

MIRACLES IN ACTS: GET OUT OF GOD'S WAY

ACTS 11:4-17

[THANK WORSHIP TEAM AND TECH TEAM - pioneering the live stream and making it work. We have around 300 people that join us on the live stream every week in addition to everyone who is here in person. Praise God.]

There's a funny little saying I often quote and I find it to be true about 87.5% of the time: NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED.

For hearing the voice of God and smashing down walls of ethnicity, oppressing relationships, and race, the apostle Peter gets called on the carpet by his own people, and here in Acts 11 he's invited to testify in his own defense in the first church trial. The disciple Jesus called "the rock" was asked to explain how Gentiles were becoming Christians without being required to adhere to Jewish law and custom. This was disturbing because most Christians were Jews. The Jewish religion they shared with their fellow Israelites was rich in tradition that helped define their culture.

What would happen if non-Jews were welcomed into the church? Should they be? All kinds of rumors were swirling around and nobody had yet heard an actual accounting of these controversial and explosive events... until now. Peter recounts his story here in Acts 11, a story told for us in more details in the preceding chapter, Acts 10. If you have your Bible or your Bible app, please open it to Acts 10 and 11 and we will jump back and forth between the two chapters. In Peter's account I see five parts which I will briefly emphasize: prayer, proclamation, purpose, promise, and presence. And then there's the question we get to ask ourselves: am I standing in God's way? (Prayer of illumination)

PRAYER

There is so much going on in this story, but it is rooted in the prayer life of both main human characters: Peter and Cornelius.

Prayer was an integral part of their lives. In Acts 10:3 we see Cornelius praying. In Acts 10:9 we see Peter praying. In both instances a time of day is mentioned... Cornelius prayed at 3pm in verse 3 and Peter prayed at noon in verse 9. This suggests that they **set aside time for prayer**. Perhaps these times were published hours of prayer for all devout people of Judea. Perhaps they were times that they chose, even that day, to

pray, but when 3pm hit that day, Cornelius prayed. When noon hit the next day, Peter was in prayer.

Prayer is two-way communication with God. We often view prayer as a one way street. We come with this list of concerns and cares... needs and desires, and we unload them. Then we say thank you and get out of there. I'm going to suggest that that is only part of prayer.

As a result, we start to ask questions like...

1. How can someone spend that much time in prayer?
2. Why won't God answer my prayers?

Instead of questions like...

1. How does someone get through their day without time in prayer?
2. How can I spend more time listening for the voice of God today?
3. What am I going to do as a result of what I learned in prayer today?

PROCLAMATION

In the midst of their prayer times, both Cornelius and Peter had visions. Cornelius saw and heard an angel. Peter heard a huge Voice. In both cases there was recognition that what they were seeing and hearing was from God.

God spoke to prepare them for what was next. Chances are good that God is speaking to *you* today. For what could He be preparing you?

In Peter's case he had a vision of a picnic blanket. It came down from the sky. He saw the red checkered pattern so he knew it was a picnic. :) Since he was a devout son of Israel, his version of a picnic was grilled fish and prime rib. His mouth began to water as the blanket came down, but as it was set out before him... he jumped back! This wasn't grilled fish and prime rib! These animals weren't even dead... they were alive! All kinds of animals were on this picnic blanket! There could have been lambs and chickens and fish - but there were also pigs and lizards and ducks!

And a voice said, "Get up Peter! Kill something and eat it!"

Peter was really disturbed by this and he refused to do it, saying that nothing unclean had ever touched his lips, and he wasn't going to start now.

And then the Voice proclaimed - and this is the proclamation...

“Don’t say anything that God has cleansed is unholy!”

Just to make sure Peter didn’t think this was a “one-off”, God repeated this vision two more times. This vision was earth-shattering because of its implications:

Keeping the ceremonial law as the Jews did so meticulously was not effective to produce the God-pleasing holiness they sought. What the Voice proclaimed is that **Holiness was - and is - initiated by God’s cleansing**.

This is revolutionary! For Jews in that day, and Peter was a faithful Jew, the ceremonial law was everything.

- They lived in the Roman occupation, which was possibly the largest system of oppression ever known to humanity. Living under Roman occupation, the people of Israel didn’t have their own civil law any more.
- In order to subdue the stubborn people of Judea, the Roman government allowed their religion to continue. The laws related to customs and temple worship, articulated by Moses but later greatly augmented and twisted by the Pharisees and others, were all the Jews had left. It was their means to holiness, and it was also a system to keep the Gentiles away from them.
- Not only was this a way to distance themselves from their Roman oppressors, but it was also a system that allowed the Jews, as the oppressed, to create a means by which they could despise, denigrate, and even dehumanize their oppressors. Since the earliest followers of Christ were Jewish, they naturally began to carry this with them into the church, but God wanted to shatter this system in the church, starting with Peter.

Anyone who heard the Sermon on the Mount knew that Jesus taught a different way. Peter, as one of the disciples in Jesus’ inner circle, heard more than just one sermon, and witnessed the message Jesus lived every day as well.

- Time and time again He made Himself available to individual Gentiles: The Syrophenician Woman (Mark 7:26), the Centurion and his servant (Luke 7), and the woman at the well (John 4).
- Time and time again He associated with outcasts from Jewish society, too: He invited Matthew the tax collector and allowed Mary Magdalene to follow Him; He talked

and ate with tax collectors and others that His own people the Pharisees said were unclean, and He touched lepers.

- Time and time again His whole life said, “Don’t say anything that God has cleansed is unholy.” And then He died on the cross so that everyone who will recognize their need can find cleansing from their sin in His blood. Revolutionary! Scandalous! the Gospel.

Peter didn’t realize this for two more days, but God set him up in this vision to see that this vision didn’t just apply to meat that could be eaten by Peter, but human souls who could be saved by Christ as well. We will see as we talk through this story how the meaning of this vision unfolded in his own heart and mind.

PURPOSE

Since we are able to read this story twice in about four pages, God’s appointed purpose for Peter is clear enough to us. But in real time, it was not clear to Peter, and he had to follow God’s instructions step by step.

Would we have the courage Peter had to follow the Holy Spirit even though he didn’t know why?

As Peter is on the rooftop patio trying to sort out the meaning of this vision of the picnic blanket, three men knock on the door at the street level below. From the story in chapter 10 we know that they were two trusted servants of Cornelius and a soldier who was loyal to his centurion, but also was a man who feared God. They were all three clearly not ethnic Jews, and here they were, asking for Peter.

You know, this story of Cornelius’ conversion is one of a series of miracles, some of which we would normally explain away as coincidence. But God proves His timing is perfect!

He heard the Holy Spirit tell him to go with these men, but by now it was mid afternoon so he did something surprising. Maybe the vision was starting to sink in: he invited these three Gentiles to come in for the night as his guests, to share the food that was being prepared for him, and to enjoy the same hospitality he was enjoying.

Do you remember the name of the town Peter was staying in at the time? [Joppa] Do you remember someone else who was called by God to preach to Gentiles who went to Joppa? [Jonah] Now, Jonah got on a boat in the opposite direction of where he was

supposed to go. Peter, instead, got up early the next morning with his new Gentile friends, and, taking some other friends who were Jewish Christians with him, set off in the direction God was leading him to go.

I have a linguistics trivia kind of question for you... which of these city names is linguistically different from the others... Joppa, Jerusalem, Bethel, Bethlehem, Jericho, **Caesarea**.

Peter was going to the equivalent of Niveveh at the time, Caesarea, the seat of the Roman occupation of Judea. Not only was he going to Caesarea, but in the shadow of the Roman governor's mansion he was going to meet with Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian cohort - a group of soldiers identified by their ethnicity as the Gentiles of Gentiles, the pinnacle of Roman superiority over the stiff-necked and troublesome, but ultimately powerless, Jewish people.

PROMISE

As I mentioned earlier, Peter was not the only one in this story who received a vision; Cornelius the Centurion in the Italian Cohort, did as well. In his vision an angel appeared and said, "Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'" (Acts 11:13-14)

So Peter began to preach the Gospel and explain Jesus to Cornelius, and Cornelius's invited guests - friends and family. No pressure.

Peter's message is recorded for us in Acts 10:34-43. The promise here is that **salvation is through Jesus Christ and is available to EVERYONE**. Peter begins with *everyone* language:

"I now understand that God shows no partiality, but welcomes from every nation those who fear Him and do what's right..." (10:34b and 35)

Peter speaks of the life and ministry of Jesus in everyone terms, "... how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil..." (Acts 10:38b)

And Peter gave an invitation to everyone: "...through His name everyone who believes in Him receives the forgiveness of sins."

When we come to Him in faith, Jesus Christ receives us all regardless of race, ethnicity, lifestyle choices, socioeconomic backgrounds... "To *as many as received Him, to those who believed* on His Name, He gave the right to become children of God!" (John 1:12)

and later this Word Himself says, “I am the Door; *anyone* who enters through Me shall be saved... the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. I am come that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” (John 10:9-10)

Years later, in his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote, “**12** For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; **13** for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

... **17** So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:12, 13, 17)

As Cornelius and his household and guests heard, they believed.

PRESENCE

And as Peter wrapped up his message, before he could give an invitation or call for an offering, the Holy Spirit poured Himself out on Cornelius and everyone there who received Peter’s message.

Do you remember the Day of Pentecost? The believers were gathered in one place, there was a strong wind that blew around the room, flames of fire appeared on every head and then what happened? [They began speaking in tongues.] **In this moment, the presence of God was shown through the new believers speaking in tongues.**

“Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.” (Acts 20:44-46)

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles because God wanted to show that everyone can experience His presence.

The power of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of salvation, was not just for Jewish people, it was for anyone who would call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved!

After these Gentiles believed, after the Holy Spirit was given to them, Peter invited them to be baptized and he stayed with them a while.

STANDING IN GOD’S WAY: Are you a roadblock or a conduit?

Have you ever had experiences in your life that you could only explain as the presence of God? He met with you and suddenly the atmosphere around you changed? Have you ever had moments by yourself or with a couple other people or hopefully in worship where you felt like you could reach out and touch God? Moments where you heard Him speaking clearly into Your life? Moments of such intense joy that you were overwhelmed?

It was this experience of the presence of God that caused Peter to say what he said in his conclusion to the Jerusalem Council: “So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

Peter had a lot of experience with people who stood in God’s way. Sometimes they were well-meaning, but not always. The religious leaders at the time of Christ often twisted their own ideas and cherished traditions in with the Law of Moses, which was difficult enough to keep. As a result, they had myriads of miniscule microlaws that they could use to prove their own righteousness and rebuke the unrighteousness of others. Sadly, they stood in God’s way.

How many times do we, though well meaning, add to the burden of someone in need of a miracle? How many times do we regard as unholy someone God wants to cleanse?

Question to ask myself today: am I a roadblock or am I a conduit? Am I keeping the miracles of God to myself, or am I allowing them to flow through me? Am I willing to go where He tells me to go, to share with those whom He tells me to share? Am I willing to step out of my group to demonstrate God’s miraculous, system-shattering, transformative love? And am I willing to receive the Word God speaks to me?

[PRAYER] God, please speak to us! Don’t leave us to wander on our own! Fill us with Your love and passion for everyone You have made. Let us believe and live Your simple gospel. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage to follow Christ in His humility, compassion, and true righteousness, that we may hear Your proclamation, follow Your purpose, believe and share Your promise, and experience Your presence in stronger, deeper ways. Amen.

BONUS MATERIAL :) - I was trying to figure out an intro, and my mind went to "The Music Man" - how would he pitch the "Gentile Situation"? So here's a version of "Ya Got Trouble"...

Oh we got trouble right here in Caesarea, with a capital T that rhymes with G that stands for Gentiles. We've surely got trouble right here in Caesarea, right here! Gotta figure out a way to keep that Gospel bottled up!

*Mothers of Jerusalem,
Heed this warning before it's too late!
Watch out for the tell-tale signs of evangelism!
The minute the Gospel is shared,
Does the new convert become kosher for the community?
Is the Law placed upon his forehead?
Does he learn the ways of the Temple?
Or does he continue to speak his own language?
Are more people like him coming to church?
We must preserve our ways
Or we will be certainly left in the lurch
and so my friends...*

Oh we got trouble right here in Caesarea, with a capital T that rhymes with G that stands for Gentiles. We've surely got trouble right here in Caesarea, right here! Gotta figure out a way to keep that Gospel bottled up!