

## **Sermons in Acts: No Partiality**

After Stephen was martyred by the Jewish Council, a persecution rose against the church in Jerusalem:

*A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria.*  
(Acts 8:1)

It seems that the church, until this point in time, was content to stay in Jerusalem. Even though its apostles were from Galilee, the importance of the Jewish nation's "main city" was such that they continued to live there, to minister there and to preach the gospel there. After all, the Jews were required to make at least one pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year on one of the three main feast days, unless they lived too far away or if poor health or some other contingency prevented their going. So the leaders of the early church knew that they would have an audience of many thousands of people coming from all over the empire. Also, this was the city where their Master had been crucified and resurrected - it was a place of immense significance for all believers.

Notice that even after the persecution began, the apostles, the leaders of the church, stayed behind in Jerusalem, while most of the rest scattered. Among those who left town and began to minister was Philip, who preached in Samaria and who explained the prophecy of Isaiah to an Ethiopian who was treasurer to the queen of his country.

In chapter 9, we read the story of Saul, the man who had witnessed Stephen's stoning and who instigated the persecution against the Christians. While on one of his missions of destruction, he met the risen Jesus on the road outside Damascus and was converted to the faith, later changing his name to Paul and becoming a great missionary of the early church.

Now that the church was expanding in centers outside Jerusalem, it was important to visit those places and to give teaching, encouragement, prayer and counsel. Chapter 10 tells us that Peter traveled from place to place in order to visit the believers and his journeys took him out to the coast, west and slightly north of Jerusalem, where he healed a paralytic named Aeneas in the town of Lydda and raised a Christian woman named Tabitha from death in the town of Joppa.

Up the coast from Joppa was a place called Caesarea, built by Herod the Great and named after Caesar Augustus - the same Herod and Caesar who were ruling at the time Jesus was born. It was a Roman city with a deep harbor, wide streets, storerooms and baths, and temples to Rome and to Augustus. Every five years it hosted major sports competitions, gladiator games and theatre productions. It was the administrative center for the Roman rule over Judea. In that town there lived a Roman army officer, the captain of the Italian Regiment, a man named Cornelius. He was unlike most Roman soldiers in that he feared the God of Israel, prayed to Him regularly and gave generously to charity. His whole household followed him in his faith in God.

One afternoon, about 3 o'clock, God gave him a vision and told him to send some men down the coast to Joppa and find a man named Peter who was staying with a leatherworker named Simon who lived near the shore. They were to give Peter a simple message: come to Caesarea and visit Cornelius. So he sent two of his servants and a devout soldier down to Joppa and, the next day, just as these men were coming close to the city, Peter fell into a trance and saw something like a large sheet being lowered towards him. On the sheet were large numbers of animals, birds and reptiles that devout Jews would not eat because they were outlawed as "unclean" by the Old Testament laws. Then a voice spoke to Peter, "Get up, kill and eat." But Peter responded, "Never, Lord. I have never in all my life eaten anything forbidden by our Jewish laws!" But the voice replied, "If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't." This vision was repeated three times, each time with the same result. While Peter tried to figure out what this meant, the three men sent from Caesarea stood outside the gate and asked for him and the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "Three men have come looking for you. Go down and go with them without hesitation. All is well, for I have sent them." So Peter went downstairs, found the men, told them he was the man they were looking for and asked what they wanted.

*They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout man who fears the God of Israel and is well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to send for you so you can go to his house and give him a message."*

*So Peter invited the men to be his guests for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some other believers from Joppa. (10:22,23)*

When Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, he found quite a crowd - his host had invited his relatives and close friends and, of course, the members of his own household were all there. Peter told him that it was against the Jewish laws for him to be there, but that God had shown him that he should not think of any person as being unacceptable to God and so he had come. Cornelius then told Peter why he had sent for him and gave him the floor so that he could deliver the message that God had for him and his household.

*Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality. In every nation He accepts those who fear Him and do what is right. I'm sure you have heard about the Good News for the people of Israel -- that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. You know what happened all through Judea, beginning in Galilee after John the Baptist began preaching. And no doubt you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we apostles are witnesses of all He did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by crucifying Him, but God raised Him to life three days later. Then God allowed Him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen beforehand to be His witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. And He ordered us to preach everywhere and to*

*testify that Jesus is ordained of God to be the judge of all -- the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in Him will have their sins forgiven through His Name.” (10:34-43)*

Peter was just getting started - at least that's what he claimed when he told the story to the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem a short while later. But he certainly didn't get to finish what he was prepared to share that day:

*Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles, too. And there could be no doubt about it, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Messiah. Afterward, Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days. (10:44-48)*

This is the last time we encounter a sermon from Peter in the book of Acts. The main character from this point on will be Paul as he takes the gospel of Jesus Messiah to the Gentile world. But this is a huge turning point, one of several of the key “hinges” that turned the faith of the early church, which was Jewish, into the faith of the nations. Here are the key events:

- 1.** The first hinge point is the conversion of Saul that is told in Acts 9. When the Lord spoke to Ananias, who was a believer from Damascus, and told him to go to Straight Street to the house of Judas and ask for Saul of Tarsus, Ananias protested because of Saul's mission to persecute the church. But the Lord responded to Ananias with these words, “Go and do what I say, for Saul is My chosen instrument to take My message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.” That would become Saul's pattern in ministry, to preach in the synagogues in various towns and then, when his message was rejected there, to preach to the Gentiles.
- 2.** The second hinge point is this experience that Peter had in the house of Cornelius. Although Peter still had struggles with this issue, and felt the pressure from the Jewish Christians who wanted the church to continue to practice the laws of Moses as if they were still normal Jews, he became more of an advocate for the Gentile mission and for full inclusion of all who came to trust in Jesus for salvation.
- 3.** The third and most decisive hinge-point was the Jerusalem Council which is described in Acts 15. This was a meeting that was made necessary by some Jewish believers who had gone up to Antioch of Syria, where Paul and Barnabas were staying, and who began teaching that a person couldn't be saved unless they kept to the Jewish custom of circumcision. The Council began with Paul and Barnabas telling stories of what was happening through their mission to the Gentiles. The next part was some men who had been Pharisees before coming to faith in Jesus insisting that all Gentile converts be circumcised and required to obey the laws of Moses. After a lengthy discussion, it was Peter who stood up and ended the discussion by recounting his experience:

*Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God, who knows people's hearts, confirmed that He accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He gave Him to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He also cleansed their hearts through faith. Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favor of the Lord Jesus. (15:7-11)*

And that settled it. Jesus' brother, James, stood up and made it official -- "we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God." (v.19) From that point on the church grew dramatically, so that soon the majority of believers were from Gentile rather than Jewish backgrounds.

Now, let's go back to Caesarea and look at some of the key points in Peter's message at Cornelius' house.

- 1.** Peter's first point is that God doesn't show partiality. What exactly does that mean? It means that He doesn't play favorites. Which would have been very surprising to a Jewish person like Peter who had thought for his whole life that God's favorites were the descendants of Abraham. And it would also have been a surprise to Cornelius who, although a God-fearer, a devout and good man, he probably also felt like God had a special place in His heart for the Jews. But this is the insight that Peter has gained from his vision of the unclean animals that were dropped down to him on the sheet -- what God has called acceptable should not be rejected by any human being. God was showing him that Gentiles were acceptable through faith in Jesus and He backed that up by pouring out the Holy Spirit on the new believers in Cornelius' household.
- 2.** The second point is the condition God places on His acceptance of people: it is those who fear Him and do what is right. There is an intellectual or mental response to God which we understand as faith. People believe in God, accept that He is greater than us and worthy of our respect, and then they respond to Him with obedience, choosing to do what is right, the things God approves of. Faith and practice both are the fruit of a real relationship with God.
- 3.** The third point that stands out to me is Peter's statement, "I'm sure you have heard about the Good News for the people of Israel -- that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all." Why would he be sure that Cornelius and his family would have heard about this good news? This is not Jerusalem; this is Caesarea! But this tells me that the Day of Pentecost was huge, that thousands of Jews from all over the Empire were talking about it, that the healing of the cripple at Gate Beautiful was talked about, and that their missionary efforts beyond Jerusalem were also hot topics of conversation. This was not a secret movement, not an underground affair. The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the offer of forgiveness of sins in His name had been broadcast far and wide by this point. This was big news and so Peter was sure they would have heard about it. He was also completely sure that they knew that Jesus had been anointed by God with the Holy Spirit -- "no doubt you know that God anointed Jesus..."

4. Once again we see the importance of witnesses - the disciples were witnesses of the good that Jesus had accomplished, beginning in Galilee. "We apostles are witnesses of all He did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem." After the resurrection, Jesus appeared, not to the general public, but to the apostles, the ones chosen by God "to be His witnesses". Their mission in the world is to bear witness, or give testimony, to the things they had heard Jesus say and seen Him do and, specifically, to bear witness to His resurrection.
5. The fifth point that I want to highlight today is that the disciples, now apostles, were under orders. They had been commissioned by Jesus to preach the following:
  - a. that Jesus has been ordained by God to be the Judge of all, the living and the dead.
  - b. Jesus was the One spoken of by all the prophets, the fulfillment of God's promises from days of old.
  - c. The prophet's message about Jesus that came into reality through His life was that everyone who believes in Him will have their sins forgiven through His Name.

Look at that list again. Jesus has been chosen, set apart by God, to be the righteous Judge. His coming was predicted by all the prophets who spoke of the forgiveness of sins that He would grant to all who believe in Him. Or, to change the order, His coming was prophesied, He came with the offer of forgiveness in response to faith, and He is coming again as Judge.

Using those five points from Peter's message in the house of Cornelius, what can we take home and apply in our own lives?

1. The first is that God is looking for the kind of person who has an open heart, who is, like Cornelius was, a God-fearer. Sometimes we will be surprised where those people are -- they won't fit our idea of what kind of people are most open to faith in Jesus. But we need to remember the thing that God taught Peter: "I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality." Once that has been seen very clearly, we know that we can look for faith in any and every human being. No one should be excluded, not street people, not people of ethnic backgrounds that we think have a bias against Christians -- many people have a sincerely open heart to the true God, if we can just show Him to them. So, be on the lookout ... everywhere.
2. The second thing that stands out to me from Peter's message is that he expected that the household of Cornelius had heard about Jesus. Are we convinced that everyone in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows and Port Coquitlam and Mission knows who Jesus is and what He did for them? Peter seemed confident that the news would have reached Joppa -- surely it should have reached the homes of our neighbors, the people we work with, the members of our extended family, friends. "No doubt you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power." No doubt! To treat people fairly, we should ensure that every person we're in contact with knows at least the things that Peter said Jesus commanded them to preach: that Jesus has been chosen by God to be the Judge of all, that His ministry was foretold by prophets hundreds of years before He came, and that everyone who believes in Him will have their sins forgiven through His Name. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every person knew enough to make an informed decision

about their response to the claims of the New Testament about what Jesus has done for us!

3. The final thing I want to pull out of this passage is, once again, this idea of being a witness. If you're on the scene of a car accident, you can be called as a witness -- and all you can do in that situation is describe what you saw, what you heard. You aren't asked about the motives of the drivers who were involved, or about all the possible courses of action they might have taken to avoid the accident. You are just asked to testify about what you saw. And Peter says this so many times in the early chapters of Acts: we are witnesses! We have had lunch with Jesus after He was raised from the dead. We were with Him when He healed the sick and even raised the dead. We can vouch for the truth of what we're saying because we've seen it, we've experienced it. The same thing is true for us - and I know I've said it more than once, but let's hear it again: we are called to be witnesses of what we have seen, what we have experienced of the risen Lord Jesus, of the indwelling Holy Spirit, of answers to prayer, of God's guidance, His provision, His care, His comfort. We've known these things and that's what we're called to be a witness to. As we press in to God, growing in our relationship with Him, receiving more answers to prayer, more grace and guidance and goodness, we will have more to testify about. Our ability to witness will just increase as we experience more of God ... so keep pressing in and pressing on.