

GOD ACCEPTS MEN FROM EVERY NATION

Acts 9:32-10:48

Key Verse: 10:34,35

“Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.’”

In the last passage we learned the marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ upon a wretched man, Saul. When Saul persecuted Christians with the express purpose of destroying the church, he was persecuting Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. This Jesus visited Saul on the road to Damascus. But the Risen Christ did not destroy him as an enemy. The Risen Christ forgave his sins and gave him a new life. The Risen Christ saved him from the torment of self-righteousness and self-condemnation and gave him peace. Furthermore, the Risen Christ gave him a clear life direction to carry his name to the whole world. This same grace and mission has come to each of us as well. We only thank God for his grace and mission. May God help us to carry Jesus’ name as ambassadors of the gospel in our times.

Today's passage shows how God raised Peter as a good shepherd for the people of Israel. That is not all. God raised Peter as a good shepherd for the whole world. God did so by teaching Peter his heart. God accepts all people and wants all people to come to him for salvation. This salvation is found only in Jesus Christ through the gospel of his death and resurrection. Today, may God enlarge our hearts until we can be useful people to him as shepherds for America and the world.

First, Peter shepherds his people like Jesus did (9:32-43).

After the conversion of Paul the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. The Holy Spirit worked mightily to strengthen the believers and they continued to grow in number. At this time, Peter did not sit down in Jerusalem. Rather, he traveled about the country visiting scattered Christians to strengthen their faith. Thus far in Acts, Luke presented Peter as an uncompromising servant of God’s word whose clear gospel message pierced the hearts of many, even the enemies of God. In this passage, Peter appears as a good shepherd for the early Christians who served them one by one.

Peter visited Lydda, which was about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem in the territory of Judea and Samaria. There Peter found a man named Aeneas. He had been bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.” Immediately Aeneas got up. Peter was speaking, but it was the Risen Christ who was working in and through him. The Risen Christ was living in Peter. The Risen Christ healed Aeneas from paralysis just as he had healed the paralytic at the beginning of his earthly ministry. Those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw this and turned to the Lord.

Meanwhile, in Joppa, a disciple named Tabitha had just died. Her name, translated as Dorcas in Greek, means “gazelle.” She must have been swift and graceful. She was a shepherdess who devoted her time to serving others in the name of Jesus. She was especially mindful of the widows in the community and made robes and other clothing for them. When she died, these women, who were already sorrowful began to cry all over again. The men disciples could not bear this. So they sent for Peter and he came to them. After going to the room where Tabitha was, Peter got down on his knees and prayed. Then, turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes and sat up. Then Peter took her by the hand and helped her to her feet and presented her to the believers and the widows. Through this event they could see Jesus who rose again from the dead. They could taste the power of

the resurrection that gives eternal life and the kingdom of God to those who believe. The widows' tears turned to shouts of joy and they did a resurrection dance. Through this event, many people believed in the Lord. In this part we see that Peter has become a good shepherd in the image of Jesus. God raised him as a spiritual leader through his faith in Jesus and his love for Jesus. Now God wants to enlarge his heart to be a shepherd for the whole world.

If we trace Peter's journey on a map we find that he moved steadily in a northwest direction; from Jerusalem to Lydda, to Joppa, and finally to Caesarea. He traveled in this way simply to serve the scattered Christians who needed God's help one by one. But in fact, God was leading him. Caesarea was the headquarters of Roman government for the entire region of Palestine. This is where God wanted him to be. In fact, God went ahead of him to prepare the person whom he wanted to bless through Peter. Surely, God carries out his own work.

Second, God gives Cornelius a vision (1-8). Look at verse 1. "At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment." Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian Regiment stationed at Caesarea. Mostly, Roman soldiers were colonials drafted by the Roman government. But there were some Italian soldiers--crack units of the Roman army. Cornelius was a genuine Italian centurion with one hundred Italian soldiers under his command. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army, and they were expected to win victories or otherwise, to stand fast and die at their posts. Therefore, Cornelius must have been a well-disciplined Roman officer with the spirit and loyalty of a Roman soldier. The world was a Roman world, and Cornelius was a Roman centurion. Humanly speaking, he was a lucky person. It seemed that he didn't need anyone's help, and that he didn't have to seek God. He could claim to be his own man. But to our surprise, Cornelius sought God earnestly until he learned of God Almighty from the Jews. The prosperity of the Roman Empire and being recognized as a man of Roman spirit made him happy from time to time, but his favorable human condition could not satisfy his soul. His soul was thirsty for the holiness of God. His soul was hungry for the truth and grace of God. He was a pompous Roman soldier, but he longed for his heavenly Father because he was made in the holy image of God.

Commonly, soldiers are very wild and enjoy the fleeting pleasures of life in order to forget about present realities. But Cornelius was different. He was a very pious man. He was a good influence to his family members. Because of his good influence, his family members were also devout and God-fearing. He was a blessing to the people around him. Cornelius also gave generously to those in need. His love for God compelled him love others. And he was a man of prayer. Obviously, he learned how to pray regularly from the Jews. In brief, he was a Roman centurion, but he had the fear of God in his heart. He was a man of integrity; he was not far from the kingdom of God. Still, he needed to hear the good news about Jesus.

Once, during regular afternoon prayer time, Cornelius prayed earnestly. Then God visited him in a vision. Look at verses 3-5. "One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!' Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked. The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.'" Cornelius prayed and saw a vision of God. There were so many things to seek, but he sought God (Dt 4:29; Mt 7:7,8). God saw this man Cornelius and told him in a vision to welcome Peter and hear the message of salvation. God seeks those who seek him.

Third, God gave Peter a vision (9-23a). About noon the following day as Cornelius' servants were approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. As usual, he was hungry and wanted something to eat. While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice from heaven told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." In this short phrase, "Kill and eat," God's passion for world salvation is dramatically revealed to Peter.

How did Peter respond to the voice? Look at verse 14. "'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'" We understand why Peter protested. He was brought up in a society where food laws were strictly kept. According to Leviticus 11, the Jews could eat only animals that chewed the cud and whose hoofs were cloven. God gave them these laws to help them discern between clean and unclean and to live as a holy people in an ungodly world. Keeping these food laws was part of their identity as Jews. However, because of these food laws, the Jews despised the Gentiles who ate all kinds of things without any distinction. They looked at the Gentiles as unclean animals. As long as this prejudice remained in their hearts, they could never accept Gentiles as human beings. In order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth, Peter had to unlearn some old habits and traditions of the Jews. According to the voice, Peter had to kill and eat. But his stomach was too weak to digest all kinds of animals and reptiles wiggling on the sheet.

What did God do with this man who had such a weak stomach? Look at verses 15 and 16. "The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven." In these verses, all kinds of animals represent all kinds of peoples on earth. "Kill and eat," meant, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). Peter needed to change his outlook on the Gentiles. He needed to see the Gentiles with the heart of God who loved them and wanted to save them. He needed to root out the prejudice that was like a concrete wall in his heart toward the Gentiles. Peter needed to rise above his own culture and traditions and learn the universality of God's love.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him to go downstairs to meet them and go with them without hesitation. In this way, Peter and the men from Cornelius met together at the house of Simon. Peter was not really ready to invite them into the house as guests. But the Holy Spirit helped him to do so. Although Peter only thought about delicious food, God showed him a great vision of his world salvation plan.

Fourth, Peter's message to Cornelius (23b-48). The next day Peter arrived in Caesarea. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him, together with his close friends, and he fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself" (23b-26). There was a large gathering of people inside the house. Peter said to them, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" (28). Again Peter said in verses 34-35, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." At this point Peter realized that God is not only the God of the Jews but also the God of the Gentiles. A great change had taken place in his heart. As soon as Peter finished telling the whole story of how he had come to their house, Cornelius asked Peter to speak God's message to them. In verses 34-43 Peter spoke of the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. In this message we learn several things about Jesus.

(i) Jesus was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 38. "...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." Why did God anoint Jesus with the Holy Spirit? It was because God, through his Son Jesus Christ—who was anointed with the Holy Spirit—wanted to deliver all those under the power of the devil. Mankind seems to have many problems. But the root problem of mankind is that they are suffering under the power of the devil. Jesus is the only one who saves people from the power of the devil because Jesus is the one whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit.

(ii) Jesus died on a tree. Look at verse 39. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree..." Jesus was sent by God. While on earth, he healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God. His life was truly beautiful, so much so that during the last 2,000 years many people have made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to walk in his footsteps. Even now there are so many people who want to follow in his footsteps. Their catchphrase is, "What would Jesus do?" Everything he did was life-giving, and an invitation to God's kingdom, where there are no more tears. But evil men killed him by hanging him on a tree. They did not like Jesus because they were so sinful and Jesus was so beautiful. They killed Jesus simply because Jesus was so beautiful. But he was not just a victim of sinful men; his death was for the sin of the world. John 1:29b says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

(iii) Jesus rose again. Look at verse 40. "...but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen." When Jesus was crucified on a tree and died, the power of sin and death seemed to win the victory over the good Jesus. But this was not true. "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Ac 2:24). Through his death Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death. Through his resurrection he won an eternal victory for us. There is victory for all who believe in him.

(iv) God appointed him as judge of the living and the dead. Look at verse 42. "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." No man is worthy to be a judge over others because we are all the same sinful human beings. But Jesus is worthy to be the judge of all men because with his blood he purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9). Death is not the end of everything. After death, each of us must stand before the Judge to receive a report card.

(v) Jesus forgives our sins. Look at verse 43. "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." The real problem of all mankind is a sin problem. Even Cornelius, who seemed to be the best man, needed the forgiveness of sins. No one can be happy when he is sick with sins. No one can enter into a new relationship with God without the forgiveness of sins. No one can enter the kingdom of God except through Jesus' grace of forgiveness of sins. Only Jesus can forgive man's sins. This is the main point of Peter's message. This is the good news of great joy for Cornelius and all the Gentiles, including each of us.

What was the response to Peter's message? The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message from their hearts. Cornelius' attitude in listening to the message was so sincere that the Holy Spirit began to work in him as well as in his people. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles and that they spoke in tongues, praising God. Peter said to the circumcised believers in verse 47, "Can anyone keep these

people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." In this Peter was saying that since the Gentiles had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they could be baptized with water and declare that they too were God's people.

In this passage we learn that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. So God wants to give them the good news of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. God's servants must know God's heart. God's servants must accept men of every nation as their brothers and share the gospel with genuine respect and the love of God. This is possible only by the help of God.

When Mother Barry gave us the prayer topic for the evangelization of Muslim countries and North Korea, it was like a vision in a dream. We could pray because Mother Barry prayed. But God is realizing this vision step by step. God is working to lead Muslim people to Christ throughout the world. God wants to reach Muslim people right here in Chicago. We have to go no farther than Devon Avenue to find many Muslim people who need Jesus. But can we welcome them in our hearts? Or do we see them like unclean animals? May God help us open our hearts to accept them as fellow human beings whom God loves. May God help us to share the gospel with them with respect and love.

Sinful human beings seem to be a bundle of prejudices. These prejudices keep us from accepting people whom God wants to save with the gospel. May God help us root out racial prejudice, national prejudice, even generational prejudice. May God help us accept others as human beings for whom Christ died so that we can preach the gospel effectively. Then North America can be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.