



# Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 10:1-11:18  
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## What's Important to God

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

The last few weeks I've been trying to figure out my schedule for the Fall. It may sound awfully early for me to be doing that but I have a bit of a dilemma in that each of my three kids will be involved in a sport. I'll have a daughter playing soccer in Spokane, a son playing high school football here at home, and a son-in-law coaching football at Stanford. And then I have this irritating thing I'm supposed to do most Sundays called preaching. So I have to figure out how to do my job and see as many games as I possibly can, and to be honest, it's like putting together a 2,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. There could be some weekends where I watch a high school football game on Friday, then fly to Spokane on Saturday morning to watch a soccer game that afternoon, and then fly home that night to preach on Sunday!

Someone might say, "You're crazy to do all of that. Why go to all of that trouble?" But, as a father, the reason I do that is simple. The reason why I'm willing to go to all of that trouble is because it's important to me. My kids are important to me and so is supporting them in what they're doing, so much so that I'm willing to take great pains to be there.

This brings up an interesting question. What is so important to God that he would go to great pains to do? What is so important to him that he would go to great lengths to make happen? I know that may sound like I'm belittling God. There is a sense in which God doesn't take pains to do anything. He's the all-powerful and sovereign God who certainly doesn't have to figure out a calendar and how he'll be in two or even a million places at once and whether or not he has the resources to pull it all off. Rest assured, I know that. But, from our perspective, from the standpoint of what it looks like to us, there are some things that it seems God puts himself out to accomplish. And the thing I want to ask today is what would that be?

There is a story in Acts 10-11 that shows God working overtime to make something happen; to communicate something of paramount importance. Sometimes we look at the circumstances of our lives and how things come together in what couldn't possibly be coincidental and we say that was a God-thing. Here in Acts 10:1-11:18 we have a God-thing. It's a long passage but I'm covering it all at once because it's one story and when you consider the whole you just have to stand back and say, "Wow! God really wanted to make sure that message got across. He went to amazing lengths to make this happen."

The story takes place in six scenes and I'm going to go through this pretty fast so hold onto your seat belt.

### I. He sends an angel to Cornelius.

In scene one God sends an angel to a man named Cornelius. He was what they called back then a gentile, which means that he wasn't a Jew. He lived in an important Roman city called Caesarea. He held an important position in the Roman army as a Centurion, which means that he was in charge of a battalion of 100 soldiers. But even though he was a gentile, he was a God-fearing man who held the Jewish faith in high esteem. Verse 2 says he was "**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.**" Cornelius is what we would call a "good guy." An angel comes to this good guy and tells him to dispatch some of his men to the city of Joppa and find a man named Peter who is staying at the house of a tanner named Simon by the sea. Cornelius does as the angel says.

So for whatever reason, God is willing to go so far as to send an angel to a gentile soldier who will then send three of his best men on a 32 mile trek to an unknown beach house in Joppa to find a man they have never met or even heard of named Peter.

### II. He appears to Peter in a vision.

Scene two switches to Peter; a Jewish fisherman who had become an apostle of Jesus Christ. The next day, sure enough, Peter is in Joppa hanging out at Simon's beach house. He has no knowledge that three Roman soldiers are on their way to find him. He goes up to the flat rooftop at about noon to spend some time in prayer. While he's up there he gets hungry and as he's getting ready to eat he falls asleep and has a vision. He sees heaven open and a large sheet being let down to earth, filled with all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. Look at v.13, "**And a voice came to him, 'Arise, Peter, kill and eat!' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.'**" Perhaps Peter is just so hungry he starts dreaming about food! But in fact this would have been like an ancient version of *Fear Factor* to Peter. The command to eat animals that were unclean would have sounded as repulsive to Peter as eating banana slugs would be to us. This was about so much more than scruples about Jewish food laws. This was the way the Jews maintained their distinctive faith in the midst of pagans. Remember, they were the minority living in occupied Palestine, trying to hold on to God's laws in the midst of tremendous pressure to compromise and cave into the culture around them. That's why Peter says, "**By no means, Lord!**" But then look what happens in v.15: "**And again a voice came to him a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer**

consider unholy.' And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky."

Now we have to ask the question, what would cause God to actually tell someone to do something that was against their conscience and what they understood his word to say? And what would cause him to tell him to do that not once, or twice, but three times?

### III. He times the arrival of Cornelius's men with Peter's visions.

In the third scene, Cornelius's men arrive Simon's door. Peter is still on the roof, trying to figure out what the vision means, when the Lord speaks to him and says, "**Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them Myself.**" So Peter goes down and finds the three men at the door and says, "I'm the one you're looking for. Now why are you here?" And 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.**" So Peter invites them in for lunch.

The amazing thing about this is how far God went to direct the timing. If they had come *before* the vision they wouldn't have been allowed in because they were gentiles. Or if they had come an hour later Peter would have had more time to think about the vision and could have just discounted it as the pizza from the night before. But God went to great lengths to time it so that Peter had his vision right when these guys were approaching the house. That's another amazing thing.

The next day, Peter sets out for Caesarea with six of his own men and the three who had been sent by Cornelius. Now we have nine men traveling 32 miles back to Caesarea.

### IV. He prepares Cornelius and friends to hear the message.

This brings us to scene four. The group arrives at Cornelius's house. He has by now gathered all his relatives and close friends and they're waiting in his living room. Look what happens starting in v.25: "**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.'**" You see here that Cornelius, even though he was a God-fearing man, had no clue. He's a classic pagan who thinks Peter is some kind of god.

Peter goes into the living room and he sees all these people gathered. Know that it was a huge thing for Peter to even enter this house. Jews just didn't go into the homes of gentiles because by accepting their hospitality they would be putting themselves in a position where they would have to touch and eat unclean things. Peter says to them in v.28, "**You**

**yourself 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. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me.**" Peter sees that this is about more than clean and unclean food; it's about people. And now he's learned that there are no people that are off limits to God and therefore there are none that should be off limits to him.

Then Cornelius tells the whole story of how the angel appeared to him and told him to send his men to Joppa to find Peter and bring him back. And then Cornelius says to Peter in v. 33, "**Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.**" You can see here how God has been at work to prepare this man and all of these people for this moment.

So Peter goes on and preaches the gospel to them all. He tells them about Jesus, his life and ministry, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and then he says at the end in v.43, "**through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.**"

### V. He sends his Spirit upon Cornelius' household in a visible way.

But before they could do anything look what happens in scene five. Luke says, "**While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 'Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?' And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.**" So now God has not only prepared their hearts but he's gone further and sent his Spirit to fall on them in a visible way much like he did at Pentecost. Remember, this didn't happen like this to everyone who believed in Jesus. Most people believed and got baptized and received the Spirit without all the bells and whistles. So why is God taking such great pains to do something special like this?

### VI. He convinces the Jews that God was granting to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

Well, in the sixth scene the truth comes out. All the rest of the apostles and all the big wigs in Jerusalem caught wind of what had happened, particularly the part about how Peter had been fraternizing with uncircumcised gentiles, and they didn't like it. So Peter went to Jerusalem and told them the whole story. Luke says in 11:18 that "**when they heard this they quieted down and glorified God.**" And they spoke and when they spoke they answered the question for us. In their own words they tell why God would go to such great pains. Are you ready for it? Here is what they say: "*Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.*"

## VII. God will go to any lengths to communicate that he is granting to all people the repentance that leads to life.

And that's the lesson of this story. God is granting not just to the Jews, but to all people the repentance that leads to life. This is so important to God that he will go any lengths for people to understand that. The emphasis in this story is on this idea of "all people." This story shows us three things...

**First, God's love extends to all people the same.** If you were in Texas you might very well see a pickup truck with a bumper sticker that said, "Texan by the grace of God." That just about sums up how most Texans feel. They're proud of their home state, and they're proud of the Cowboys. Texas Stadium (where the Cowboys play) is built almost like a dome, but it has a huge opening at the top. The seats in the stadium are under a roof, but the field itself is under the open sky. You know why they say that is, don't you? It's so God can watch his favorite team play.

This is the kind of attitude Jewish people had Peter's day. In the OT the people of the nation of Israel were God's chosen people. Some believed this meant they were his favorite people as well...that God loved them more than the others. They believed that God had no use for Gentiles. Though a Gentile could convert to Judaism, he could attain only a "second-class" status in their religion. Some Jews even went so far as to say you shouldn't aid a Gentile woman in childbirth, because who would want to bring another Gentile into the world.

It was this kind of religious prejudice that God wanted Peter to overcome. He wanted to use Peter to tell the world something new: God is not only the God of the Jews, he's the God of all creation. That's why in 10:34-35 Peter says, **"I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him."** This, by the way, was always God's plan. When God called Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, he said, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." That's talking about gentiles. God's plan was like a funnel, starting narrowly with the Jews and expanding outward to all people in every place.

We may say that all men are created equal, but hasn't worked out that way in our society. Some are born with greater opportunities than others, a better family, more money, more talent, more intelligence, more resources. We haven't created a society where all people are equal. That's true in many churches. Martin Luther King once said, "The most segregated hour in America is 11:00 on Sunday morning." This is a mistake that many churches have made in the past; today we must strive to show that God loves all people, and so do we.

There is only one place in this world where true equality exists: in a relationship with God. God doesn't show favorites. He doesn't favor America over other nations, he doesn't favor one race over another race, he doesn't favor men over women, or the rich over the poor. God's love extends to all. This is good news, because the only thing that really matters in life is a relationship with God, and it's equally available to anyone. Anyone can know him. Anyone can talk to him in prayer. Anyone can

experience his love. Anyone can be forgiven. Anyone can do his will. As Peter says, *"God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him."* In light of all the inequality that exists in our world, it's good to know that in the most important aspect of life true equality exists. It doesn't matter who you are. God loves you.

**Second, God's judgment extends to all people the same.** The Bible says that Jesus is your friend (John 15:14), he's your brother (Romans 8:29), he's your advocate (1 John 2:1). Peter reminds us that Jesus is also our judge. In v.42 he says that Jesus is the one **"appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead."** There is no other judge I would rather have. When you stand before the judgment throne to give an account of all you've done, who do you want to face? Your high school soccer coach? Your boss? Your mother-in-law? Do you think they would be able to judge with both fairness and mercy? The Bible teaches that God is a fair and merciful God—not at all like a human judge.

In 1994 three American citizens came together to smuggle heroin from Thailand into the US. All three were caught at different stages of the act—one in Thailand, one in Holland, one in the US. The person caught in the US was given a two-year suspended sentence and sent to rehab. The one caught in Holland spent two years in a Dutch prison. The one caught in Thailand was sentenced to death. Same crime, three different punishments. The idea of justice differs from nation to nation, in state to state, and from judge to judge. We can argue over which judge or which nation is "right" but the fact remains that there is inequity in our administration of justice.

It doesn't work that way with God. Human courts may fail at administering justice, but Jesus won't. He judges everyone the same with absolute fairness. There are two lies the devil will try to get you to believe. First, that you're a good enough person that you won't need his grace and mercy at the judgment. The other one is that you're such a bad person that there won't be enough grace and mercy for you at the judgment." If he can't convince you of one, he'll try to sell you the other.

Jesus will judge you with absolute fairness. True means two things. First, you can't escape consequences just because you're you. There's no personal privilege you can invoke that will get you off the hook. Cornelius is described in this passage as the quintessential "good" person. He was righteous and devout. He feared God. He gave money to the poor. He prayed continually. But that wasn't enough. He still needed the gospel. He still needed to repent. He still needed to be forgiven and saved. That's why God went to all this trouble to get him the message of Christ. The second thing true means is that if anyone in the world can be forgiven, you can. God will not deny you what he's offered freely to everyone else. It doesn't matter who you are...it's not going to work for you or against you. God judges everyone the same.

**Third, God's salvation extends to all people the same.** If you stood before the throne of God today to face judgment based on your own merit, how do you think you would do? When you think about the judgment of God, some of you probably begin to feel uneasy. No one wants to stand before the judge when they're guilty, and we're all guilty. God judges us impartially. He won't let you off the hook just because you are who you are, but—here's the good news—he will let you off the hook because of who he is. His purpose for sending Jesus into the world was to save us from our sins. In v.43 Peter said, **"Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."**

You'll never be able to earn good standing with God based on your own merit. Nothing you do can ever make you worthy enough to stand in the presence of God. But Christ died on the cross for you. If you believe in him you can experience God's forgiveness. It doesn't matter who you are, it only matters who you know.

This is how we all begin the Christian life—believing in Jesus. But this is how you live the Christian life. Coming to Christ is a matter of God's grace; continuing in Christ is a matter of God's grace, too. When we put our faith in him we're covered by his mercy. As we learn to live the Christian life from day to day, we stumble and fall along the way, and we still need his mercy.

## CONCLUSION

It's only when we LIVE the Christian life in this way that we can learn the lessons that Peter had to learn in this story and take pains like God did to get the message across. In order to reflect God's character, Peter had to have a sort of paradigm shift in how he thought about people. He thought he understood the gospel, but he hadn't learned to apply it to everyone. How about us? Would we go as far as God went to make sure that no one was left out.

Our fallenness makes us want to be a part of not just any group, but an *exclusive* group. Every society includes people who belong to one another and those who don't. Every society includes people who feel left out, who don't get chosen at recess, who don't get invited to the parties. We exclude others because of pride or fear or ignorance.

I think about this whenever I climb aboard an airplane. The first-class passengers are served gourmet food on china and crystal by their own flight attendants; those of us in coach eat snacks served in plastic wrappers. The first-class passengers have room to stretch and sleep; those of us in coach are sitting like teenage lovers in the back row of a movie. The first-class passengers have flight attendants who bring them moist towelettes for comfort and personal hygiene; those of us in coach have to wipe away our facial sweat. Then the curtain gets drawn to separate the two compartments. It's not to be violated; it's like the veil that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Holy of Holies in the temple at Jerusalem. The curtain is a reminder throughout the flight that some people are first class and some aren't.

Let the curtain stand for a tendency deep inside the fallen human spirit—the tendency to *exclude*. We divide the world up into "us" and "them." But this is a story that reminds us that God doesn't exclude; he includes. There is no first class. There is no coach. With God it's like Southwest Airlines. God has gone to great lengths to show us that he is granting to all people the repentance that leads to life.