If you're seeking the Lord, God won't hide Himself from you. He's the revealing God. Right? He wants you to know Him.

A day and a half later, Peter is in Joppa up on the roof, having his noon prayers (as a Jew), waiting for lunch. He's starving, he wants to eat, but the food isn't ready. And, as he is up there, the Lord gives him a vision. As he is praying, a sheet (or a sail) comes down from heaven. It is tied in all four of the corners up to heaven. On this sail are all kinds of unclean animals. And then a voice from heaven, "Arise, kill and eat." And Peter, being the Jew that he is as far as following the law, it offended him. He said, "Lord, no way! I've never eaten one of those, and I'm not about to start now." And, again, the voice came. And, again, "Not so, Lord!" And the third time it happened as well, and then the sail was taken up from Peter's vision. And about that time, as Peter was sitting there wondering about what it meant, these two men and the soldier from Cornelius' house (that left the day before) had asked for direction in town and had finally arrived at the gate of Simon and were knocking at the door when the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "There're three guys at the door. I want you to go with them. And don't ask any questions. And don't put up a fuss. Arise with them, and go with them, and don't doubt anything." And so Peter went down, and he met these three men who had come from forty miles away, sent by a vision to a Gentile centurion. They explained to him what was going on, why they were there. There was this exchange on the porch. Peter invited the men to spend the night there, and they headed out in the morning. But it gave Peter some time to think about what he was going to do. This was way out of his comfort zone. This was offensive to everything that he understood, and yet somehow this was going to be God's will. He had moved Peter along quite a ways, and this was going to be, like I said, one of the biggest steps of all - that he would learn that God loved all men and that Jesus had come to save all men.

So we left off in verse 23 last week, where we read, "Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from

Joppa accompanied him." Now we're going to try to get to the end of the chapter tonight just to kind of have the flow of the story for us. But we start off with Peter and the boys in Joppa, headed forty miles away (another two-day trip) to watch God save Gentiles by the simple preaching of the Word. But the big lesson for us from Peter's life is that God has a way of taking the walls of prejudice down in your life. The fact that God wanted to save everyone, I think, is clear in a lot of places in the Scriptures. But that you could bring someone that had those kinds of hang-ups to that place where he could embrace God's will - that's a miracle of God that changes the heart.

So the Lord had begun a work in Peter's heart. He saw the salvation of the Samaritans, for example. He understood God's grace. He could live at a tanner's house. But now this step, and it's a big one. Right? I think there is much to learn in watching God take Peter along this road slowly but consistently because that's how He works with you and me. You aren't the person you started off being in the Lord. You give the Lord your life, He's going to make some changes. He's going to change the scene. He's going to change the heart and the outlook. And you watch Peter from the time that the church was born as Jesus ascends into heaven, if you will, to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Samaria, to the softening heart that allowed him to hang around with dead carcasses, and the walls are falling down. This was a journey of years for Peter. I know you read the book of Acts, and you're at chapter 10, and you go, "I read ten chapters today." But this took years! It's important that you don't lose sight of that, any more than we talked about Paul's preparation taking all of those years and not really being able to see them. So, this was a journey. In fact, like I said, Peter's going to disappear in a little while, but he's going to show up in the book of Galatians again, having still some problems with the Gentiles and the Jews. And you remember that story - where he was eating with Gentiles. They were having bacon, maybe, and Peter was fine with that. He was free. Until some of the people from James' church (and James was the Jerusalem pastor) were real uptight, and they didn't let go of things very quickly; it was a real struggle in the heart of Israel, if you will. And when Peter saw these guys comin', he got up from the table, and he went to sit with the Jews. And he started eatin' matzo or whatever they were gettin', some falafels. But he wasn't willing to live the freedom in the eyes of those who would come to criticize. This was years later. So, it takes a long time, I think, for God to deliver us. I bring that up only because I think we would be wise to be patient with one another while God is softening the edges. Right? We want perfection in everyone around us except ourselves, and we're patient with ourselves, we're always making excuse.

But God is working, and so the light of His daily presence drives out the darkness. And that's certainly what's happening to Peter. I don't know what they talked about for the two days they walked. Twenty miles a day. Imagine. That's a long walk with people. But I think he knew where he was headed. I think the guys at least told him enough to know that this wasn't going to be easy. In fact, we will be told in a little while (in chapter 11) that he took six guys with him in the hopes that they could clear his name when he was brought up on charges for witnessing to Gentiles because he knew this was going to be a big blow to the church as well. So I think if you let God have his work in you, you'll be ready for the greater work - whatever that work God intends.

So we read in verse 23 here that they just head out. Like I said, six guys with him. Chapter 11:12 mentions these six brethren from the church in Joppa. They walk, and they discuss, maybe, what they are headed for. Religious prejudice in the early church was extremely strong. You don't find the Jewish converts in the early book of Acts reaching out to Gentiles at all. It just wasn't on the page for them. Right? Then, later on in Acts 15, you're going to find that the Jerusalem (and leadership of the early church) is actually going to get together once this has been established and say, "All right. We realize that God wants to save Gentiles, but we're pretty sure if He saves them, they're first going to have to become Jews like us." So there was still that - grace wasn't fully grace yet. It took a long time to develop, and it sometimes takes a long time, I think, in our lives to let go of all that stuff. If you grew up in a denominational family or you grew up in a prejudiced family, whether it's race or income or intelligence or whatever it is, it can take a long time to let go. My dad, when he got saved, was such a strong Catholic that he struggled with the freedoms that come with knowing the Lord. And it wasn't that he didn't love the Lord. He just couldn't let it go because it was driven so deep. It took a while. He eventually got free and crazy like the rest of us, (Laughing) but it takes a little while to see that work. And I think that's what all of Peter's presentation to us in these chapters, more than anything, cries to us - let the Lord work in you so that you can become the man or the woman that God desires you to be.

Well, we're just told, "And the following day," verse 24 (so they've been walking two days now) "they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends." Forty-mile walk, two days, they finally get into town, and they come to Cornelius' house, which is now brimming with Gentiles. He doesn't know if they're going to find a guy named Peter. He

doesn't know if they'll ever come back. But he called everybody and went, "Hey, you gotta come over just in case." And the whole house of Cornelius is filled with those wanting to hear from a man that God has summoned named Peter. Caesarea (and we go there on our trips to Israel) is an offensive city - or it was to the Jews during the Roman occupation. Herod the Great built this town in about twelve years. He built it along the coast. There is a palace, there's an entertainment center, there's a horse track or a race track for chariots, if you will, you'll get to see if you go there even to this day. He named it in honor of Augustus Caesar. It was quite a metropolitan, Gentile, sinful city in comparison to the little Galilean town that Peter grew up in. In the four days that his friends had been gone, Cornelius (it looks like) had been really busy. This is, in your Bible, the first Gentile home Bible study. I think the invitation he sent out said, "God's booked a special guest speaker for tomorrow night," and he would hope that he would show up. By faith, he had reached out to his good friends, to his family, and he was waiting to hear what God had to say. I'm particularly biased towards home studies. I was saved in a home Bible study in Bellflower in the early 70's. I owe my spiritual well-being to being involved in them all of those years. I learned to teach in a home study. I was horrible. Don't say, "You're still horrible." You just love me. (Laughing) But I chased ninety people out of a home study and got it down to less than five people - in a month. Thank you very much. I was horrible. I have a cassette somewhere - you'll never hear it - of the study I did. (Laughing) It was that bad. But I learned about teaching and ministry, and I just love the setup of how home studies work. Morningstar began in a home study here in Whittier. We have in our church lots of small groups which function in the same way. On Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights we come together, and it's kind of a one-way communication in terms of teaching. But small groups tend to let you speak and ask questions, interject, share your thoughts or what you're learning. There's great accountability. You make good friends. But the home study was the birthplace of Gentiles being saved. They got saved - it started in a house in Caesarea. And we love having them and are so thankful for the small groups and, like I said, we have a lot of them that meet during the week.

Verse 25 says this, "As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man.' " A couple of things that impress me. Number one - Cornelius is a soldier, tough guy, and yet, in his heart before the Lord and wanting to know how to best get to the Lord (and God sending this man), he absolutely is humble before Peter; and he humbles himself. Here was the one that the angel of the Lord told

him four days earlier would come, and he was right where the angel said, and he came along, and I don't doubt that he'd been praying every day that that vision was the Lord's. So he falls down at Peter's feet because he doesn't know any better. He doesn't get it. He just knows God's doing something. It reminds me a lot of John (in the book of Revelation) twice hit the deck in front of an angel. Right? And twice was told, "Get up, clown. What're you doin'?" It's right in there, in the Greek. "Get up, clown." I'm pretty sure it's right there. But he was overwhelmed with what he saw. So John, like Peter, refuses worship, and I think there's a good lesson in that. There's something about being the servant of God that has danger. When you're criticized in ministry, that's not dangerous; that's just humbling. But when you're applauded in ministry, that's very dangerous. And Peter hadn't done anything, nor was he going to be able to save this man or anything. He was just going to be there to deliver a message from Almighty God. And so there's a lesson to be learned. One prevalent thing that you find in church so often is that people put other people up on pedestals - whether it's a worship leader or a musician or some pastor that you have as a favorite- and they give awe to someone that doesn't deserve it, and they place them in a position that their life doesn't warrant. People say nice things. We can all use encouragement, but the danger is found when you begin to believe them about yourself.

Well here's Peter getting, really, applause. I mean, this guy's at his feet like he's a celebrity. He could have gone, "Oh, thank you very much. Kiss my ring, and get up, and then we'll go on from there." Be careful when the glory of God heads in your direction that you don't return it to the Lord. One of my favorite ministry verses is in Leviticus 10:3, and it is a word that the LORD spoke through Moses to Aaron after his boys had been killed by the LORD for strange fire. But here's what Moses said to the dad. He said, "Look, this is what the LORD wants you to know: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy;' " (in other words, when you represent the LORD, He gets the credit) " 'and before all the people I must be glorified.' " So, "I have to be regarded as holy, and then I have to be glorified." Those are the two things He demands. God is holy, and He gets the glory. So I love seeing Peter. Peter was ready. This isn't the old Peter. This is the new Peter, isn't it? We love to honor instruments rather than the Lord. If you've ever been to Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, there are millions of people each year that come to kiss the feet of the statue of Peter. In fact, it has gotten so bad that they had to replace a foot a couple of years ago; it broke off through use. "Toe-maine" poisoning, I'm pretty sure. (Laughing) That's what it was. But it's a sad picture of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). So it's vital to

know that beyond the instrument is the Lord who deserves all of our praise, and it would be wise for you to always remember that when God begins to use you. God can use a donkey, remember? He spoke through a donkey. So don't brag too much. But Peter knew where his strength lie. He quickly gets Cornelius up. He's not sure what to do. This is an awkward place for Peter to be - right where God wanted him, but yet this is really uncomfortable.

We are told in verse 27, "And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together." It seems like maybe they talked for a minute outside. Maybe he explained to him how the angel had come and what the angel had said or whatever. But it must have been quite a shock to have Peter walk in and realize that the whole room was filled. And I suspect that whatever vision that he remembered of that vision just a few days ago, "Rise up, kill and eat," and he said, "Not so, Lord!" and the Lord said, "Don't you ever call what I've called clean, unclean," I think it finally registered to him.

So here's what he says, verse 28. "He said to them, 'You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.' " Now the word "unlawful" here is the Greek word for taboo. And I mention that to you because it was not "unlawful" according to the Word of God for him to talk to Gentiles or be around them. God never said that to them. But they interpreted the call of God to separate from other nations as a declaration from God that they were better - like you're more important, you're holier, you're better, you're more loved - and so that separation was their doing, not the LORD's. The LORD intended to be a witness through them to the whole world, but they quickly took their favored status, if you will, and kind of separated themselves from everyone rather than reaching out to them. In reality, when the LORD said, "Separate yourself," it was a call in the Bible to be pure, to stay away from false gods, to be loyal to the LORD; but not to exalt yourself, if you will, above others. So God was changing Peter, and he was growing; but, man, this hurt. And despite the long-standing tradition of generations of people, Peter says to them (even before he begins to speak), "God has shown me that's not my right attitude. That's the wrong outlook. God has taught me better. He's changed my heart." God is not the author of division between the Jew and the Gentile, and Peter stood confident that God had brought him here, and he quotes the Lord from forty-eight hours before. "I can't call them unclean or common. They are God's people. And if I have a dispute with God, guess what? He won't change; I'm going to have to."

And so verse 29, " 'Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?' " Interesting question, right? "I've come here without a question because the Lord told me to do that. Now what do you want? Why am I here? Why am I standing in your midst? God told me to come. I've obeyed Him, but I don't know what we're doing here."

Verse 30, "So Cornelius said, 'Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you." So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.' " The Holy Spirit repeats much of the story because I think it's so important. It's one of those crux issues - the breakdown of the wall between the Gentile and the Jew. Paul, when he wrote his Ephesian chapter 2 letter, he said in chapter 2:14, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation." That's a hard lesson for Peter to learn and sometimes for us to learn as well. But Peter got it now, he gets it. His response to what he'd heard, knowing how serious it was, he just sent for Peter. "I immediately sent for you. You've done well to come." It's kind of like he said, "I'm glad you listened to the Lord. So here we are, and these are my friends, and this is my family. This is my neighbor. This is my neighborhood. And we're all ears. What does God want to say to us, Peter?" Oh, man! Now Peter realized God was doing something.

But put yourself in Peter's shoes for a minute. This is great place to preach, isn't it? A room full of hungry hearts - not critical, not waiting to get out of there. They'd been waiting for hours! They're not even sure you're going to show up. They're not sure there'll be a service this night. But they came hungry to hear from God, and they expected to hear from Him. I remember reading Spurgeon in his "Lectures to My Students". One of the students said to him, "What makes a great preacher?" and Spurgeon said, "A great congregation." And I think that's right. I mean, you're at your best when everybody likes what they're hearing, when they're really interested. The hard thing is when people fall asleep right in the middle. "You're a joy to preach to." That's what he says. All right. So, with very little planning, no notes, no prepared statements, Peter is now placed before a room full of Gentiles - eeeewww (because that's how he felt) - to hear what God was

going to say. I wonder how Peter felt. You know, you put yourself in his shoes for a minute, and you go, "Gosh, I don't know."

Verse 34, "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.' " Thatta boy, Peter. Right? He starts with a personal, kind of solemn, statement about something God had been teaching him for months if not years. "This is gettin' through to me very slowly. God does not play favorites. God does not discriminate based on appearance or by race or by color or by nationality or by class. If God had spoken to Cornelius, and obviously He had, why shouldn't I speak to them? He spoke to them, and He spoke to me about them." And Peter gets to look out over this room of hungry Gentile faces, and he was able to say to himself (and he's the first guy in the church, really), "God loves these Gentiles. He's at work here." And Peter began to realize that God loved them all the same. It was kind of like graduation day. He's a long way from where he started (a real snob before he got saved). He realized, long before others in Jerusalem, that the criteria for being acceptable with God was not race but reverence, was not class but obedience. And Peter, in his mind now, has to formulate a message to them. "What would God say?" Put yourself in his shoes. What would you say? You didn't plan for this. You showed up, but you didn't know what you were going to be asked. "Hi. Here's the pulpit. Preach to us. Tell us what God wants." "Yeah."

You will read in the verses here, in just a minute, Peter gives to the people a very broad, if you will, overview - like a broad stroke of the death and resurrection of Christ. That's it. And faith. It's the most simplistic message that you could read in the Scriptures. And Peter had been there himself, he was able to speak from a firsthand experience, and he couldn't have made it any simpler. For example, if you get to verse 36 here, he says this, " 'The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ - He is Lord of all - that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached.' " So, he places the entire Old Testament record in one verse. "God preached peace through His Son Jesus to all men. Not just to us Jews. God's intention was to give life to all men." The world is at war with God due to their sinfulness, and there's turmoil, there's no rest for the wicked, but the Word of the Lord came through the children of Israel (that's the Old Testament), and here's what they're going to preach now - Jesus is the Lord of all. He's the Christ, He's the Savior. And you've heard the message because this wasn't hidden

from any of you. It wasn't hidden. John the Baptist had caused a great stir when he was arrested, later when he was executed. His message of a coming Savior was common knowledge. In fact, when Paul will stand before King Agrippa (in Acts 26, way down the road), he will say to King Agrippa (there, towards the end), "I have spoken freely to you, King, but you know these things. None of these things that I'm speaking to you have escaped your attention. These things were not done in a corner" (verse 26). Or, if you will, if you wanted to know is the gospel out there, by the time you get to this chapter, everyone's heard it. They know the position of the Christian, and they know the position of the unbeliever. So Peter has to talk to a room full of Gentiles, so he can't say, "The book of Isaiah" or "Zechariah the prophet said" because they don't know, they're Romans. So he has to stick with the things that everyone can relate to - sin and forgiveness and God's way of life and pointing, again, to Jesus. So he's kind of limited to that.

He even says, in verse 38, " 'how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him." "You've heard of Jesus. You heard about His work, His anointedness." In fact, verse 38 is, in one verse, summarizing three and a half years of public ministry. You want to know where the four gospels are in his message? They're in verse 38. That's it. He spends one verse going, "Here's the Old Testament, and here's the New Testament." Right? Here're the gospels, if you will. And he presents those things to them very quickly. "God was with Him, He brought deliverance, He set men free from the devil."

Verse 39, " 'And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.' " "Our faith and our testimony," Peter says, "is based on facts, and they are first-person facts. You've known about all of these things, you've heard about the things of Jesus. We were there! That's our message. We were there." When John writes his 1 John letter, he starts with the words, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." So John went to the same place. He spoke to scattered folks, a lot of them not Jewish. He doesn't appeal to Jewish Old Testament Scriptures. He just said, "We

were there. Everything you've heard, everything's fulfilled. We were there. We saw, we watched." And Peter gives personal testimony. If you ever want to know how to share your faith, start with this. "Here's what God did for me. Here's what God promised to do, here's what He did. Here's how my life used to be, here's how it is now." And it's a great place to start building your testimony, if you will. "We saw the crucifixion. We, the Jews, killed Him with your help. We used a Roman ruler, we used a Roman method of execution. But the good news is He didn't stay dead." That's his message, right? "He rose on the third day." The resurrection of Jesus was well known throughout the land. It sets Christianity apart from every religion in the world. Isn't it nice to be in that religion? Your Savior rose from the dead. Every other god of the people is still dead. We were in Jamaica last year talking to these Rastafarians who were smokin' a lot of ganja, gettin' really loaded and talkin' about their god who is a fellow named Haile Selassie. He used to be the Ethiopian president. He died years ago. They believe he's coming back to save them, but he's still dead. They're serving a god who's dead. Our God is alive. Good news.

And so he presents to these Romans, to these Gentiles, to these unbelievers, the gospel in its most simple form. "God's plan of the Old Testament was to save, to deliver us, that God would preach peace with Him through Jesus. You're at war with God, but Jesus'll make peace. And you've heard His word proclaimed, you've heard what He did, you saw what He did, and we're here to tell you we saw it too. And we walked that walk with Him. And when He died, He rose. And we ate with Him after He rose. It wasn't any ghost. We've seen Him with our own eyes. We'll give our lives to back up the story, and this is what you need." So, in just such a few verses (he starts in verse 36, and he ends in verse 43) - I mean, it's not exactly your long sermon. Years later, when Peter would write his epistles, he will write a remarkable sentence. He will say this, "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). "We were there." "And so" (2 Peter 1:19), "we have the prophetic word confirmed, as a light that shines in a dark place." But then he goes on, and he says this, "But I have an even more sure thing for you to depend upon, not what I'm telling you. You should depend on the Word of God because the Lord said He would do this, and He has." So Peter starts by his testimony with these men, without any biblical background, to say to them, "We were there. It's a reliable testimony, it's an eyewitness report, it is sure of God's Word."

Verse 42, he says this, " 'And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission' " (or the forgiveness, the washing away) " 'of sins.' " We've been called to preach, we've been called to tell everyone about Jesus, He's going to be the Judge, He'll decide whether you get eternal life or not, He's the only One that's going to do that. But here's the good news - the salvation that God had planned was well-planned. And throughout the Old Testament, every prophet agreed, and he didn't quote any of them because they wouldn't have related to it. But he just said, "Every prophet that has led us to this point told the same story. God will provide salvation through His Son. And the way that we're saved is we believe in His Son. His death was for our substitute. Faith in Him saves." And that was it. I mean, literally, that's it.

Now if you read verse 44, the natural response would be that they might continue to take notes except (in this eight-verse message) it's the first thing Peter tells them they have to do. In other words, "Here's all the information." "Okay, how do we get saved?" "Those who believe in Him will have their sins forgiven." And they turned Peter off at that point. "All right. So if I believe in Jesus, I'm going to have life. Sorry, Peter. I'm about to get saved now. Quit talkin'." And, in the midst of a message, the room starts to get saved, and the Holy Spirit begins to get poured out, and people begin to speak in other tongues, and they've evidenced the power of God's Spirit falling upon them. And Peter is just preaching. He's gotten eight verses in. Look, Jesus isn't someone you can ignore. His radical statements don't leave room for you to go, "Well, I can take Him or leave Him." You can't take someone or leave them when they say, "Either you believe in Me, or you're going to Hell." You can't take or leave that. You either believe that or you don't. Right? It doesn't allow you the wiggle room. I think Josh McDowell, years ago, (well, he wasn't the first one to write it) wrote a book called "Liar, Lunatic or Lord." He's either a liar because He's telling us crazy things, or He's nuts, or He's telling the truth. "Liar, Lunatic or Lord." You're kind of left to that you have to decide, you have to respond accordingly. And there're only categories. There're two of them - those who believe and follow Him; and those who will not believe and will reject Him and head out on their own.

Well understand, from verse 44 where we read, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word." Not just in their ears but in their hearts. Right? All of the people in the room wanted to hear

was what he said - they just wanted some direction. "How can I be made right with God. What is His plan? What is His demand from us? What does He want me to do?" By faith, to believe in Jesus. And faith stepped out, and Jesus stepped in. That's really what happened. And, rather than waiting for Peter to finish or have an altar call or raise your hand or go to the prayer room, they just went, "All right. If that's what God wants, that's what we'll do," and they just turned to the Lord in their own hearts. They began to believe in His name, in His death, in His resurrection - on their behalf. And if you read the story, you have to come away concluding, "Gosh, God sure makes it easy to be saved." How cool would it be while you're sharing with someone, people just start gettin' saved all around you? And you're just goin', "Man, I must be a good preacher." No. You're not. Look at Peter. A lot better way to be interrupted than cell phones going off, people getting saved. This is the way it ought to work, isn't it? I hate to see how often, unfortunately, in ministry people try to work the Holy Spirit up rather than praying Him down. I've always been hesitant to do altar calls (personal persuasion) because I find that people get so easily manipulated (when they're vulnerable) to what God is wanting to say. Even this Easter at the stadium, I felt led of the Lord to say, as we were done sharing the gospel (or the message) - before we ever prayed or had music, "Hey, look, if God's speaking to you, stand up and get saved." And we had eighty people stand up. They weren't coerced. They were just - God spoke to them. And then you feel right about that. That's what the Lord does. But I'm always careful. Peter didn't work this up. "Ah, we're gonna sing this song one last time, you hold outs, you losers, you, you, you.....there's eight more over here and two more over here." You can hustle people, but don't you want God to work? And God worked. Peter went, "And fur.....I guess I'm done." He never go to.....I don't know if he felt good about himself, but the Lord certainly used him, didn't He? And so the message just kind of changed him completely, and he watched the room turn to the Lord. I love the way it is. The Holy Spirit will use the teaching and the preaching of God's Word as simply and powerfully as God did with Peter, and you should know that when you go out and share.

"The Holy Spirit," read there verse 44, "fell upon them." The word "upon," "*epi*," is always the description (so far in the book of Acts) to the baptism of the Holy Spirit; not when you get saved when the Holy Spirit comes to live within you but come upon you (Acts 1) and then Acts 2, the "upon" experience where God empowers you, seems to have taken place all at the same time. The salvation and the infilling of the Spirit upon these folks, which is nice because you can't box God

in. And then they would be baptized to follow. It's not the usual practice in the Scriptures, but it's pretty cool.

Verse 45 says this, "And those of the circumcision" (those Jews) "who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also." I mean, it just blew their minds, these six. "For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God," and it just moved them. This is exactly what happened at Pentecost. And they heard the tongues. They didn't understand, but they understood tongues now. If you go to 1 Corinthians 14:2, it says that the use of tongues is a way whereby man can praise God. It is from man to God. It isn't a message from God to man. Man to God. Always worship, praise and all - 1 Corinthians 14.

But here's the lesson for these guys like Peter. "God makes no distinction in salvation, and the obvious work of God in our lives is now happening in their lives. Who would've believed it? God is saving Gentiles!" It blew Peter's mind. It freaked out the six guys that were with him. He was glad, I think, that people were with him because he was going to have to explain himself. And if you get to verses 1 and 2 of chapter 11, Peter is immediately called to Jerusalem to explain. "What do you think you're doin'? What's wrong with you? Those are Gentiles!" And Peter went, "Yeah, wait till you hear what happened!" And he's got six witnesses, and they all went with him to testify. It was just amazing.

"Then Peter answered," verse 47, "'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days." And he did. But look, here's the deal. The barrier comes down. Gentiles are baptized into the body of Christ. What a moment! What a moment.

So, a couple things to learn. God wants to save everyone whether you like them nor not, and God would rather change your heart so that you believe that His power is able to save in the simplest of terms. How powerful is the sharing. And Peter hung around for a while. I don't know what he did; answered lots of questions, I guess. Maybe he brought Philip over. Philip ended up here. He lived here. They could have taken him to Philip's house. Philip had a bunch of daughters that liked to prophesy. What a great new believers' class this would have been! Right? But here's the lesson - God worked on both sides of the fence to do this cataclysmic thing. He opened the door to the Gentiles, which now will open the door for Paul

because Paul is the guy that God sends to the Gentiles. So this has got to be resolved, which is one of the reasons I think Paul was in the shadows. The time wasn't right. But now the time will be right.

So we'll get Peter's defense in chapter 11, which is amazing, and then he'll get to share all that was going on. We'll find Barnabas going to Antioch in Syria (hundreds of miles away) and starting a church. He's not a pastor, he's just kind of an encourager. And so he says, "Man, I need help," and he goes to where Paul is living in Tarsus, not very far away from Antioch in Syria. He finds him, drags him down. For the next year, Barnabas and Paul teach in that church. There's a prophet in the ministry there who warns about a famine coming to Jerusalem. And, for the first time, you find a bunch of Gentiles in Antioch gathering money together to send to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were hit the hardest in 46 A.D. when this famine struck. But then all we'll have left is Peter getting busted out of jail, and the church (I love the lesson) praying all night, not believing it was him when he got out. And then Peter will disappear, and then we will pick up with the death of Agrippa, who dies a really violent death. Barnabas and Paul go back home, having taken money to Jerusalem. And then we start those three long missionary journeys of Paul which really take the gospel globally, but for the most part to the Gentiles. So, I know the book of Acts is really big, but I think when you outline it, it's fairly small. But there're lots of lessons to learn.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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