

Reaching the Locked-outs

Acts 10:1-45

Acts 10:1) There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment. 2) He was a devout man and feared God along with his whole household. He did many charitable deeds for the Jewish people and always prayed to God. 3) About three in the afternoon he distinctly saw in a vision an angel of God who came in and said to him, "*Cornelius.*" 4) Staring at him in awe, he said, "*What is it, Lord?*" The angel told him, "*Your prayers and your acts of charity have ascended as a memorial offering before God.*" 5) *Now send men to Joppa and call for Simon, who is also named Peter.* 6) *He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.*" 7) When the angel who spoke to him had gone, he called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, who was one of those who attended him. 8) After explaining everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. 9) The next day, as they were traveling and nearing the city, Peter went up to pray on the roof about noon. 10) He became hungry and wanted to eat, but while they were preparing something, he fell into a trance. 11) He saw heaven opened and an object that resembled a large sheet coming down, being lowered by its four corners to the earth. 12) In it were all the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and the birds of the sky. 13) A voice said to him, "*Get up, Peter; kill and eat.*" 14) "*No, Lord!*" Peter said. "*For I have never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean.*" 15) Again, a second time, the voice said to him, "*What God has made clean, do not call impure.*" 16) This happened three times, and suddenly the object was taken up into heaven. 17) While Peter was deeply perplexed about what the vision he had seen might mean, right away the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions to Simon's house, stood at the gate. 18) They called out, asking if Simon, who was also named Peter, was lodging there. 19) While Peter was thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him, "*Three men are here looking for you.*" 20) *Get up, go downstairs, and go with them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them.*" 21) Then Peter went down to the men and said, "*Here I am, the one you're looking for. What is the reason you're here?*" 22) They said, "*Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who has a good reputation with the whole Jewish nation, was divinely directed by a holy angel to call you to his house and to hear a message from you.*" 23) Peter then invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and set out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him. 24) The following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25) When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, fell at his feet, and worshiped him. 26) But Peter lifted him up and said, "*Stand up. I myself am also a*

man.” 27) While talking with him, he went in and found a large gathering of people. 28) Peter said to them, “*You know it’s forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner, but God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean.* 29) *That’s why I came without any objection when I was sent for. So may I ask why you sent for me?”* 30) Cornelius replied, “*Four days ago at this hour, at three in the afternoon, I was praying in my house. Just then a man in dazzling clothing stood before me* 31) *and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your acts of charity have been remembered in God’s sight.* 32) *Therefore send someone to Joppa and invite Simon here, who is also named Peter. He is lodging in Simon the tanner’s house by the sea.’* 33) *So I immediately sent for you, and it was good of you to come. So now we are all in the presence of God to hear everything you have been commanded by the Lord.”* 34) Peter began to speak: “*Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism,* 35) *but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.* 36) *He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ – He is Lord of all.* 37) *You know the events that took place throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John preached:* 38) *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all Who were under the tyranny of the devil, because God was with him.* 39) *We ourselves are witnesses of everything he did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem, and yet they killed him by hanging him on a tree.* 40) *God raised up this man on the third day and caused him to be seen,* 41) *not by all the people, but by us whom God appointed as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.* 42) *He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.* 43) *All the prophets testify about him that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.”* 44) While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. 45) The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

The martyred death of Stephen in Acts 7 triggered severe persecution and led to **The first major turning point in the church’s future = witnessing through persecution**. In our journey through the Acts of the Apostles and What Matters in the Church, one clear, settled matter continues to resound: Evangelism Matters. And specifically, evangelizing and reaching the hard-to-reach. Our narrator, Dr. Luke, selected three case studies to demonstrate reaching the hard-to reach. **The Case Study of Philip the Evangelist in Acts 8: Witnessing through Persecution requires faithful evangelists and reaching the Left-outs – the**

excluded, the unsought, and the overlooked.

The Case Study of Ananias of Damascus and Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9:

Witnessing through persecution requires overcoming fear and reaching the Opt-outs –Those who have taken an active position against faith, the church, and Religious standards.

Now Dr. Luke unfolds **The Case Study of Peter and Cornelius:** Remember from chapter 8 that when the severe persecution erupted in Jerusalem, all Christians except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Evidently, the Apostles were allowed freedom to travel, because after Saul's escape from his life threats in Acts 9, Peter left Jerusalem and travelled to coastal cities, participating in several miraculous accounts along the way. While in Joppa, a Mediterranean seaport (the modern city of Jaffa today), Peter prayed while waiting for lunch to be prepared and drifted off into a trance. He saw a large tablecloth dropping out of heaven, containing all of the four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth, and birds of the sky. A heavenly voice interrupted, *Get up, Peter, kill and eat.* "No Lord, for I have never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean." Again, a second time, the voice spoke to Peter: *"What God has made clean, do not call impure."* This happened three times, and suddenly the object was taken up into heaven. Meanwhile, 33 miles away in Caesarea, Cornelius, an Italian military centurion, having experienced a vision the previous afternoon, sent two of his soldiers to summon Peter in Joppa. As Peter pondered about the vision, the Holy Spirit told him, *"Three men are here looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them."* *"What is the reason you're here?"* They said, *"Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who has a good reputation with the whole Jewish nation, was divinely directed by a holy angel to call you to his house and to hear a message from you."* When Peter arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. Peter witnessed to them: *"You know it's forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner, but God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean.* As we consider Peter's experience,

1. Witnessing through Persecution requires confronting religious, social, and ethnic prejudice. This was the same issue confronting Philip and his witness to the Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuch. Here, in Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the Jewish food laws presented a real problem for Jewish Christians and their witness to Gentiles. Even though Jesus settled this issue in Mark 7: *"Don't you realize that nothing going into a person from the outside can defile him? For it doesn't go into his heart but into the stomach and is eliminated"* (thus he declared all foods clean), Peter and Jewish Christians continued to struggle with religious, social, and ethnic prejudice. While Ananias in Acts 9 represents the reluctant

witness,

- **Peter represents the biased witness.** Bringing a gospel witness to the Gentiles defined a hard step for the Jewish Christians because it confronted their religious, social, and ethnic bias. In their cultural context, if anyone other than a Jew considered following Jesus, did that decision require them to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian? If the answer is “Yes” then anyone not a Jew must be circumcised and yield to the Jewish kosher food laws. If the answer is “No”, then a second issue involved fellowship: Can Jews and Gentiles co-exist as believers, eating together, worshipping together, serving together, ministering together, doing church together? If the answer is “No”, then Jesus died only for the Jews and not the Gentiles. If the answer is “Yes”, then religious, social, and ethnic prejudice is a sin.

Most of us in this church are not Jewish Christians, so we could ignore easily this bias. Yet, I’m convicted, as I hope you are, that we also struggle as biased witnesses.

- **The struggles of a biased witness:**

- ✓ **The Inclusion Struggle: Is salvation available to everyone?**

Our Baptist Faith and Message affirms that “*salvation is offered freely to ALL who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.*” If God offers salvation freely to ALL, then our witness must extend to ALL, and our church must accept all. Since Jesus included me, and you, how absurd and ludicrous for us to exclude anyone. Salvation is offered freely to ALL.

- ✓ **The Doctrinal Struggle: Is salvation belief in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone?** Had Peter and the Jewish Christians of the first century yielded to their religious, social, and ethnic prejudice, then Christianity would have been perverted, John 3:16 would have been corrupted, and salvation would have become the great heresy. Instead of “*whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life*”, first century Christianity would have deviated into Jesus plus circumcision, Jesus plus the Levitical law, or Jesus plus the Sabbath. We must hold firm this doctrinal standard in the 21st century and resist any aberrant theology which insists that salvation is more than belief in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone!

2. Witness through persecution involves reaching the LOCKED-OUTS.

When Peter stood before Cornelius and his family, he stated emphatically and immediately his new conviction: “*Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.... Jesus Christ – He is Lord of all.* (34-35)

- **Peter’s progression from favoritism to acceptance underscores a bedrock truth**, declared three times by the Apostle Paul: Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, and Colossians 3:25 – “*for there is NO favoritism with God.*” And according

to James 2:9 – “*If you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*” Although Cornelius was “*a devout man and feared God along with his whole household,*” he was “locked-out” from Christianity because of his Gentile ethnicity UNTIL PETER REPENTED OF HIS FAVORITISM!

• **Cornelius and his family represent for us the LOCKED-OUTS -- persons whose life-styles are different from the church’s standards or values.** The Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19, Legion the demon-possessed man in Mark 5, the woman caught in adultery in John 8, the two thieves on the cross define biblical examples of Locked-outs. Who are the Locked-outs? They surround us – their lifestyles cry out for help and acceptance. Prisoners and ex-cons. Sexual deviants – homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals. Many ethnic and racial groups. Drug addicts. Alcoholics. Unmarried persons living together. Surprisingly, the very rich up-and-outers. Divorcees and remarrieds. Single parents. Couples in or children of interracial marriages. Often viewed as lawbreakers, locked-outs live under a shadow of shame, dishonor, and humiliation – with little or no interest in spiritual things or a Christian world-view. They are different and daring – and perceive that they don’t fit or would be unwelcome in our churches or circles of influence. (See Robert Dale and Delos Miles, *Evangelizing the Hard-to-Reach*, chapter 6). We must never compromise biblical truth, but we must open our evangelistic witness to the locked-outs. To reach them will require us to change our attitudes, revitalize our ministries, and refocus our programs. But these are the people that Jesus most often reached out to, and we must reach out to them as well.

No One is Beyond the Reach of God’s Hand! As with the left-outs and the opt-outs, God’s Hand is not TOO SHORT to the save the toughest locked-out. God is not willing that ANY locked-out should perish, but that all lock-outs should come to repentance. God wants EVERY locked-out to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. God help us to embrace the Peter’s conviction – “*Now we truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism.*”