

ACTS

The God Who Holds the World in His Hands

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THE GOD WHO HOLDS THE WORLD IN HIS HANDS **Acts 9:32-12:25**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open to Acts 9. We're going to be at the end of Acts 9 in just a second. I want to think of what expresses the heart of how we're wanting to read through the book of Acts, not just in our lives and in our families, but as a church to say, "Here we are, Lord. Here's a blank check. Whether or not you want us to sell a building, reorganize everything about how we do church, whatever. Whatever you want us to do, we will do it. We want your glory in Birmingham, and to the ends of the earth. So, whatever."

You know, Jonathan, our Global Pastor and I were together in Southeast Asia a few months ago, together on the largest, unevangelized island on earth. A huge island in Southeast Asia; there are 50 million people on it, but over 50 different people groups on this island, most of whom have no church, no Christians. What's interesting is that one of the people groups on that island is predominantly Christian. It has millions of people in it. In fact, I wrote about this people group. It's an amazing story. I wrote about it in that little orange book. This people group, years ago, had no exposure to the gospel. A Baptist missionary comes to them, shares the gospel with these tribal leaders...these pagan tribal leaders, and the tribal leaders killed the Baptist missionary couple and cannibalized them.

Years later, another missionary came and shared the gospel with these tribal leaders, but this time they listened, and they responded. They believed in the gospel, and they shared the gospel with the whole tribe. Pretty much the whole tribe was converted to faith in Christ, but in the years since then, this supposedly Christian tribe has turned tragically inward and are doing little to nothing to engage all of these unreached people groups right around them. It was startling.

There are church buildings. There are denominational conventions. They have 30 seminaries, but in order to reach out to these other people groups, it would involve a lot. They would lose a lot of comfort in the process. For example, most of these people groups around them are Muslim, and Muslims do not eat pork. It is unclean and offensive to them. So, you would think, if you want to share the gospel...build bridges to share the gospel with Muslims...you would abstain from pork, but one of these supposed Christians in this people group said to one of our partners on the island there, "I would rather a Muslim go to hell than for me to have to stop eating pork." He said that to him.

Now, I don't want to be too hard on this people group. The reality is, if they were to intentionally engage these Muslim people groups around them with the gospel, it would be costly. Some of the states on this island practice Sharia Law...Muslim State Law. To share the gospel in those areas would mean almost certain imprisonment or certain death.

So, this people group sits back with the gospel, surrounded by unreached people groups, but doing nothing to engage them. Our partner on the island said this; this was the statement he told Jonathan and me. He said, "David and Jonathan, they have all the

trappings of the church, but they are totally missing the heart of Christ.” Is that possible? Is it really possible to have all the trappings of the church...buildings, and seminaries, and all this stuff...and yet totally miss the heart of Christ for the peoples of the world? Absolutely, it’s possible.

It’s possible in this room, and I know we talk about the unreached a lot around here. It’s not a term that is unfamiliar. We talk about the unreached a lot, but yet, I’m guessing that if we’re honest, there are still some, maybe many of us even in this room, when we hear about the unreached, our hearts are not really gripped. Our hearts are not overwhelmed with the need for the gospel among 6,000 people groups that haven’t even heard it. We can hear about that and still be in a sense cold and unmoved. I and we...all of us in this room...we are prone to cling to personal comfort; we are all prone to avoid potential cost; we are prone to settle for the trappings of the church and ignore the heart of Christ.

So, what we’re going to look at today is a text where God took a pivotal moment in the history of the church, and He reached down into the hearts of His people, and He turned them upside down. God did something in their hearts that would leave them totally changed when it comes to the peoples of the world. My prayer is that, as we read this text, God might do the same thing all across this room. That among those who, yes, would say, “Yes, I am gripped by the need for the gospel to go to 6,000 unreached people groups in the world,” that it would just go deeper. Then, for many of us, who maybe just aren’t quite there and just not overwhelmed by that need and gripped by that need to the depth of our hearts, that today, through the power of the Word, that might happen in your heart.

Because the reality is, we can sing all day long, “Whatever you want us to do, we’ll do it,” but until our hearts are gripped like this, then we won’t do whatever He wants us to do. We won’t let go of traditions. We won’t let go of comforts, and we won’t say, “All right, let’s do anything that He wants us to do different. Let’s do it all, no matter what it costs; no matter what comforts we lose.” We won’t take those steps until our hearts have been changed.

So, I want us to walk through this text, and we have a ton of ground to cover. So, here’s how we’re going to cover it. You have heard me already mention that this is somewhat of a difficult book to walk through because when we see things happening...just because something happens in the book of Acts, that does not mean that that’s necessarily prescribed for the church to act that way and do that all the time from that point on.

For example, Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost, and all these people start speaking in different languages. We don’t study that passage and say, “Okay, everybody’s got the Holy Spirit. Obviously, I should be able to speak another language. So, let’s see who’s got other languages in this room, and we’ll see who’s really got the Spirit.” That’s not how we would take that passage. There are other passages like that all throughout the book of Acts. If we were thinking that every single thing that happened in here was prescriptive...prescribing what should be done all the time...then we would come away from the book of Acts very confused Christians, especially when it comes to the work of the Spirit of God. So, we need to be careful.

I was talking with a mentor of mine in ministry, another pastor, the other day, and I was telling him we were preaching through Acts. He said, “That is the most difficult book to preach through in the entire Bible.” I was like, “Great, we’re flying through this thing, and it’s the most difficult.” So, I don’t want to make mistakes that are really easy to make.

So, what I want us to do is I want us to read through this text. It’s a chunk of text. I want us to read through it, and pause along the way, and I simply want to help us understand

what it says along the way...what's going on. I'm going to resist the temptation to stop, step back and say, "Okay, this is what this means here and there." It's like we're walking through the forest, we're just going to stay in the text. We're going to stay in the text, see what it means, see what it's saying, and then we're going to step back...after we've gone through the forest a few chapters...we're going to step back and say, "Okay, in light of all that Scripture says, what does this mean for our lives in this room?"

So, you see, two miracles, two conversions, two churches, two disciples, and two gods. We're just going to fly through all that, and then we're going to spend most of our time there. At the very end, we're going to see two conclusions. That's all we're going to lead to, two conclusions. Just for those of you who like to pace yourself and think, "All right, how many blanks do we have, how much time do we have left?" Like, just know that those last two conclusions we're going to fly through, so there are going to be a lot of blanks hanging with a couple of minutes left. So, don't panic. Lunch will come.

Two Miracles ...

Acts 9:32. You ready? Put your seatbelts on, here we go. Acts 9:32, this is right after Saul has come to Christ. The scene shifts to Peter.

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days, she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." So, Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas had made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

Aeneas: Victory over disease.

What do we see here? Okay, stop there. What do we see? In the story of Aeneas, we see victory over disease. Aeneas, bedridden, paralyzed for eight years. Peter comes up, says, "Rise up," and he does. Victory over disease. So, that's what happens. Now, this is, for example, this is the point we're not going to stop and say, "Okay, that means everybody who's sick needs to come down to the front. Somebody is going to pronounce healing over them, and they should be fine walking away." That's not what this passage is intended to show us. This passage was intended to show us that Jesus has authority and power over disease. Period. He has authority over disease. Victory over disease. You see that in Aeneas.

Dorcas: Victory over death.

Then, in Dorcas, victory over death. Dorcas, an unfortunate name, which means "gazelle." I think I'd have gone with gazelle, but also called Tabitha, so we'll go with that one. She dies. Her body is washed and prepared for burial, and everybody is mourning. Peter is sent for. He comes in, tells everybody to go out of the room. He says, "Tabitha, arise," and she does. Victory over death. She was alive.

Now, in these two stories, I want you to see the presence of Christ at work in His people. You read these stories, and they're almost exactly the same as some of the stories we see with Jesus in the Gospels, aren't they? John 5, a man paralyzed. Jesus walks up to him, says, "Rise up and walk." He does. Mark 5:41, Jairus' daughter; she has died. All the mourners are in the room. Jesus comes in and says, "Get out of the room." He says these words, he says, "*Talitha cumi*." It's the exact same words that Peter says here, except it's "*Tabitha*" instead of "*Talitha*." He says the same words, and in Mark 5, this girl rises from dead.

So, that's exactly what's happening, and we are seeing the power of Christ...the presence of Christ...at work in His people, through His people. So, see the presence of Christ at work in His people, and see the kingdom of Christ advancing through His people. What was the result of these two stories? Acts 9:35 says, "*When they saw him, they turned to the Lord.*" Aeneas was healed, and people believed in the Lord.

When Tabitha was raised, verse 42, "*Many believed in the Lord.*" This was the whole purpose of signs and wonders in the ministry of Jesus. They were demonstrations of the kingdom. The King was here, and this was a demonstration of His Kingdom. So, that's exactly what we see here. This is not just signs and wonders for the sake of signs and wonders. This is for the advancement of the gospel, the advancement, demonstration, of a Kingdom. So, two miracles.

Two Conversions ...

Now, moving on. What happens next? The story of two conversions. Let's read on. Acts is so good, isn't it? This is so rich. Now, this is a pretty hefty passage we're about to read, the story of Peter and Cornelius. Follow these details carefully.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "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." When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The scene switched to Peter.

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry

and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 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.

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" And 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 he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped 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 anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So then when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.

And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, '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 by the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' So 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."

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand," [key verse right here] "that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us

who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold 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.

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout 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, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." But Peter began and explained it to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its 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, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice of God answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is 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 will 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 stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Cornelius: Conversion to Christ.

Okay, two conversions. First, Cornelius' conversion to Christ. I want us to realize how historic this is. This is the first Gentile that we know of to become a believer. The first Gentile, non-Jew, from among the nations to be saved. The first person outside of God's covenant with Israel, brought into Christ through the New Covenant people of God.

Now, what do we know about Cornelius? He's a centurion. He's a Gentile, a centurion. So, he's a leader in the Roman army, and he's a God-fearer. Now, what does that mean? He prayed continually to God. He feared God. What does that mean? Some have said...some have taken this passage and said, "Well, Cornelius was actually...before Peter even came, Cornelius was right before God, justified before God." That's important to know, whether or not he was right before God before Peter came or not. If he was, what people do who

believe that is they take that a step further and say, "There are many people around the world, in other nations, among other people groups, that are praying to God and are right before God, even though they've never heard the gospel." So, there are some, even many, who claim the banner of being a Christian, who claim that there are people in other nations, other people groups around the world that may never have heard the gospel, but they're right before God, because they're seeking after God, just like Cornelius was.

So, we need to ask the question, "Was Cornelius really right before God, justified before God, before Peter came?" Well, think about it. If he was right before God before Peter even came and shared the news of Christ with him, then why was it necessary for Peter to stand up in front of a whole group of devout Jewish people in Acts 2 and preach the gospel to them? If they were right before God simply by being God-fearing and devout in Judaism...giving alms, offerings, doing this or that, going to the synagogue...then they wouldn't have needed to hear the gospel to repent and be baptized, every one of them.

However, they did, which is why, when you get to Acts 10:43, Peter comes with this message, talking about Christ, *"To him,"* to Christ, *"all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him,"* everyone who believes in Christ, *"receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* How do you receive forgiveness of sins? Through His name. Through whose name? The Christ, who is Jesus. You receive forgiveness of sins through the name of Christ. Cornelius hadn't heard of Jesus.

Therefore, he could not have received forgiveness of sins, which is why when you get over to Acts 11...look down at Acts 11:13-14. This is when Peter's recounting what happened, when an angel spoke to Cornelius and said, verse 13, *"Send to Joppa. Bring Simon who's called Peter."* Listen to verse 14, *"Simon Peter will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household."* If the message was a message by which Cornelius would be saved, that implies that Cornelius was not yet what? Saved. Which is why when you get to the very end of this passage, Acts 11:18, now we see after all this that God has granted repentance that leads to live through the preaching of the gospel.

So, Cornelius was not converted already and just needing some additional information. He had not heard the name of Christ, and he needed to hear the name of Christ to be saved. I want you to see what God did to bring this about, because God did it all. God moves His people. You see the details coming together in this story.

God gives Cornelius a vision. So, there's a man who's never heard the gospel. God's working in his heart to send some people. While the people are being sent, God says to Peter, "Here's a vision for you." He gives him a vision. These clean and unclean animals that we'll talk about in just a second, and God orchestrates in Peter's life to be open when these guys get here, and then God orchestrates so Peter can come to this household.

Now, picture this. Peter walked into this household. It's full of people, and they're saying, "Would you please preach the gospel to us?" That's a great audience. I remember when Heather and I were in East Asia one time, in the middle of unreached people groups, and we came across this guy, by coincidence, who had found a Bible. So, he had a Bible, and he invited us to come to his home. So, we came to his home. He said, "Sit down, please." We sit down on his couch. He puts the Bible on the table in front of us, opens it up, and he looks at us, and he says, "Can you tell me how to have a meaningful life based on this book?" "Well, I guess, sure, since you put it that way, yes."

So, God had this whole thing rigged. He brought this whole thing together for what's happening. God moves His people. Then, God empowers His gospel. See the gospel that's

preached. It is plain and simple. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Verse 38, life of Christ, "*God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*" So, there's the life of Christ. Verse 39, the death of Christ. "*They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.*" The death of Christ. Then, the resurrection of Christ, verse 40, "*God raised him on the third day.*" He rose from the dead, end of verse 41. Life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Check this out. Peter walks in, no jokes, no funny stories, no entertaining quips, just life, death, resurrection of Christ, and they're saved. No rhetorical, oratorical skill. No, just gospel.

God empowers it, draws people. What does He do? He sends His Spirit. He moves His people, empowers His gospel, sends His Spirit. The result is, while Peter was still talking, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the Word. What happens after this is what some have called the "Gentile Pentecost" because it's exactly here what we saw in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came down on those Jewish Christians, and they began to speak in tongues. The Spirit comes upon Gentile Christians. You have to catch this. This is the first time Gentiles are believing the gospel. The first time.

The Spirit comes down, which leads to the epic statement from conservative, Jewish leaders in the church. Jewish Christian leaders in the Church, when you get to Acts 11:18, and they say, "Wow, God has granted repentance that leads to life." That's exactly what it had done. God had done it. God moved His people, empowered the gospel, sent the Spirit. God worked this whole picture out for the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. So, that's conversion number one, the conversion of Cornelius, the first believer among the nations outside of Judaism.

Peter: Conversion of the Church.

However, there's another conversion here. Not a conversion in the same sense, not the salvation kind of a conversion, but a conversion nevertheless. We see it in Peter, the conversion of the church. Now, this one...this one's tough for us to imagine because we don't read this text with the feeling sense of the division between Jews and Gentiles in that day, but all throughout the Old Testament...we read last year...we saw laws set up among the people of God by which they would be pure and separate from pagan nations and polytheism and pagan religion all around them. So, God had set some of these up, but at the same time, God had said, "I'm going to bless you, so that you'll be a blessing to the nations."

What had happened was, as we saw, reading last year through the Old Testament, the people of God had ignored His purpose among the nations. Then, they had piled on more laws on top of what was already there, and you see, when Peter comes to Cornelius' house, he says, "*It is unlawful,*" in Acts 10:38, "*It is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation.*" Just feel that, "It's unlawful for me to be in this house with you," Peter says, "much less to eat with you." It was unlawful for Jewish people to even have a possession that once belonged to Gentiles. That possession was unclean. Jewish midwives were told not to help Gentile mothers in birth, and in so doing, help propagate the spread of Gentile scum in the earth. This was serious division, major division.

What happens here is God, starting with Peter, begins to bring about a conversion from deep-seated prejudice to divinely-ordered openness. This is the moment where everything changed for Peter. He has this vision of things that he classifies as unclean, and God says, "What you have avoided, I call acceptable." God is saying to Peter, "You need to be open to what I'm doing." See, this is the heart. The heart begins to change here, "You need to be open to what I am doing among the people groups, among the nations around you."

It's really interesting when you think about it. Peter has this vision when he's in a place in the city of what? Anybody remember? Look at the end of Acts 9, for example, verse 43. It says, "*He stayed in,*" where? "*For many days with one Simon a tanner.*" He stayed in Joppa. Does that ring a bell? Joppa.

Remember last year, when we walked through the Old Testament, there was a prophet named Jonah who one day received the Word of God to go to a Gentile nation, and Jonah said, "No," and he ran to a city called Joppa, where he caught a ship bound for Tarsus, going the opposite direction. Makes me wonder, if when this started to transpire, if Peter thought...maybe first thought, "Man, I need to run. I don't need to be near these Gentiles," but then thought, "Wait, wait, wait, wait. I've heard what happens when people run. So, maybe these guys knocking on the door, I should at least open it up and let them in." So, he does. Divinely-ordered openness.

He goes with them, now, from selfish pride to selfless humility. Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, and Cornelius...catch this...bows down and worships Peter. Now, for Jewish fisherman to have a Gentile army leader bowing down and worshipping him, if there is any pride in Peter, he is absolutely enjoying this right here, but instead, everything has changed. He said, "Get up. We're on the same level." Oh, this is huge, selfless humility.

He goes into the house, says, "It's unlawful, but I'm going in." Then, as things happen, look at this. Look down at Acts 10:48. After they come to Christ, they believe in Christ, it says, "*They asked him to remain for some days,*" and Peter did. Peter remained. He's in the house with them. You get to Acts 11:3, the Jewish Christian leaders are saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them?"

Oh, this is big, from traditional favoritism to gospel fellowship. These people that used to be totally divided, Peter is now associated with them. Why? Because when you get down to Acts 11:17, Peter says to these leaders, "If God gave the same gift to them that he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? The gospel's had the same effect on them that it's had on us. That means we're together now, Jews and Gentiles together."

This was an epic moment in the church, where the church moved...last part of this conversion...from cultural isolation to global involvement. Get the picture. One moment Peter has a deaf ear to multitudes of people around him from other nations who have never heard the gospel. He's not even paying attention to them. The next day, he is open to how he can make the gospel known among those multitudes of nations. Did you see that heart change that just took place; the heart change that we need to take place in our lives?

Two Churches ...

All right, it's this huge moment in the church. Everything after Acts 11:18, from this point on in the book of Acts is different. Look at verse 19,

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also..."
[Hellenists is Greeks or Gentiles] "...also..." [So, they were just speaking to Jews in verse 19. Now, they're speaking to Gentiles] "...preaching the Lord

Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch" [to find out what was going on].

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Jerusalem: Mono-ethnic believers.

Two churches. First, the Church at Jerusalem made up pretty much of mono-ethnic believers, meaning one ethnicity. Pretty much everybody is a Jewish Christian. That's what the church looked like. Now, follow with me here. It had been founded by noteworthy leaders of the church, namely the Apostle Peter and other disciples there, in Acts 2, when the Spirit came down at Pentecost. What we've seen so far in the book of Acts is this church was the center for mission among the Jews, at great cost, mind you.

Stephen stood up, in Acts 7, in front of the Jewish ruling council and proclaimed the supremacy of Christ. What happened? He was stoned. This was costly mission to the Jews. You saw that a couple of weeks ago, and as a result, the church was scattered as a result of persecution. You remember Acts 8:1-4? They scattered everywhere after Stephen was stoned, preaching the gospel.

Antioch: Multi-ethnic Christians.

That leads us now to Acts 11:19. Now, in the meantime, this whole Peter/Cornelius thing has happened. The gospel is open now to go to the Gentiles. God has changed the heart of His church, so now these people who've been scattered from Jerusalem because of persecution, now go to Antioch, and they start preaching the gospel, not just to Jews, but to Gentiles. Antioch becomes a church of multi-ethnic Christians. We're going to see this even more next week when we get to Acts 13, but you look at the leadership in this church, multiple ethnicities. Not just Jewish Christians, although some of them are Jewish Christians. You have Jewish and Gentile Christians together for the first time in the church. This is the global spread of the church.

Now, don't miss this. The Church at Antioch was founded by unnamed members of the church. Did you hear Acts 11:20? "*There were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene,*" some of them. That's who started the Church in Antioch, some guys. Some guys. Not Peter, or James, or John, even Paul at this point. No, just some guys. Some guys with the gospel; no seminary training, no church planting experience, had never seen disciple-making at work. They just heard the gospel, believed it, now they're going to start the Church at Antioch. The church that would become the center for mission to the Gentiles, to the nations.

We're going to see in the rest of the book of Acts that this Church at Antioch is the sending point for the gospel to go to the nations, in the book of Acts. It was started by some guys, and it's not just the book of Acts, and not even just the Bible. You look into the second, and the third, and the fourth centuries, some of the greatest preachers in the history of Christianity have come from this church; men like Ignatius, and Lucien, and Chrysostom. They all preached at Antioch. Just some guys. Isn't that good?

Center for mission to the Gentiles, founded by unnamed members of the church, and don't miss it: this church started as a result of persecution. Praise God for the stoning of Stephen. Praise be to God for His servant being pelted with rocks until his heart beat no more. I can only imagine the panic in the church in Acts 7 and 8. "What's going on? Where's God? Where's our Defender? They just stoned...now, everything has gone wrong. We're all scattering. Everything is different. Nothing is the same as it used to be. What is this, God?"

God knew exactly what He was doing, and as a result of the stoning of Stephen, what's happened since then? Acts 9, Saul, who was there at the stoning of Stephen, the greatest enemy of the gospel, is now about to become the greatest proponent of the gospel to the nations. The Church at Antioch, mission base to the ends of the earth, is beginning as a result of persecution. God always knows what He's doing.

Two Disciples ...

James: Beheaded as a follower of Christ.

Which leads to two disciples, Acts 12:1, *"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also."* That's so swift it's almost startling. James, one of the inner three among the disciples...there was Peter, James, and John; one of the foremost leaders in the church...in a matter of two verses, he is gone. No explanation; no commentary; no tribute. Nothing. James beheaded as a follower of Christ, and Luke just moves on. He just moves on. He moves on to Peter.

Peter: Rescued as a follower of Christ.

"This was during the days of Unleavened Bread." Verse 4 says, *"And when [Herod] had seized Peter, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."*

"Now when Herod," follow this, *"was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers..."* I love that. All right, so this is the night before Peter is about to go to the same fate that James is...about to be beheaded...and he's snoozing. This is the peace of God, "Nah, just go to sleep, tomorrow die." *"...bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison."*

"And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him..." I love that. You picture...and this is almost movie like, right? Peter is in chains, snoozing. Angel shows up, bright shining light, "Ahhhh" in the cell, triumphant entrance with the bright light. Peter is just snoozing, sleeping.

So, the angel thumps him on the side and wakes him up, and says, "Get up, Peter." *"And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, 'Dress yourself and put on your sandals.'" Like, "Don't go naked, Peter, put on some clothes." "And he did so. And he said to*

him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.'" You can just picture it, the angel almost rolling his eyes, "Gah, Peter."

And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.

I love verse 11, "When Peter came to himself..." That's why we all love Peter. He is so slow, isn't he? I mean, you have just been woken by an angel, shining light, thumping you on the side, telling you to put your clothes on, leading you out past guards, opening gates in front of you on their own accord, and leading you down a street to where you're now separate from the prison. Then, Peter came to himself and realized, "Oh, I'm out of prison." "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

It gets better. Verse 12, "When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl..." enter Rhoda, "...came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy [Rhoda] did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate." All right, if you're Peter, you have just broken out of prison. Certainly, everyone is looking for you, running after you. You get to the house of the believers, and they leave you standing outside.

So, Rhoda goes in and tells them, reported that Peter was standing at the gate. "They said to her, 'You are out of your mind.'" "Be quiet, Rhoda, we are praying for Peter." "But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel!'" "Rhoda, would you be quiet. We want Peter delivered from prison, and you are interrupting us in our prayers." Meanwhile, "Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed." They start making all this commotion. "But motioning to them with his hand to be silent..." ["Shh, already caused enough problems,"] "...he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Tell these things to James and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place.

"Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there."

James, beheaded as a follower of Christ; Peter, rescued as a follower of Christ. There's no explanation why one devout apostle is dead, and one devout apostle is alive. We'll come back to that. Finish up the story.

Two Gods ...

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were

shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Herod: The man who wanted to be applauded as God.

Two gods, and I mean that figuratively, obviously, when it comes to Herod. Herod was the man who wanted to be applauded as God. He loved the praise of men, and when he saw that it pleased people to behead James, he imprisoned Peter, looking for the applause of men, enjoying, basking in it when they say, "*This is the voice of a god, not of a man!*" Herod was insane. He was insane because it is insane to exalt yourself, to think that you are anywhere close to the level of the Creator of the universe.

God: The God who refuses to share praise with man.

I want you to see that God refuses to share praise with men. Mark it down: God will not share His glory with another. He may let men and women boast and rage for a time, but He will bring them down. Hear this: God will always, always bring pride of men and women down. Always. Do not stand in pride before this God.

Two Conclusions ...

Our responsibility is urgent.

So, there's the story. Now, what are we to conclude? How are we to take this in? What does all of that mean for our lives? What does all of that mean for our church? What does this mean for us? What does this mean in this room? Two conclusions: one, our responsibility is urgent. Here's what I mean by that. First, to unbelievers. To every person in this room who has not believed on Jesus Christ...believed in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, the point of this whole story is for you to believe the gospel now, today.

Experience what Cornelius experienced in Acts 10. Experience what the nations experienced in Antioch in Acts 11. Believe in Christ. God has orchestrated the events of your life to hear this. Jesus has died the death that you deserve to die. He has died on the cross for your sins, and he has risen in victory over sin, so that when you trust in Him, you will be reconciled to God to know and enjoy Him forever and ever and ever. It's the best news in the world.

Believe the gospel. Turn from you sin and yourself. That's the word in Acts 11:21. They turned to the Lord. Turn from your sin. Turn from yourself and trust in Christ as Lord. Trust in Christ as the King. Do what people have been doing for the last 2,000 years and be saved from your sins. That's what this passage means for you, if you've never believed in Christ for your salvation.

Then, to believers...so unbelievers, believe the gospel. Now, believers, proclaim the gospel to the nations. Unbelievers, be converted today. Believers, be converted today. In the same way...I'm not talking about conversion to salvation, but see what happened in Peter's life. See what happened in the church, in this pivotal point in the book of Acts, and let it happen in your heart. Ask God to grip your heart...the depths of who you are...for thousands of people groups, nations who have never heard the gospel. Be converted today. Refuse to live Christianity a moment longer cold and unmoved when it comes to the unreached around the world. Soften hearts. Ask God to give you His heart.

See this: the gospel is a divine message. It carries divine power, and praise God, He has worked about your conversion to Christ. God orchestrated the whole thing. He brought man, woman, that you knew, maybe you didn't know, maybe family, maybe friends, somebody you just met, somebody you were listening to, whoever it was, God did that. God brought somebody to you so you could hear the gospel. You hear about the life, and death, and resurrection of Christ and believed, and your life has been totally changed. That is a privilege that a billion-and-a-half people have never had before. Never even had it.

So, realize this: that gospel is good. You know it's good. We know it's good. It's a divine message, but it requires a human messenger. That's the takeaway here, especially from Acts 10 and 11. Angels, and visions, and dreams, oh my. All of this is happening, but notice this, the angel in these visions. The angel appears to Cornelius. The angel doesn't share the gospel. God has not entrusted the responsibility, opportunity, and privilege of sharing the gospel to angels. He has entrusted that responsibility, obligation, opportunity, and privilege to His people, and this gospel always requires a human messenger.

There are 6,000 plus people groups around the world that have not heard the gospel, and there are dreams and visions that are happening, but the gospel will not go to them until humans go to them. God is doing all kinds of things to prepare our hearts. We'll get to that.

The gospel requires a human messenger. We know this, right? Romans 10:13-15, "How will they believe if they haven't heard?" They won't hear unless we go to them. So, we can't just sit back and think, "All right, somebody is going to do it. Somebody can do it." No, we are God's instruments to do this. Our responsibility is urgent. His power is available to us. His power is available to His people all over this passage, right? His power is available to us as we pray. See the church gathered in fervent prayer. See the church, even weak in faith, gathered in fervent prayer. So, let's pray. Let's pray for the power of God, and His power is available as we preach. When we speak this Word, He will bless it. He will bless it to lead people to Christ.

His power is available to His people, and His plan is aimed at all peoples. That's the point. That's the point of this text. God has people from every nation and every people group. Some of those nations and people groups may seem hard. They may seem anti-gospel, but do not write them off. God has people in every single one of those nations, and He is sending us to them. This is what God is doing. It's what He did in Peter's life. It's what He did in the life of the church. It's what He's doing in our lives.

Don't sit back and let gospel grace become a means of elitism and favoritism in your life, where we as a people are content to soak in the gospel week after week after week and use our resources for ourselves, do church according to what works best for our comforts. No, no, don't do that. He is sending us. Be free from prejudice and pride and favoritism and cultural isolation. He's sending us, and He is preparing them. Think about this.

Oh, now, this is where I'm going to go aside for a second. So, I don't know this for sure, but just think about it with me, based on what we just read. Could it be, maybe, could it be that while God is doing a work in your heart right now, opening your heart to the need among the unreached and how that plays out, who knows. Who knows. We're going to talk about that some next week, but it's going to play out differently in all of our lives. So, we're not even going there.

Is your heart gripped where you say, "Really, whatever...whatever you want me to do, whatever you want us to"? So, as God does that kind of work in our hearts and leads us to pray, and to give, and to go as He leads, as He does that work in our hearts, could it be that

while He's doing that in this room at this moment, that at the same time, maybe there's a guy in Pakistan. Maybe there's a guy in Pakistan who is having a vision right now? His heart has been opened. Somebody is going to come one day, and maybe you're that guy or that woman who's going to go and interact, and God is going to orchestrate the entrance of the gospel in one of these unreached people groups through your heart and their heart coming together.

God's sovereignty is unstoppable.

Could it be? Yes, absolutely it could be. That's the second conclusion. God's sovereignty is unstoppable. It's all over this passage. God's sovereign over disease and death. You see His sovereign leadership in Cornelius and in Peter at the same time. His sovereign plan in using persecution to start the Church at Antioch. His sovereign rule over king Herod himself. Oh, don't miss it. Our God holds world leaders in His hands. They are His to do with what He pleases in His timing.

As you watch the news, and you see what's going on in Egypt, and you see what's going on in Tunisia, and you see what's going on in Yemen, and you see what's going on in Jordan, know this: God is sovereign over every single bit of it. Men are responsible in the middle of it, no question, but God is sovereign over it. He holds all things in His hands. He holds every leader in His hands, every future leader, holds in His hands. What that means is He holds our lives in his hands. Every single one of our lives, and every single detail in our lives.

Now, here's the deal. I don't know what that means for our life. I don't know what that means for my life. I don't know what He will bring in your path, and I don't know what He will bring in my path. Maybe a brain tumor, maybe not. Maybe cancer, maybe not. Maybe your road will be easy; maybe your road will be difficult. Maybe your road will be smooth; and maybe your road will be rough.

James beheaded; Peter rescued. God had power to save James, right? He's sovereign over the whole picture. No explanation why one happens to this person, and there's something else happens to this person. There's a lot we don't know, but this we do know, whether in peace or in persecution, whether in health or in sickness, whether in life or in death, God will accomplish our good. That we know for sure.

Romans 8:28, "*God will work all things together for the good of those who love him.*" Psalm 31:15, He holds your times in His hands. That's a promise. Revelation 21, there is coming a day when there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, and all the tears He will wipe away from our eyes. That's a promise guaranteed.

He will accomplish our good, and He will show His glory among all the peoples of the earth, every people group on the earth. He holds the world in His hands, and He holds our lives in His hands. So, let's confess that. Let's thrust ourselves before Him, and let's say, "Whatever you want to do. Whatever you want to do in our lives, whatever you want to do in our families, and whatever you want to do in this church, do it for the spread of your glory and your gospel to every people group on the planet. That is what we are here for, and we want your glory more than we want our own lives."

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