



THE INCLUSIVE KING

Acts 10

Dan Claire

September 4, 2016

After I finished seminary, I was determined to become an Episcopal priest. At the time, I really thought that the Episcopal Church would take me. They were suffering from a shortage of priests, especially clergy under forty. Signs everywhere said, “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.” But not me, not as clergy. They said that my biblical faith was unwelcome. So after five years of closed doors, I gave up hope.

In 2001, along came the Anglican Church of Rwanda, hardly the first option that came to mind when I was thinking of alternatives. I had almost nothing in common with Rwandan Christians—nothing except the Lord, who is everything. So the Rwandan church welcomed me. They ordained and included me, despite a chasm of primarily socioeconomic differences between us.

As I think back over all the good that has come from their inclusion, one of the greatest gifts is something I didn’t anticipate at all: how I would be changed as a result of serving alongside and under the authority of Rwandan Christians. For me at the time, it didn’t matter where they were from—I was merely trying to get ordained. But I’m a white boy from the deep south. Fifteen years of praying for and learning from black spiritual leaders has been really good for me. I’m not as much of a bigot as I used to be. It’s been a different kind of conversion, if you know what I mean. I used to think I was already fully converted, but that was before I knew how much more converting I still really needed.

Acts 10 is often described as the conversion of Cornelius, and yet that captures only half of the story. Because as much as Acts 10 is about a Roman centurion becoming a Christian, it’s also very much about Peter’s conversion, from exclusion to Gospel inclusion. And as we’ll see in Acts 11, what happens to Peter will lead to the transformation of the entire church. But it all begins in Acts 10, with not one but two giant leaps of faith: a Gentile commits his life to the Jewish Messiah, and a Messianic Jew embraces him as his brother. So even though Acts 10 is an important history lesson about an epochal moment in the early church, it’s also a call to radical inclusion, under the banner of our inclusive king. As we engage this story, open your heart to what the Lord will say to you, and don’t be surprised if there’s a leap of faith in your future as well.

Acts 10 is about not one, but two enormous leaps of faith made by Peter and Cornelius. I love Luke's storytelling in this chapter as he unfolds the tales of Peter and Cornelius in parallel, step by step. So in leading up to his conclusion, Luke tells the story in terms of two visions, then two journeys, and then two speeches. Let's explore the story more fully together.

ACT I. THE TALE OF TWO VISIONS (10:1-16)

Act I of chapter 10 (v1ff) is the Tale of Two Visions. Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, had the first vision. He lived in Caesarea Maritima, a luxurious Roman city on Israel's Mediterranean coast. Caesarea served as the true capital of the Roman province of Judea, even though a puppet Jewish government remained back in Jerusalem. Imagine if Russia annexed the USA, left a puppet government here in Washington, and then established a bigger and better capital city called Putin on the Atlantic Coast. That's what Caesarea was like, and that's where Cornelius lived as a wealthy, important leader.

Even though Cornelius was a Roman Centurion, no doubt raised to believe in the Roman pantheon, he was also a seeker who had become attracted to the one, true God. Through living in Israel, Cornelius had become what Jews called a "God fearer," a Gentile adherent to Judaism. As such, he was doing all that he was really allowed to do as a Gentile. He prayed to the Hebrew God at set times each day, and he generously gave alms to the poor. He was as close to becoming Jewish as a Gentile man could get without being circumcised.

And so it was that while Cornelius was saying his mid-afternoon prayers (around 3 pm), an angel appeared to him and said, v 4ff, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." Cornelius was a soldier. He knew how to take orders. So he did precisely what the angel had said.

Meanwhile, down in Joppa some 30 miles to the south, the Apostle Peter was staying with Simon the Tanner and the growing community of believers there. Up to this point, all those whom Peter had seen come to faith were fully Jewish, or were Samaritans, whose ancestry was partially Jewish, and who practiced a variation of Judaism. During his travels with Jesus, Peter had often seen Jesus showing kindness to Gentiles. Jesus had taught them and healed them and so on. Nevertheless, from what we can tell, it hadn't occurred to Peter that Jesus intended for the Gentiles and the Jews to all become one big, happy, Christian family. Peter was still traditionally Jewish, and he was all about *fulfillment* and *continuity*. All his sermons were about how Jesus *fulfilled* the OT as the long-awaited messiah king. He probably still expected *continuity* with Jewish expectations that the messiah would overthrow the Romans and drive them out of Israel. He almost certainly still expected *continuity* with Jewish customs like circumcision and eating kosher. The idea of entering a Gentile's home, or sharing a meal with Gentiles, never even crossed his mind.

It turns out that Peter and Cornelius had some things in common. Like Cornelius, it was Peter's custom to pray at fixed hours each day. At noon, while he was hungry for lunch, Peter set about saying his midday prayers. And like Cornelius, Peter also received a vision from the Lord, v 11ff: "and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven."

When Luke tells us in v12 that there were "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds," we must understand this to include non-kosher, unclean animals, like pigs and rabbits and other creatures Jews weren't supposed to eat. In Peter's vision, the Lord was overturning the ancient Jewish customs regarding clean and unclean foods.

Like Cornelius, Peter was also a man under authority. Back when Jesus was arrested, Peter had forsaken Jesus, denying him three times. Then after Jesus rose from the dead, he reinstated Peter at a breakfast in Galilee. Three times Jesus called Peter to love and follow him by feeding his sheep. Peter was reinstated under Jesus' authority. So now, when the Lord gave Peter a vision *three times*, you better believe that Peter was paying attention and ready to do Jesus' bidding. But he wasn't yet clear on what the vision meant.

So in Act I, both Cornelius and Peter received visions from the Lord during mid-day prayers, and both were ready to obey. Let's see what happened next.

ACT II. THE TALE OF TWO JOURNEYS (10:17-29)

Act II of chapter 10 (v 17ff) is a Tale of Two Journeys. First there's the journey of Cornelius' three messengers. They made it safely down to Joppa and stood at the gate of Simon the Tanner's house. Of course they didn't go in; they were Gentiles. So they called out for Peter. Meanwhile, Peter was still up on the roof pondering his bizarre vision when the Spirit said, v 19ff, "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." Then Peter, still not knowing what this was all about, went down and asked what they wanted. They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." So Peter did something surprising and extraordinary, v 23. He invited these three Gentiles inside Simon's house, to stay as guests along with him. It was a small step towards inclusion. Do you think Peter was starting to realize that his vision was about a lot more than the foods he was allowed to eat?

The second journey in Act II began the next morning, as Peter got up and did not only what Cornelius' emissaries had asked, but also what the Lord had commanded when he said to "accompany them without hesitation." Some of the other Jewish believers from Joppa must have realized the significance of what was happening, so they tagged along with Peter. It must have been a pretty interesting two days on the road, Cornelius' three Gentile messengers, and Peter with his handful of Messianic Jews. Don't you wonder what they did at mealtimes? The Romans over here with their prosciutto and provolone on ciabatta. The Jews over there with their gefilte fish and matzohs. And all the while Peter thinking about that crazy vision he'd had, and what awaited him when he met the Centurion.

After two days, they all arrived to Cornelius' home in Caesarea. Try to imagine for a moment what it must have felt like for Peter as he crossed the threshold and went inside a Gentile home, doing something that had been taboo for his entire life. And not just any Gentile household, but one of the leaders of the occupation. A Roman Centurion! Peter had been raised to fear and despise this man and all he stood for. Now he was walking into a Centurion's home. But there was no turning back. Apartheid was over. It was time for a new beginning. Somewhere along the journey, Peter had become convinced of the meaning of his vision. He said to Cornelius and the crowd who had gathered to hear him, v 28, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean." Yes! Peter! He nailed it! That's precisely what the OT was always driving at. In time Peter would come to see how the inclusion of the Gentiles was the *fulfillment* of God's call of Abraham, and the mandate given to Moses, and the vision of the prophets. He would see the *continuity* of the inclusion of many nations with the story of his nation. But for now, Peter didn't have to understand. He just had to obey, and that's exactly what he did.

So at the end of two journeys, Peter and a group of messianic Jews found themselves for the first time standing within a Gentile home, of a Roman Centurion no less, that was jam packed with the Centurion's friends and relations. Then Peter asked, v 29, "Why did you send for me?" Let's see what happened next.

ACT III. THE TALE OF TWO SPEECHES (10:30-43)

Act III of chapter 10 is a Tale of Two Speeches. Cornelius' speech comes first. Beginning in v30, he recounted his vision in which the angel commanded him to send for Peter. Then he described his response to the vision, saying (v 33): "I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." In other words, tell us the good news. We're ready to hear from you what the Lord has sent you to say.

This is the third time in as many chapters of Acts that Jesus has sent his messengers to share the good news about him with people primed and waiting to hear it. Two chapters back there was the Ethiopian eunuch. He had come from the ends of the earth seeking God, and now he was headed home, still seeking, and reading aloud from Isa 53. Then Jesus sent Philip as his messenger to share the gospel with the eunuch. Philip explained how the passage from Isa foretold that Jesus would lay down his life as a sacrifice for sin, so that they might be reconciled to God. The man gladly believed and gave his life to Jesus. Then as they passed an oasis in the desert, Philip was able to baptize him and send him on his way. Philip was Jesus' ambassador to a man who was waiting to hear the good news.

Then there was Saul the persecutor, whom Jesus blinded on the road and sent him on to Damascus, telling him to wait there for further instructions. Then Jesus sent Ananias to heal Saul and to baptize and disciple him as a new Christian. So once again, Ananias was Jesus' ambassador to a man who was waiting to hear the good news.

Peter had heard these stories. He knew about Philip and the eunuch. He knew about Ananias and Saul. So in tonight's episode, when Cornelius said to Peter, "We're all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord," Peter knew what was going on. He knew that God had prepared the hearts of Cornelius and his friends and relations, in the same way that God had prepared the Ethiopian eunuch, and Saul of Tarsus. All he had to do was make his own speech in return.

Peter's speech is one of the most important Gospel presentations in all the Bible. It's dense; I wish we could spend more time studying it together, but there's only enough time to summarize it in terms of four points.

First, Peter shared what he had just learned from the Lord, a new theological insight that was just in time for his ministry in Caesarea. (By the way, this is how Jesus teaches us. Not to say that classroom instruction isn't important, but we tend to learn best and grow best on the job and in the field, acquiring what we need to know as we need to know it.) Peter shared his new insight in vv 34-35, saying "Now I get it. God is no 'respector of persons.' Anyone from any nation who 'fears God and does what is right' may become a Christian." Peter understood this as the meaning of his "rise and eat" vision. The Gospel is good news for anyone who 'fears God and does what is right,' which in this case means pledging allegiance to Jesus. It doesn't matter what color you are. It doesn't matter where you come from, or whether your parents are still together. You too can become a Christian. It doesn't matter whether you're Democrat or Republican, Libertarian or unaffiliated. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. You too can become a Christian. It doesn't matter whether you're single, married, divorced, remarried. It doesn't matter whether you're opposite-sex attracted, same-sex attracted, all or neither, confused or ambivalent. You too can become a Christian, because Jesus Christ is inclusive. There's no house that he

enters in which he feels ill at ease. He is very happy for you to join his kingdom. His church welcomes you, no matter who you are.

Secondly, in v 36, Peter summarized the Gospel message that up until now he had been sharing with his fellow Jews. It is “the Gospel of peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.” I do not understand why the ESV translators put “he is Lord of all” in parentheses in v36. Biblical Greek had no punctuation. There were no spaces or periods, let alone parentheses, or en-dashes. Peter was not trying to mutter Jesus’ Lordship under his breath, as if he didn’t want Cornelius the Centurion to hear him saying something seditious. Rather, this is hands down the most important thing Peter says. Jesus is Lord, King, not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles. And that’s why everyone ought to swear allegiance to him. Sooner or later every knee will bow before him, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. Why not do it now, and experience the joy of knowing him and serving him throughout your life?

If you’ll swear allegiance to King Jesus, then you’ll discover what Peter meant with the rest of his summary of the Gospel in this verse, namely that there’s good news of peace *through* Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. Apart from Jesus, we can have no peace with God, who knows our lives and our hearts better than we do. We were born to know God and to love him, but we prefer to do our own thing, and that’s sin. There’s no forgiveness of sins, no reconciliation with God, except through faith in the Lord Jesus. And there’s also no peace with one another. Despite our best intentions, we hurt one another, and those hurts pile up. How can Jews and Gentiles deeply love one another and be friends? How can Rwandan tutsis and hutus forgive one another and welcome one another into their homes? How can blacks and whites in our country become one united people, beating swords into plowshares and loving one another? Only through the Lord Jesus Christ. As the bumper sticker says, “No Jesus, no peace. But if you know Jesus, then you will know peace.” And his peace is the foundation for the peace we have with one another.

Thirdly, Peter summarized what Jesus did during his ministry in Israel, eventually culminating in his crucifixion (v 39) and resurrection (v 40). That’s how Jesus was able to broker the peace we now can have with God and one another. He died on the cross for our sins, so that we might be reconciled to God. And he rose from the dead, the firstborn into eternal life promised to all who trust in him. It’s because of what Jesus did that he is now Lord of all, and worthy of our allegiance. Without the cross and the resurrection, we would have no hope.

Fourth, and finally, Peter returned (vv 42-43) to the universal offer of peace in Jesus. It’s something that all of us who follow Jesus are to carry with us and share with the world. Just as Cornelius and his household were waiting to hear the good news from Peter, our world is filled with others whom God has prepared to hear from us. So we have to be ready and willing to obey when God calls us to share the good news with others.

CONCLUSION (10:44-48)

The grand conclusion is found in vv 44-48. Luke's parallel stories of Peter and Cornelius have brought us to this point. Two visions led to two journeys, two journeys led to two speeches, and now these two speeches lead to two conversions.

First, there's the conversion of Cornelius and his friends and relations. The Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as had happened for the Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and the Samaritans in Samaria some months later. In the other conversions we have read about, like the Ethiopian eunuch and Saul the persecutor, Luke hasn't mentioned the Holy Spirit coming upon them, and everyone speaking in tongues. But he does so here, because it's an epochal moment in Christian history. There must be no doubt that the same Spirit who filled the Apostles now also fills Gentile believers as well. God is no respecter of persons, and there's hard proof of it in the way that he supernaturally empowers them, whether they're circumcised or not.

Consequently, Peter was convinced that they were fully converted to Christ, and he asked in v 47, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Now we know why it was so important that some other Jewish believers came with Peter from Joppa to Caesarea. They were witnesses of what had happened. They saw it too.

Before his crucifixion, Jesus had said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:18-20).

Peter had his 2 or 3 witnesses, to confirm what he was loosing on earth and in heaven. Gentiles were being set free from sin and welcomed into the family of God.

So Cornelius and his household were converted. But that's only half the story. Not only were Gentiles converted, but so was Peter, and so will the church in Acts chapter 11. From this point forward, Peter would no longer lead a messianic sect of Judaism. Peter had become a follower of Jesus the inclusive King.

As we close this evening, let's take a moment to reflect on what a tremendous gift it is that Jesus ministers *to* us as he ministers *through* us. Make no mistake. Peter was already converted to following King Jesus. However, like all of us who follow Jesus, we're still getting to know him better all the time. Peter simply didn't know about the radical inclusivity of the Lord. Yet that didn't stop Jesus from sending Peter as his Gospel messenger to those whom Peter had always believed were unclean. Jesus didn't give Peter time to work through his bigotry issues. He just sent

Peter on a mission and taught him along the way. Through obeying the king, Peter came to know the king even better. And that's a lesson we all need to remember.

Christians today are so hesitant to take action. They need to get all their theological ducks in a row. There's something about our generation that so many of us feel like we have to have PhDs in theology in order to follow the Lord. Yet the certainty we seek can only be discovered in motion, on mission, rather than sitting on the sidelines. Jesus teaches us as we follow him.

Over the years that I have served as a pastor, I've discovered that I have a greater capacity for giving others advice than for applying said advice in my own life. I'm a fountain of wisdom, but just because I'm preaching it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm practicing it. Just like you, I struggle with the gap between head and heart.

Yet on the other hand, I've found that as Jesus ministers *through* me, he also ministers *to* me. Just this week, for example, I encouraged someone to trust in the Lord and not be afraid. And then the next day, when I was afraid, the word of the Lord came back around to me like a boomerang, and I experienced a flood of the peace of Christ. It was amazing. Likewise, a good friend told me about how he was struggling to forgive someone who had hurt him, and I pleaded with him to forgive as the Lord had forgiven him. Then not too long afterwards I was thinking about how someone else had hurt me, and I suddenly it dawned on me: "Hey! Forgiveness! I should do that too!" I wish it were the only time, but it's pretty common for me to discover that my ministry has this boomerang effect, resulting in two conversions for the price of one. The leap of faith that I encourage someone else to take ends up becoming the leap of faith I must take myself. To be honest, I've been pretty ashamed of this in the past. But after reading how Jesus used Peter, I'm learning that this is simply the way that all Christians grow in faith. Jesus ministers *to* us as he ministers *through* us. In our weakness, he is strong.

If you're someone who feels like you don't have much to give, maybe you've felt stuck spiritually, out at sea and floating in a dead calm, let me suggest that exciting adventures following Jesus are in fact well within your reach. You don't have to save a lot of money to go on a missions trip. You don't have to quit school or quit your job or quit your family. All you have to do is take a step towards someone different and tell them about Jesus. Maybe it's someone outside the faith whom the Lord has laid on your heart. Maybe it's one of the many kids or teenagers in our church, all of whom are looking for big brothers and sisters in the Lord. Maybe it's one of the youth involved in Little Lights or the Porch. Maybe it's a homeless person outside. Whoever it is, don't be surprised if in calling them to take a leap of faith, the Lord calls you to do the same. That's how it is, following Jesus. Conversion begets conversion, as we all await the Kingdom Come.