

## CROSSING BARRIERS

Acts 9:32-10:29

It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, isn't it? Having grown up a certain way and having gotten used to things being a certain way, we become comfortable, and it makes change difficult. Everybody raises their hand for change but we tend to not want to change. We typically avoid what isn't familiar. We know from Acts, before Jesus physically ascended back into heaven, He told His disciples to make disciples of **all nations**. There's only one problem: It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. It's hard to teach Jewish men, reared in Jewish tradition, used to being distinct from the nations around them, to instead cross borders to reach out to them! Jews weren't used to that. The Law of Moses told Israelites to minister to the Gentiles (non-Jews) around them by remaining distinct and waiting for the nations to come to them so they could introduce them to God. But not it's time to be a missionary and go to the nations. But the various laws of distinction that kept them separate would get in the way (like circumcision & diet). The religious leaders at times went so far with the laws of distinction that they made their own laws (in the Mishnah) where they virtually didn't associate with Gentiles at all. When God said don't cross a certain fence, and they said, "*We'll put up a fence around God's fence so that we don't even go near His fence. We won't even associate with the Gentiles.*" That's sort of what we're dealing with this morning in Acts. The change was hard for them.

It's been a while since the Church has been born in Acts 2 and the gospel has flooded the land of Israel but the mainly Jewish Church was still hesitant to willingly go and reach out to their Gentile neighbors. It's been to the **Hellenistic Jews** (Greek-influenced), the **Samaritans** (half Jews), to **proselytes** (Gentiles who have converted to Judaism), but it hasn't been to those untouchable, **unclean Gentiles** yet. But if the Church is going to keep **growing** and **increasing** (Acts 12:24) they have to deal with some prejudice that God has removed in Christ but that still remained in their hearts. Ephesians 2 says God has in Christ broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile that brought hostility, but they weren't living like it yet. So what was needed was a test case to deal squarely with this controversial issue and clearly reveal God's will in the matter (11:2-4).<sup>i</sup> And that is going to come through visions to **Peter** and a Gentile named **Cornelius** where God shows them He desires the Gentiles' inclusion and partiality/favoritism has no place in the Church because Jesus is Lord of all and died for all. We're going to look at 5 **barrier-crossing principles** today for us to if we're going to cross barriers for the sake of the gospel as well.

*32 Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. 34 Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. 35 And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and **they turned to the Lord.***

*36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. 37 And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body,*

they laid it in an upper room. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, “Do not delay in coming to us.” 39 So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. 40 But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. 41 And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 It became known all over Joppa, and **many believed in the Lord**. 43 And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.

## **I. PETER’S MINISTRY TOUR. (9:32-43)**

It’s been a while since we’ve ran into Peter because the storyline has been shifting to other men like **Stephen, Philip, Paul, Ananias**, but now **Peter** is in the spotlight again. God is **divinely directing** the apostle Peter, but He’s also been directing many others. I like that thought because it shows us that God doesn’t just use “the clergy”. The mission is not limited to the apostles alone, but to all believers. He desires to use all believers in His plans and His mission.

### **BCP #1 – Jesus desires to use all believers in His mission.**

That’s been a huge barrier to gospel outreach in past centuries – the idea that the “minister” or “priest” does the ministry. But based on Ephesians 4, I’m supposed to be an equipper and you are ministers too, right? All believers are priests who have been uniquely given spiritual gifts, talents, and resources to be on mission. But it helps to be **available** and **looking** for the Lord to use us like Peter was. He was on the move preaching Christ, traveling through Israel, and following the Spirit’s lead (v. 31). And he met up with some saints in **Lydda**, also called **Lod**, about **25 miles northwest** of Jerusalem. This was a **predominantly Jewish** town and take note of that because we will visit **3 cities** in this chapter, and each is **increasingly Gentile**. He finds a man there a man named **Aeneas** who has been **bedridden for 8 years** and heals him in Christ’s name. The man makes his bed for the first time in 8 years, how about that! You thought your kids were bad!

Peter’s words, “*Jesus Christ heals you*” reaffirms for us the centrality of Jesus in everything which gives us another principle. He doesn’t say “*I, Peter the great, heal you!*” No, it was “*Jesus heals you.*” Peter’s comment reaffirms our take on the title of the book of Acts: **Acts is the continuing work of Jesus through His people by the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Healer, not Peter.** Jesus has ascended, yes, but He is still at work. The power to restore this man is flowing from Jesus as he depends on Him through prayer. And the point here is not to teach us that it’s God’s will to heal in every situation but **to draw people to the saving message of the gospel where they will find spiritual healing they need most – forgiveness of sins in Christ.** But Peter’s not drawing attention to himself or to the miracle, but to Jesus. The result of keeping the focus on Christ in the healings is that news spread and “*many turned to the Lord.*”

### **BCP #2 – Jesus is always the central focus.**

We want to keep the focus on Jesus, avoiding unnecessary barriers that could hinder people coming to know Jesus. And Lord help us to discern what those are in our conversations with people.

Some disciples from a nearby town called **Joppa** send 2 men to Peter to have him come and try to do something for a beloved woman named **Tabitha**. Joppa, also called **Jaffa** (in the **Tel Aviv** area on the coast), is about **12 miles northwest** of Lydda and is a **far more Gentile, Hellenistic** (Grecian Jews) city. Again, we're subtly inching our way **increasingly Gentile**.

**Tabitha** is an Aramaic name meaning "gazelle" which in Greek is **Dorcas**. I don't know about you, but I'd rather go with Tabitha... And this beloved woman who is called a **disciple** was known for her **continual deeds of kindness and charity**. I did a devotional on her this week talking about how we need more tender-hearted Tabitha's who are zealous for good deeds. She's someone you could name your kids after. The folks cherished her so much that when she died of a sickness, they prepared her burial but didn't bury her immediately, as was custom. Instead, hearing that Peter was nearby, they thought, "*Why not see if Peter can do something?*" So Peter comes and raises her from the dead. The account is no doubt a **parallel** to when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter in Mark 5. Jesus sent people out of the room except a few disciples, including Peter, and used similar language – instead "*Talitha kum*" it's "*Tabitha kum*". One letter difference! The point is intentionally being emphasized, **Jesus is still at work!** And knowing Jesus is at work in Peter, a qualified leader, prepares us for **one of the greatest revelations in all of God's historical program – the acceptance of unclean Gentiles!**

That little descriptive detail about Peter staying with **Simon, a tanner**, also prepares us for this because tanners handled animal skins from ceremonially unclean animals. According to the Law, Peter's already likely unclean for praying over a dead person and now he's surrounded by unclean animals. God is directing him to cross some uncomfortable barriers already, but he's still reluctant.

*1 Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" 4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 "Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; 6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, 8 and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

## **II. CORNELIUS'S VISION. (10:1-8)**

Now **Cornelius** is from **Caesarea** which had a **heavy Gentile, Roman presence**. This is a city Herod built up and built a temple to Caesar there, named it after Caesar Augustus. It was the

**provincial capital** for Rome, the seat of Roman administration in Israel. So **this city represented to the Jew everything that was wrong in Israel** – Gentile occupation and Roman domination. Faithful Jews, feeling oppressed by and fed up with the Romans, wouldn't be caught entering this city and they wouldn't be caught entering the home of a **Roman centurion** there like Cornelius. **Centurions** were **commanders** of Roman troops (over 100 men in a cohort of 600). Jews especially hated Roman military officials but if you've read through the gospels, your heart is already prepared for a centurion to get saved because the seeds have already been sown. A centurion once came to Jesus and asked Him to heal his servant from a great distance. Jesus said of him that he had greater faith than anyone else in Israel. Another centurion at the cross said, "*Surely this was the Son of God!*" Similar to those two, Cornelius is what Luke calls a **god-fearer**, which seems is a technical term to refer to someone who is sympathetic towards Judaism but **not a full convert**. He had been exposed to the God of Israel and prayed and tithed, but that's about it. Not baptized. Not circumcised. And severely limited in his ability to approach God in Jewish worship. Chapter 11:14 says **he's still not saved**, which brings up a good point.

### **BCP #3 – All must believe the gospel for salvation.**

Someone can be very religious – giving and praying and doing many religious things – but this account drives the biblical truth home that unless someone hears the gospel and believes, they are not saved. **One must place their trust in Christ as Savior for the barrier of their sins between them and God to be removed.** This thought ought to cause some of us to think about unreached peoples out there who need the gospel and don't have it. We need more men and women who will cross the borders of countries and cross cultures and cross ethnic lines to reach people with the gospel and establish churches. This account also proves God will go to incredible lengths to get the gospel to someone who is truly seeking Him, through a believer.

This is also neat: Cornelius' prayers & alms are said to have **ascended as a memorial** before God. The language is reminiscent temple sacrifices. Here is a Gentile man outside the temple offering sacrifices that God responds to by granting him more revelation. And he does what the angel says and sends some men to Joppa to get Peter. Meanwhile, God is directing Peter to receive them.

*9 On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; 11 and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, 12 and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. 13 A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" 14 But [typical, stubborn] Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." 15 Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." 16 This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.*

### **III. PETER'S VISION. (10:1-29)**

At about noon, the day after Cornelius sends his men to get Peter, Peter goes up on the roof to relax. The flat top roofs of their homes are a great place to relax. The roof Peter was on maybe had some type of awning made from a sheet for shade. But as he's waiting for the meal to be prepared, he falls into a trance and sees a sheet full of all kinds of animals and birds and insects and a voice saying, "*Get up, Peter, kill and eat!*" You'd think he'd be all excited! I can eat bacon! But instead, Peter, being a good kosher Jew, has always lived by the distinctions in the Law and denies it. In the Law of Moses (Lev. 11), there were **several animals off limits** to Jews like buzzards and fish without scales and camels or pork. Basically, their purpose was to teach them **God is holy and they were to be holy**. To do so, required being different. Some of the laws kept them distinct from the nations as a chosen people and some were no doubt for health reasons. When Christ came though, He fulfilled the Law and we are not under it as the Church.

But in Peter's typical fashion, he tells the Lord no. "*I won't change!*" By the way, calling Him **Lord** and saying **no** to Him is an oxymoron. Didn't Jesus say, "*Why do you call Me Lord, Lord, but do not do what I say?*" But God replies, "*What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy*" and the vision is **repeated 3 times** to get it through his coconut of a head. Peter is hardheaded and repetition from the Lord signifies God is determined about this and we need to pay attention (Gen. 41:32). This is another great principle for us. As believers, the reason why we don't get more involved in His will and His mission is because of the barrier of our own wills. We can be hardhearted and hardheaded (Ezek. 3:7). We've got to let the Word penetrate our heart and mind.

#### **BCP #4 – Surrender your will to His will.**

What does Romans 12:1-2 say? Surrender. Ultimately, we learn this **isn't just about Peter changing his diet, but about changing his heart for the Gentiles**. God is showing Peter how fellowship, even table fellowship with Gentiles, is now acceptable. He's still processing though...

*"17 Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings [without doubt], for I have sent them Myself." 21 Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" 22 They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him."*

So God is **divinely directing** Cornelius and Peter, making it indisputable. Peter goes with these men to **Caesarea** the next day. **Verse 24** continues, "*On the following day he entered [enemy territory looking around cautiously to see who might recognize him – just kidding, I added that because that's probably what it was like] Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had*

*called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man." [God alone deserves our veneration like that – not men or angels] As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for..."* Now let's read one last verse in 34, "*I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality.*"

That's where we will pause and wait to continue the rest of the story next week. But Peter is coming to understand here that God's plan in choosing Abraham and His descendants, the Jews, has always been to reach the nations with the truth of who He is and who we are – He is holy and we are not – we are sinners who deserve to be separated from Him. We deserve an eternal barrier between us. But **the good news of the gospel is that He has made a way for all men to be reconciled to Him the same way – through Christ.** While not even the best Jew could perfectly keep God's 10 commandments, God became a man and kept it Himself, fulfilling God's holy demands and now offers us **forgiveness** and a **righteous standing** before God **through faith in Christ.** God's **holiness** and **justice** has been **satisfied** through Christ for those who **believe.**

#### **BCP #5 – The gospel is for everyone.**

That's the primary message we need to understand today. The gospel is for everyone – Jew and Gentile (you). And we should **seek to share the gospel with everyone and be willing to cross barriers to get the message to them.** If it's for the nations, it's for the nations. It doesn't matter who they are, what continent they're on, what the color of their skin is, what the culture is like... Jesus died for them and has good news for them. What matters is whether they know Christ or not. Peter says God shows no partiality or favoritism (we'll talk more about true justice next week). But what that means is that we shouldn't either. The problem is that, well, it's hard to teach an old and proud dog new tricks. It's hard to leave the familiar. It's hard to leave our comfort zones. It's easier to avoid people who don't look or act like us. But the truth is, we need more "Tabitha's" who will self-sacrificially give of their time and energy to reach out and show people the love of Christ. It's a broken, needy, fallen world and we've got to think more like missionaries no matter where we are. To get our hands "dirty" so that hearts might be clean in Christ.

Our challenge today is to lay what is safe and familiar aside and instead, start crossing some barriers we might not normally cross with the intention of advancing the gospel, giving people the hope of Christ. To know your barriers just ask yourself: ***Who do I consider unclean that God might want me to reach out too?*** Who and what type of people do I typically avoid? And prayerfully start crossing some of those boundaries. Maybe it's a conversation or having them over for dinner, starting a relationship with them. That's a good place to start.

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<sup>i</sup> Homer Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1972), 89.