

SEISMIC SHIFT ACTS 10:1-23

One day, when Jesus was alone with His disciples, He asked them, “Who do you think I am?” In typical fashion, it was Peter who answered first, and his response hit the bullseye. He said, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus replied, *“Blessed are you, Simon! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”* And then Jesus prophesied about Peter’s future role in His church. He said, *“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matt. 16:15-19).

There is some debate among scholars about the precise role that Jesus intended Peter to have in His church, but whatever the extent of that role, everyone agrees that it is extremely *consequential*. It is *eternally* consequential. Peter would be given so much authority that the decisions and decrees he would make as the primary leader in the church would determine the composition of the church *and* the eternal destinies of people who populate the earth.

In our study of Acts we have already seen elements of Jesus’ prophecy being fulfilled in Peter’s ministry. On the day of Pentecost, when Peter unlocked the door to the kingdom of heaven and about three thousand Jews from all over the world entered that door after hearing him preach (2:41); after Philip preached the gospel to the Samaritans, many of whom believed, and then Peter and John went there and laid their hands on these new Samaritan believers, and in so doing they received the Holy Spirit (8:17).

But the events that take place in chapter 10, the passage we are going to look at this morning, is, without a doubt, the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy. What was revealed to Peter in a mind-boggling vision, the theological conclusions that he formed after pondering that vision, and then how he acted upon those conclusions blew many of the theological underpinnings of Judaism to smithereens.

I have entitled my message, “Seismic Shift,” but that title is really an understatement. What Peter did in chapter 10 literally altered almost everything that was previously understood about the kingdom of God and salvation—specifically, who gets to be part of the kingdom and who gets to obtain God’s salvation?

In Acts 10 we are introduced to two separate stories that occur in two coastal Palestinian cities involving two very different men that are woven together to form one amazing plot. The first story begins in **verses 1-2**. *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.*

Caesarea was a seaport on the Mediterranean coast that was built by Herod the Great and named after Caesar Augustus. It was the administrative headquarters of the Roman empire in the province of Palestine and served as a showpiece of Roman culture. Not surprisingly, the most prominent architectural feature in the city was a great temple to Caesar, and it was in that temple that he was worshiped as a divine being.

As a result, most Jews despised Caesarea, and would often speak of it as though it were not even a part of Judea. For Jews, Caesarea was a wart on the landscape of Palestine, and, consequently, it had a predominantly Gentile population. But the several thousand Jews who *did* live in Caesarea were far from compliant citizens. According to

Josephus, the great historian, riots between Jews and Romans in Caesaria sparked the Jewish war in AD 66, leading to the massacre of the entire Jewish population of 20,000 that same year. (Fernando, 318).

The man to whom we are introduced in verse 1, Cornelius, was a centurion—a non-commissioned officer in the Roman army. Centurions were considered the backbone of the Roman legion, commanding between 80 and 100 men (Hughes, 144).

As a Roman, Cornelius had been raised in Roman culture and religion, so he was familiar with the Roman “gods” such as Jupiter, Venus, and Mars. Yet despite the bad blood between Jews and Romans he had become convinced that the God Jews worshiped was the one, true God. The text says he and his family were devout and God-fearing. A God-fearer was a person who attended synagogue, obeyed Jewish laws, and honored Jewish customs, but had not been incorporated into the Jewish community through circumcision. In other words, Cornelius was a spiritually minded Gentile who took his relationship with God seriously. However, he was still considered “unclean.”

Two things about Cornelius stood out: His generosity to the poor and his continual prayer. Jews and God-fearers considered prayer to be absolutely essential to their piety, so much so that they could literally set their clocks by their corporate prayer times throughout the day. When they awoke in the morning, the first thing they did was recite a prayer called the *Shema*—“The Lord our God, the Lord, He is one. I will love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.” At the end of the day, they repeated this prayer, and sandwiched in between the *Shema* were set times of daily prayer.

In Palestinian cities, trumpets would blow on the hours of 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00, signaling that all Jews and God-fearers should stop their activity, turn toward the Jerusalem Temple, and pray. It was during the 3:00 prayer time that Cornelius had a vision. **Verses 3-4.** *³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius. ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”* The language the angel uses here was commonly used with reference to the sacrificial system. The angel is saying that Cornelius’ prayers and his generosity had ascended into heaven like incense or like the smoke from a sacrifice. In other words, God had taken notice of them, God was pleased with them. As a result, God was about to bless him in an extraordinary way.

Verses 5-6. *⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”*

As a Roman officer Cornelius was used to giving and receiving orders. But I doubt if he had ever received an order directly from heaven. An angel tells him to summon Simon who is staying at the home of a tanner in Joppa (whose name was also Simon). And just so there will be no mistake he gives Cornelius Simon’s nickname—Peter—and tells him where the tanner’s house is.

But, notice, he does not tell Cornelius *why* he is supposed to summon Peter, or what will happen as a result of his summons. Which is a test of Cornelius’ faith. Cornelius could have easily talked himself out of following through with this order. “I mean, this Peter guy doesn’t know me from Adam. It’s a thirty-mile journey on foot between here and Joppa, and if he’s like most Jews he’s not going to want to come to Caesarea. If I don’t give him a good reason why he’s supposed to come here, and if he shows up and I still don’t know, it’s going to be *really* awkward. Besides, how do I know if this vision was real and not the result of something I ate that disagreed with me? Maybe I’ll think this over for a couple of days and then decide what to do.”

I'm not sure if Cornelius had any hesitation or not, but the text seems to indicate that he was immediate in his response. **Verses 7-8.** *⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

Okay, that's the first story. We'll pick it up a little later, but in the following verses we are introduced to another story. Look at **verse 9.** *⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.*

Luke wants us to know that God was choreographing these circumstances. He wants us to know that Cornelius' servants, as the result of God's specific instructions, were approaching the city of Joppa at the same time that Peter went on a rooftop to pray. God is about to reveal Himself to Peter during his noon prayer time just like He did Cornelius during his 3:00 prayer time, the day before.

A couple of things you might be interested to know. First, the place where Peter was staying was no Hilton. This was a tanner's house, and tanner's houses were known to be notoriously stinky and thus were required to be on the outskirts of town, preferably near water. What is more, tanners were considered low life in the Jewish community. In the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the law, there is a statement that says, "Woe to him who is a tanner by trade." That's because, since tanners handled animal carcasses, they were ceremonially unclean. Some Pharisees taught that one should avoid tanners altogether, and some even lobbied, unsuccessfully, to prevent tanners from entering the holy city of Jerusalem.

At noon, Peter went on the rooftop to pray. The flat roofs of Palestine, accessible by an outdoor flight of steps, were common places of prayer in biblical times. It was a good place to pray during the daytime since it was separate from the activity of the house (Fernando, 320), and the sea breeze helped keep it cool and, perhaps, diffuse the odors.

Verse 10. *¹⁰ And [Peter] became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance... One church father (Philo) attributed this trance to what he called "divine intoxication," which happens, he said, when one is in such a state of earnest prayer that the soul is filled with God and one loses touch with one's surroundings.*

I have no doubt that earnest prayer can do this, but it makes more sense to me to interpret this trance as a divinely induced phenomenon. God wanted to reveal something very important to Peter, so he timed this trance to correspond with the arrival of the men from Caesarea. So, while he was in the trance, **verses 11-14.** *¹¹ [he] saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."*

If most of you men in our church had received this vision, you would spontaneously start singing the Hallelujah Chorus. Then you'd jump up, grab your crossbows, run for the door, and on the way out tell your wives to fire up the Traeger.

But not Peter. This vision was more like a nightmare for him. When he saw that bed sheet descend from heaven containing all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean, his reaction was, "Yuk!! This is disgusting!" And when he heard the command to "kill and eat", he was incredulous. "No way, Lord!!"

It is difficult for those of us who are non-Jews to understand the offensiveness of this vision and the absurdity of this command. Peter, like every Jew at this time, followed strict dietary laws regarding kosher food. That's because they were intimately acquainted with

Leviticus 11, the passage in the Old Testament that expressly forbids eating certain animals, birds, fish, and insects.

In this passage a word is used over and over. It's the word *detest* or *detestable*, an emotive word that describes an intense, negative reaction to something. It is used in this context to reinforce how important these dietary matters were to God. And so, the Jews went to great lengths to make sure they did not violate these prohibitions. It is a matter of historical record that, during the time of the Maccabees, some Jews preferred death to eating unclean food. For Jews dietary restrictions were not just a matter of social etiquette or cultural cuisine; they were a core part of their identity.

So, Peter's response to this vision and the command is not surprising. Since he had never eaten anything that was not kosher, he balked at the unholy smorgasbord that was spread out before him and protested vehemently. *"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean!"* For Peter, this was not just a matter of conscience, this was a matter of obedience since this directive contradicted Scripture (Lev. 11).

Which is why, **verse 15**, ¹⁵ *...The voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."* Stop thinking of these formerly unclean animals and reptiles and birds as inferior or second-rate. As of right now, I have pronounced them clean.

And to reinforce that this really was God, **verse 16**, ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.*

What in the world is the meaning of Peter's vision? It means, quite simply, that God was changing the rules. He was, at that moment, declaring "clean" things that He had previously called "unclean." What things? Animals? Yes. But I'm going to suggest to you that this vision has two meanings—one a literal meaning and a spiritual meaning, both of which are consequential, but one of which, the spiritual meaning, is far more consequential.

Let's talk about the literal meaning first. God was reversing a previous decree and declaring that Leviticus 11 was no longer binding. "You may now disregard those distinctions I made between clean and unclean animals", says the Lord, "all animals are now pronounced clean and are, therefore, edible."

You might be saying to yourself, "Wait a second! How can God change His mind about which animals are clean and unclean? Did He not institute His original dietary laws because certain foods are conducive to the body's health and well-being while other foods, especially certain kinds of animals, are harmful to the body's health and well-being?"

Actually, that is *not* why He instituted dietary laws. It didn't have to do with health; it had to do with holiness—being set apart, distinct, and different from other nations. Dietary laws, just like circumcision, were outward signs of distinctness. They distinguished God's special and chosen people from all the other peoples of the world.

But God knew all along that the external laws which distinguished the nation of Israel from other nations would be temporary. God knew that on a particular day He would issue another decree through Peter declaring that all animals were clean, and that it was therefore okay to eat them. Peter was now free to go downstairs and have a ham sandwich for lunch.

Of course, Peter did not do that. He was still stunned by this vision. Which is why, **verse 17**, he stayed on the roof and contemplated the meaning of the vision. As he did, **verses 17-23**. ¹⁷ *Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate* ¹⁸ *and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.* ¹⁹ *And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you.* ²⁰ *Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them."* ²¹ *And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one*

you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²² *And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say."* ²³ *So he invited them in to be his guests.*

As Peter, on the rooftop, contemplated the meaning of the vision of the sheet containing all the animals, both clean and unclean, and the command to kill and eat, God timed the visit of Cornelius' servants so that Peter would make the connection between that vision and their visit.

What was the connection? Here's where we come to the spiritual meaning of the vision, which (as I said) is the more consequential meaning. Not only was Peter to stop considering any animals as unclean; he was to stop considering any *people group* as unclean. God wasn't just changing the dietary rules; He was changing the rules about who would be able to relate to Him, obtain His salvation, and be the objects of His favor. It is not just Jews, but all peoples!

Peter is being prepared to accept Cornelius' invitation to visit him, which, as we will see next time, is the formal, official introduction of Gentiles into the kingdom of God. And, to Peter's credit, he not only makes the connection between the vision and this visit, but he is also convinced that God has, in fact, changed the rules and he immediately acts upon it. He invites these Gentile men into Simon's home to be his guests.

That was an amazing step of faith. Jews did not dine with Gentiles, let alone have them stay in their homes. It goes to show you how quickly and how decisively God can change the attitudes of His people when they are willing to listen to Him and then believe what He says, even the attitude of prejudice, which is perhaps the most difficult attitude of all to change.

Friends, do you realize how consequential this passage is? It is the result of God declaring all animals and all people groups clean on this day through this vision to Peter that we are here today with the assurance that our sins are forgiven, that we are children of God, and that we are citizens of heaven. It is because of this passage that we who are Gentiles have the hope that, in Christ, we are just as acceptable and pleasing to God as Jews.

It is because of this vision that the Apostle Paul would later write, "In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—we are all one in Jesus Christ" (Col 3:11; Gal. 3:28). God is impartial! He has no favorites. The basis for His acceptance of a person is not race or religion or culture or custom. It is whether or not he/she has put their faith and trust in His provision for their salvation—His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of the whole world.

Response: *"And Can It Be?" #203*

Seismic Shift

Acts 10:1-23

Main Idea: God changed the rules about what is considered “clean” and “unclean”, opening the door for Gentiles to obtain his favor through Jesus.

God Targets an Outsider (1-8)

Cornelius the man (1-2)

Cornelius' vision (3-6)

Cornelius' response (7-8)

God Changes the Rules—the Type (9-16)

Peter prays before lunch (9-10)

Vision of an unholy smorgasbord (11-13)

Catapulted out of his comfort zone (14)

Divine confirmation (15-16)

God Changes the Rules—the Anti-type (17-23)

Perfect timing (17-20)

Responsive leadership (21-22)

Discrimination is abolished (23)

Application Questions

Acts 10:1-23

Do you remember a time in your life when your long-standing beliefs or cherished convictions were challenged by the truth of God's word and were revealed to be contradictory to his will? How did you respond? Was it difficult for you to "let go" of your beliefs or convictions? How did you go forward?

For your theological reflection: How can you reconcile the fact that God changed the rules in Acts 10 with his immutability (The fact that God never changes)?

Through Peter's vision God abolished, once and for all, all racial discrimination. What are the implications of this as to how God would have you respond to the immigration or refugee issues of our day? How would God have you view and treat such people?