

LIFE FOR ALL

by Ray C. Stedman

It is often suggested that the book of Acts ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. I agree. Nowhere is the sovereign superintendency of the Holy Spirit more in evidence than in this wonderful account of how he moved to open the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Please turn again to the tenth chapter of Acts where we are examining the story of the working of the Holy Spirit in his sovereign direction of men. We have learned that it was necessary first for him to prepare the heart of a Gentile, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, to receive the message of life. He did that by awakening in him a sense of hunger which Cornelius expressed in prayers, in the giving of alms, and in seeking after God. Then he had to remove an iceberg of Jewish prejudice against Gentiles that remained in the heart of the Apostle Peter. To do that he gave Peter the vision of the sheet let down from heaven with various kinds of animals, birds, and reptiles in it, and told him pointedly that they all were clean. Then he brought Peter and Cornelius together through an angel who visited Cornelius and had him send for Peter.

We resume the account as Peter and the brethren accompanying him leave the city of Joppa:

The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; and he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask you then why you sent for me." {Acts 10:23b-29 RSV}

There are certain human reactions that Dr. Luke has recorded for us which mark this as the authentic account of a real episode. When Peter entered Cornelius' house, this proud Roman centurion fell down at his feet and worshipped him. It is remarkable that a member of the subjugating military garrison should fall at the feet of one of the subject people and worship him. But so hungry is the heart of this man Cornelius, so desirous is he of finding God, that he is actually willing to worship a Jew. Peter of course is embarrassed. He lifts Cornelius up and says, "I'm just a man like you; don't worship me." This, by the way, is most interesting, in view of the Roman Catholic claim that Peter was the first Pope. He refused to accept the homage of this man and would not allow him to give it.

Also, Peter obviously is still uneasy at entering the home of a Gentile, for he feels called upon to explain his action. As they go into the house he says to Cornelius, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation." Now, that was not God's law; that was man's law. The Jews had adopted that position on their own. But Peter had been taught a lesson, and though he obviously did not fully understand it, he says, "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean and so I've come. What do you want of me?" Cornelius now tells his side of the story:

And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, saying, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.' So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." {Acts 10:30-33 RSV}

It was one of the most strategic home Bible classes ever held. It is the exact format of a home Bible class: A man opens his home, gathers his friends into it, has some refreshments ready, and invites a teacher to come and present the gospel to his friends. That is the format by which our church has been conducting its outreach of evangelism for many, many years. It is still a most workable proposition, as it was on this occasion when Cornelius gathered his kinsmen and friends together. They are waiting expectantly now for the word of the gospel.

There is an impressive detail in this account which needs comment. You sometimes hear people say, quite mistakenly, that God never hears the prayers of a non-Christian. Obviously, from this account, that is not true. God did hear the prayers of Cornelius while he was yet unregenerate. God took note of his good deeds and alms as an expression of the earnestness of this man's heart. He remembered them and acted on that basis. Do not ever tell anybody that God will not hear the prayers of a person who is not a Christian. He will hear any honest and sincere prayer, regardless of the state of that man's relationship to him, if it is indeed an honest prayer.

Now we come to Peter's message. This is the purpose for which the Holy Spirit has maneuvered these men together. Here is the great message that will set Cornelius free:

**And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."
{Acts 10:34-35 RSV}**

Here we have the first preaching of the gospel, the first preaching of Jesus, to a Gentile audience. Peter makes seven distinct points and they are a marvelous unfolding of what the good news is.

The first is that God shows no partiality. God is not a respecter of persons. He receives anyone, anywhere, from any background, race, any social class, any station in life; it does not make any difference to him. He is not any more in favor of one race than another. He pays no more attention to the fact that a man is a communist than that he is a capitalist. It makes no difference to God. He is impartial, he accepts any.

Do not misread what Peter says. The words "in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" do not mean that that is all God asks of a man. They simply mean that God recognizes that he has an honest heart and a correctly receptive attitude. Cornelius still needed a lot more. He still was unregenerate, without Christ. He still had no life within his heart. He was a good man, in the worldly sense of the word, but he needed redemption, he needed salvation, he needed Christ. Yet he was acceptable to God because he was honest. That is what God wants of anyone. Anyone, in any circumstance, who comes to God with an honest heart will find an open door to the truth about Jesus Christ. That is the first part of the gospel.

Peter goes on to make the second point:

"You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;" {Acts 10:36-38a RSV}

Immediately he moves to the coming of Christ, to the incarnation, to the fact that Jesus, who, he emphasizes, is the Lord of all, came to us, nevertheless, as a man. Notice how Peter puts it in human terms. Jesus came as a man through whom God worked in love and power. He did not come primarily to display his deity, to show us how God behaves; he came to show us how man behaves as God intended him to be -- indwelt by God. That is what it takes to be a man. You will never be a human being as God intended you to be until you are indwelt by God. That is the essential ingredient of humanity that makes man, man. Jesus came to demonstrate that fact. He is God, reaching out to man in man's weakness, failure, and sinfulness to restore him and to reinhabit man who had lost the Spirit of God.

Notice also that Peter preaches the Lordship of Jesus. He does not call him the Savior; he calls him the Lord. It is as Lord that Jesus is to be received into the heart; then he becomes Savior.

The third point of Peter's message goes on from there:

"... how he [Jesus] went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem." {Acts 10:38b-39a RSV}

The next great feature of the good news is that when Jesus Christ arrived, he destroyed the effects of evil everywhere he went. He did this openly, before witnesses, where everyone could see. He came to a world that was lost and despairing, without hope. Everywhere he went he set people free and brought again to human hearts the hope that there is a way out of the desperate bondage of fallen humanity.

I do not know of a time in history since those days when our Lord was first here in the flesh, that the world has been so gripped by obvious bondage to evil forces as it is today. Men and women everywhere are hopeless, sunk deep in despair, and they need to see again this marvelous demonstration that Jesus Christ can set people free.

I will never forget the experience of a young man who came into our congregation a few years ago. I have related this story before, but it well illustrates this point. He was not accustomed to attending church -- he had not been raised in a church at all -- but his heart was hungry. He came here not knowing what we would be like. His idea of Christians was that they were a sort of super-snobbish people who self-righteously felt they were better than others. I happened to be speaking on First Corinthians 6, and I read these verses:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. {1 Cor 6:9-11a RSV}

For some reason that morning I stopped there and said, "How many in this congregation belong in this category? How many have ever been guilty of some of the things that are listed in these verses?" And I read them again. All over the congregation hands began to rise. This young man took a look around, saw this forest of hands, and said to himself, "These are my kind of people!"

Such were some of you, set free. That is what Christ does. "He went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil" as a demonstration of what God is accomplishing in the work of redemption.

Peter's fourth point is sobering, and very briefly stated:

"They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;" {Acts 10:39b RSV}

It is almost as though he does not want to dwell on it. All he says is, "They put him to death..." Jesus was killed by the most shameful means possible. Even the Romans recognized that. Cicero, the Roman orator, said, "The cross is so terrible that it should not be mentioned in polite company." But by that means Jesus, the man who went about doing good, was put to death.

Peter passes quickly to the fifth point:

"... but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." {Acts 10:40-41 RSV}

That is impressive, is it not? Peter said, "I was one of those witnesses who saw him after he rose from the dead. It was no hallucination, no ghostly, spiritual appearance, because we ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He was there in a body. Only bodies can eat and drink, and there he was." He could not be defeated by men. God's power was greater than man's, and he broke the barriers of death. Now there is the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ is the answer to death in every form, whatever it may be. Everything which creates hopelessness and despair in human life must yield to the power of this mighty Son of God.

Peter then makes the sixth point:

"And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead." {Acts 10:42 RSV}

That is, says Peter, this good news is to go out to all men everywhere. Jesus commanded us to preach him as a living person. He is not dead; he is alive and available to all men everywhere. Not only that, but he is supremely important to every person. He is the paramount figure in the universe, the ultimate crisis of all men. He is no low-caloried option in life for you to take or leave as you like; he is the ultimate person. There is not one of us here this morning who ultimately is not going to confront Jesus Christ. He stands at the end of every path down which men go, and he waits there as the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. Therefore the most important question you will ever face in life is, "What do you do with Jesus of Nazareth?" What have you done with him?

Finally the seventh point and the glorious climax to it all:

"To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name." {Acts 10:43 RSV}

Peter says, "You Romans may not appreciate this fully, but everything that Jesus did was predicted by the prophets. Long before he ever came, what he would be like and what he would do was written down. Every prophet bore witness to this one fact: The only way you could ever find forgiveness of sins is by believing in him." That is the great, final, glorious thrust of the gospel. The good news is that men have been given a way to be forgiven of their sins.

That is the basic need of every human heart. Each of us suffers from the terrible consciousness of guilt. We are guilty people; and we know it. That is what makes us so restless. That is why oftentimes we cannot stand to be alone with ourselves, because we are afraid of that sense of guilt which oppresses us. So the prime need of our lives is to be forgiven, to have nothing in the past to worry about, to have nothing that makes us uncertain of the future and, especially, nothing which makes us unwilling to appear before God. Through Jesus Christ sins are forgiven.

Have you reflected upon that, Christian friends? Have you recently stopped and thanked God that your sins are forgiven? Have you ever? Not just the ones you committed before you became a Christian; all your sins. All the future ones as well as those of the past are forgiven already in Jesus Christ. God therefore has no quarrel with you, he loves you, he accepts you. Whatever you do he will continue to love you and accept you.

But no one can take that truth and use it as a license to sin, to go out and do as you like. To do so would indicate that you have never been regenerated, have never understood why God bore your sins. But if you have been born again you know that this is the greatest and most unending blessing of your life -- to wake up every morning and remember that you stand as a beloved child in God's presence. He loves you and accepts you. You are his, and for that reason he will be with you all day long, in every circumstance of your experience.

Peter had intended to continue, but right at this point a most dramatic interruption occurs:

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. {Acts 10:44-48 RSV}

The Holy Spirit interrupted Peter. He is always doing this in the book of Acts. He did it on the Day of Pentecost. He would not let Peter finish his message. I have often wondered what Peter intended to say at the end of these messages, had the Holy Spirit not cut him off. But, at any rate, he hardly ever got to finish a

message because, before he could, the Spirit acted. What he did here is very significant. Peter had just given these people something to believe. He told them, "The prophets bear witness that every one who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins." As soon as these men heard that they believed. Immediately upon believing they received the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus said they would. He had said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink... 'Out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water,'" {cf, John 7:37-38}. "This spake he of the Spirit, whom they that believe on him should receive;" {cf, John 7:39}. As soon as they heard, they believed, and when they believed, they received. The Holy Spirit refused to wait until the altar call.

As on the Day of Pentecost the sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit was the gift of languages, the gift of tongues. This was in order to indicate to Peter, and these other Jews, that the Gentiles were being received on the same basis as the Jews had been. Peter got the point. He said, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" i.e., by the same accompanying sign. That is why these first Gentile believers spoke in tongues. It was not because that is always essential to the giving of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures do not say that. It was in order to indicate to these Jews that the Gentiles were on exactly the same basis and footing.

The gift of tongues that is given here is the biblical one. All four of the biblical marks of the true gift of tongues are present here as they were on the Day of Pentecost:

First, these were languages spoken somewhere on earth. Peter says, "It is exactly the same as we received on the Day of Pentecost" and the tongues that day were languages spoken on earth.

Second, they were not addressed to men, they were praise to God. It says that they began to speak in tongues, extolling God. That is what tongues are for. They are not for delivering messages to people who are present in a meeting, and they are not for preaching the gospel; they are for praising God.

Third, this was a public demonstration. Tongues are never privately exercised in the New Testament. They are not a private gift. They are one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which, as Paul says, are given for the common good and are not to be exercised privately. If you ever hear anyone saying that they speak in tongues privately then they are not speaking in the biblical gift of tongues. It is intended to be public.

The fourth mark confirms that. The biblical gift of tongues is a sign to unbelievers and not to believers. Paul says that. On this occasion they were a sign to these unbelieving Jews who came with the Apostle Peter. You say, "Wait a minute! I thought they were believers." Yes, they were. They were unbelieving believers, i.e., they were believers in Jesus Christ, but they did not believe that the gospel was to go out to the Gentiles. In order to convince them God gave the gift of tongues, which is a sign to unbelievers. It was a sign to them that God had accepted the Gentiles on the same basis as the Jews. Immediately Peter says, "Let's baptize them with water." As he tells us a little later, he remembers that Jesus said, "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit," {cf, Acts 1:5}. And so Peter says, "Can any one forbid water, since these have received the Holy Spirit?"

Notice that the baptism of the Holy Spirit does not do away with the baptism of water. One is a symbol of the other. These men were baptized with water because they had been baptized with the Spirit.

The last part of the story shows us what happens when this truth encounters deep-seated prejudice and tradition:

Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" But Peter began and explained to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, something descending, like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came down to me. Looking at it closely I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But

I said, 'No, Lord: for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment three men arrived at the house in which they were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brethren also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ who was I that I could withstand God? When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God saying "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." {Acts 11:1-18 RSV}

That is the way to answer arguments. Just tell what God has done. Recount the actions of God. When these men saw how God had acted, there was nothing further they could say. Peter silenced them by reminding them of the actions of God. That is where faith always rests. It rests on what God has done.

That is what the table of the Lord is all about. It is a reminder to our hearts of what God has done. He came to us in Jesus Christ. He died; he gave himself for us. He made his life available to us. As we partake of this bread and wine we are reminding ourselves of the activity of God. Upon that our faith must rest.

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