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Opening Another Door Acts 10:1-35

Intro: We are looking at Peter's itinerant ministry in **ch9-10** but before we jump right into **ch10**, I would like to go back and study an episode from the ministry of Jesus that we touched on last week. I believe it will add some perspective to these events Luke has recorded from the life of Peter. In **Matt 16:13-19**, Jesus is asking the disciples who people think that He is. In the course of this discussion, Peter stumbles upon an enlightened and accurate view of the true identity of Jesus and is commended for it. Jesus tells Peter he is correct because the Father has revealed it to him. Jesus then reveals to Peter that he will have an important responsibility in the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Jesus says He will give to Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, but what does that really mean?

Did this mean that Peter somehow had the authority to receive or exclude a person from salvation? Or did it rather refer to the authority given to all ministers of the Gospel to declare on the basis of God's Word that sin is forgiven when it's confessed to Jesus and that it's not forgiven when it is not confessed? The 1st interpretation is the view of the Roman Catholic Church. The 2nd is generally the Protestant view. We're not here to discuss or debate the value of either of these opinions because there is a 3rd view that's not widely held but has application to our text in Acts.

This view states that the keys Peter was given was for the opening of the Gospel to 2 distinct people groups: Jews and Gentiles. Peter used the first key on the day of Pentecost when he preached the first public Christian sermon, opening the door of the Gospel to the Jewish people. Now, he is going to use the second key to open the door of the Gospel to the world of the Gentiles as he presents salvation to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family. Peter was the Apostle to the Jews so it was right that he preach to the Jews first but, he is also the first to bring the gospel message to an exclusively Gentile audience.

Regardless of how we view the "keys," it's clearly obvious that bringing the Gospel to Cornelius was an important event. As we saw with the story of

Saul's conversion, the importance of an event in **Acts** is emphasized by Luke through repetition. The testimony of Saul's conversion is given 3 times. In the same way, the description of the vision Peter has in **ch10** is also given 3 times but, unlike Saul's conversion, it's repeated once and implied a second time in the story itself (Peter repeats the lesson he received in the vision to Cornelius [**34-35**]).

This story is pivotal to the theology of Acts but it is also pivotal to the structure of the Book. After this incident occurs, Peter begins to fade out of the narrative of Luke's record and Paul begins to take prominence. Peter's preaching to Cornelius is a long story – it takes up all of **ch10** and the fall-out from it takes up half of **ch11**. This story can be separated into 6 different scenes. We'll look at the first 4 today and deal with the last 2 sections next time.

1-8 – First, we are given an introduction to Cornelius. He lived in Caesarea, a predominantly Roman city and the headquarters of the Roman governor of Judea. Cornelius was a Gentile but he was also an officer in the Roman Army – a centurion, no less. As such, any patriotic Jew of that day would've disliked or even hated him. A centurion had command of 100 soldiers and this is not the only place in Scripture where we find them. We see them several times in the 4 Gospels and Acts and in every instance, they are highly commended.

Luke tells us a number of other things about Cornelius, all of which point to his genuine faith. He was devout; God-fearing and active in his piety: generous to the needy; praying regularly. It seems his heart had grown tired of the pagan myths and empty religious rituals of Roman society and he then turned to Judaism in hopes of finding salvation. He was a close to Judaism as he could get without becoming a full proselyte. Cornelius was a God-fearer. This means he worshiped Jehovah but hadn't become a full Jew by circumcision. God-fearers were Gentiles who were interested in Judaism and attended synagogue as observers only. Since they hadn't fully converted to Judaism, they couldn't participate fully in the Jewish community. God-fearers were respected by Jews since they were on the right religious path. But, because they weren't full Jews, Jews could not associate with them socially.

Cornelius' faith was also an active faith. He gave generously to those who

were in need and he prayed to God on a regular basis. Judging by the way Luke describes him to us; we can see that he is clearly someone who had a deep interest in knowing the true God. This raises an interesting question: was Cornelius born again? I would have to say, by the strict definition of salvation, that he was not; mainly because, at this point in his life, he was ignorant of Jesus Christ. That's what Peter is sent to tell him about. On the other hand, Cornelius is seeking the true God – in a greater way than even most Jews were at that time.

It is interesting to see how religious a person can be and still not be saved. Cornelius was sincere in his obedience to God's Law, his fasting (30) and generosity to the Jewish people. He wasn't allowed to offer sacrifices in the Temple so he presented his regular prayers to God as his sacrifice. In every way, he was a model of religious respectability and yet – he was not a born again, "saved" man. The difference between Cornelius and a lot of religious people today is that Cornelius knew that his religious devotion and activity was not sufficient enough to bring him salvation. Many religious people today believe that their character and good works will get them to heaven and they have no concept of their own sin or of God's grace. It seems that in his frequent prayers, Cornelius was asking God to show him the way of salvation.

While it is clear that Cornelius was not saved, what is also clear is that God was actively preparing his heart and mind to receive the message of salvation. Is it possible to really seek God unless God is actively at work drawing this person to Him? It was the Holy Spirit working in Cornelius' life that made him dissatisfied with his paganism and brought him in contact with a better way so he could begin to learn about the God of Israel. Cornelius was actively being prepared for the message that Peter was being sent to Caesarea to tell him. Everyone needs to have their heart prepared by God if they are going to receive the gospel. Yet, they also need to hear the way of salvation.

Cornelius prayed for direction and God sent him an angel with instructions. He told him to send men to Joppa to look for Simon Peter. Cornelius had no clue who Peter was but he knew he should do what God said to do, trusting that He was speaking to Peter as well. Why couldn't the angel just tell him what he needed to know? Angels aren't tasked with preaching the Gospel. They may help connect lost souls with God's appointed preachers but

they're not allowed to do any more than that. God sent an angel to instruct Cornelius but He used a man to preach the Gospel to him.

9-16 – Cornelius needed preparation but so did Peter. Peter was a Christian but the problem was, he still thought like a Jew! According to Jewish belief, God didn't save Gentiles as Gentiles. They had to become Jews first. But, God had already been preparing Peter to think otherwise. It started in Samaria. The gospel had spread there and Peter went there to investigate. Samaritans weren't entirely Gentile; they were part Jewish, part Gentile. This mixture was important in moving Peter away from his strict Jewish prejudices. Peter checked Samaria out and his knowledge of Jesus overrode his prejudices. He concluded that God really was at work there and he was rightly pleased.

Next we're told (9:43) that when Peter went to Joppa he stayed in the home of Simon the Tanner. Tanners work with leather, which means they have to handle a lot of dead animals. Dead bodies were considered unclean by the Jews. Anyone who touched them became unclean. So a normal Jew would have nothing to do with such people. Yet Peter stayed with Simon. Simon was a Christian brother, and this was the right thing to do. This was another experience in which God was beginning to break down Peter's defenses. Still, Simon was a Jew and Peter is about to be sent to the home of a Gentile. That is a huge leap from a believer who is considered ceremonially unclean by the Jews.

Again, the problem wasn't that Jews didn't think God saved Gentiles. They knew He did – there are many examples in the OT. Rahab was a Gentile harlot in the city of Jericho. She had heard stories of what the Jewish God had done and she began to believe in this God. She protected the Jewish spies when they came into Jericho and was saved herself when Jericho was taken. But what happened after? She was incorporated into Israel. She married into the tribe of Judah and became an ancestor of Jesus (**Matt 1:5**).

The story is virtually the same for Ruth the Moabitess. She came to know the true God through her mother-in-law Naomi. After her husband and both her sons died, Naomi decided to return to Israel and Ruth was determined to go with her. She said, "Don't make me leave you or turn back from following you. Wherever you go, I'll go; wherever you stay, I'll stay. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God." Ruth wanted Naomi's

God to be her God; she would be a worshiper of Jehovah. But before she could say “your God will be my God” she had to say “your people will be my people.” Ruth first became a member of Naomi’s tribe.

This was the scriptural foundation, the biblical backdrop of Peter’s theology. Could he now preach salvation, offering it freely on the basis of the finished work of Christ to one who had not fully come to God by way of Israel? Yes, yes he could! That’s what the vision of the sheet was intended to show – that God was not calling the Gentiles unclean, no matter what the Jews thought. Gentiles could come to Christ as Gentiles without passing through the narrow door of Judaism first. God wasn’t just trying to change Peter’s diet; He was changing His entire program!

As the sheet came down, Peter saw that it contained both kosher and non-kosher animals. When the command came to “Rise, kill and eat,” it wasn’t that Peter was just being disagreeable. He probably took this as a test to see if he, as a Jew, would disobey God’s written law. He answered correctly on the basis of what he knew. He was walking in the light that he had, until further light was granted to him – “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” Did Peter get the picture immediately? No, this happened 2 more times and even then, Peter was still scratching his head. He began to have the idea that God was trying to tell him something but he had no clue what it was...yet.

17-23a – While Peter was puzzling over the vision, the 3 men sent by Cornelius were out front knocking on the door. God’s timing is always perfect. It was a 3 day journey from Caesarea to Joppa and they didn’t know where Simon the Tanner lived yet, here they are, right on time. God’s working both side of the problem to bring it to a divine solution. It’s critically important that we see this point because that’s exactly how God works in our lives today. The only real difference is that, when God works on our problems, we only see one side of His work and the vast majority of the time we’re struggling to figure out what He is trying to tell us! Don’t despair in the midst of the struggle. God has the situation well in hand – all we need to do is trust Him and keep pressing into our relationship with Him.

Maybe Peter saw significance in the number of times the vision was repeated and the number of men at the front gate. Whatever the case, God instructed Peter to go down to them and go with them because He had sent

them. But an interesting thing is seen in vs23 – Peter invited them in to be his guests. Peter was learning already. A good Jew wouldn't normally do that. They would've directed them to an inn or the town square to stay the night. No orthodox Jew would have invited Gentiles into his house. He wouldn't have eaten at the same table with them. He wouldn't have fellowship with them at all. It was forbidden. Peter had gotten the point of the vision so far. God had called these men clean. And since God had called them clean, he wasn't to treat them as being unclean. So they came in. By entertaining these Gentiles, Peter went against the customs and traditions of Israel, but not against God's Word.

23b-33 – The next day, Peter set out for Caesarea and he brought some other Jewish believers with him. Clearly, he believed something was going to happen that would probably be met with misunderstanding at best, and out-right opposition at worst, but the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Whatever God was prompting him to do, it was a good idea to have some other Jewish Christians along to verify the outcome of this meeting.

When they arrived at Cornelius' home, they met him and all those assembled by him to hear Peter's message. What a wonderful thing – and a preacher's dream! It would be wonderful if every preacher had the same reception Peter had in Caesarea, when they got up to preach. Cornelius had been prepared by God and Peter had been prepared by God. But they weren't the only ones who had been prepared. Cornelius had prepared his whole household, and now they were all waiting to hear Peter. Cornelius calculated when they would arrive from Joppa and he had everyone assembled. God had prepared Cornelius, the preacher, and the audience.

God was preparing to communicate and true communication would take place. But, the message God wanted to communicate to Cornelius' household was a spiritual message so it required spiritual perception. God had to prepare the hearts and souls of these Gentile hearers. He'd been busy preparing good soil, cultivating receptive ground. That is when things really happen, when God prepares both the messenger and the hearts of those who are to receive the message. When you come to church, do you want to receive a good message? The best way to make that happen is to come with a prepared heart. Yes, the preacher must be prepared but when God prepares the preacher and the hearers, that's when great things happen. Our blessing is greatly increased when we prepare ourselves to

hear the Word of God.

34-35 – Notice what Peter's says in response to Cornelius' story, "I perceive that God shows no favoritism." Do we really believe that? Sure, we are Gentiles, the recipients of God's acceptance but do we really believe that God doesn't show favoritism. I mean, God showed favor to us, right? But, did God show favor to us because we are the type of people that God favors? Ah, when you start to think like that, it's only a small step from favor to favoritism. What we can never forget is that God has shown favor to us precisely because He doesn't show favoritism. That's the only way we ever became Christians in the first place. If God showed favoritism, we wouldn't be saved. So, we should never show favoritism in presenting the Gospel. The message of the Gospel is for all who will come to Jesus.

Remember what was contained in the sheet in Peter's vision? All kinds of four-footed animals...wild beasts... creeping things. Whenever you see yourself, not as the clean animal but the unclean animal, not as the attractive beast but as the creeping thing, as one who by the grace of God got into that sheet and was pronounced clean by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ, then and only then are you ready to open your heart and arms to other people. It doesn't make any difference who they are. God does not show favorites. If I got in and if you got in, then the gospel must be for everybody.

One thing we learn from our text is that the idea that one religion is as good as another is completely false. There can be no salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Cornelius had piety and morality but he did not have salvation. Apart from hearing the message of the Gospel and accepting Jesus as his savior, Cornelius had no hope!

Second, we learned that the seeking Savior will find the seeking sinner. Wherever there is a searching heart, God responds. That's why it's essential that we as God's people obey his will and share His Word. You never know when your witness for Christ is exactly what someone has been waiting and praying for.

Finally, prayer is critical to evangelism. You can have all the latest evangelistic training the church has to offer but if your heart is not humble before God or you're not humble enough to pray for the Holy Spirit to work

in the lives of the lost – your efforts will mostly be in vain. Some may be influenced by your ministry but the limited results won't match the out-put of energy and you will quickly tire of the work. 😊