

Acts 9:32-10:48 (ESV)
Breaking Barriers to Gospel Sharing

Introduction

We are looking at a very long passage today—Acts 9:32-10:48. So let me try to be as clear and concise as possible. I will ask you to open your Bible to this passage so that I can refer you to the relevant verses as I preach along.

Australia closed its borders to foreigners to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Many families were separated for long periods. The Ying family was one of them.

Dominic Ying was working at a bank in Singapore. But his Singaporean wife and their three young children were based in Adelaide (Australia) because she was working in marketing down under.

Dominic Ying usually travels to Adelaide every other month, or at least seven times a year. But with the closure of borders by Australia due to COVID-19, foreigners like him would not be able to enter the country.

When interviewed by the media, Dominic said that while his family could come to Singapore, there were things to consider—such as his wife taking time away from her regular work in Australia, and costs incurred by stay-home notices and COVID-19 tests.

He added, “When the situation got more serious and border restrictions were imposed, it dawned on all of us that we will not see each other for quite a while ... and there’s no end in sight. I’m most worried if there’s an emergency and I can’t travel there immediately. I miss them. I wish I could hold them. And my children ... they are growing up so fast and to not see them for months ... is a loss.”

The border-control measures may have helped to contain the COVID-19 virus, but it has also kept out many people from each other. Such is the adverse effect of man-made barriers no matter how well-intentioned they may be. All man-made barriers will bring with them some adverse effects in both human endeavours and relationships.

(<https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/when-will-we-meet-again-couples-separated-covid-19-border-controls-struggle-reduce-distance>)

We have often been reminded that our first concern as witnesses of Jesus Christ is found in His last command just before His ascension in Acts 1:8—“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

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This is the Lord's call to His people to continue His work of reaching the lost as His witnesses not by closing borders, but by crossing boundaries; not by building walls, but by breaking barriers so that the gospel can be preached from beyond their familiar ground in Jerusalem.

In our passage today, we will discover how the Lord is opening the way for His people to obey this call by using Peter (arguably the lead disciple at that time) to break down barriers so that the gospel can be shared beyond Jerusalem and beyond the Jews.

How does the Lord prepare someone to be His gospel witness?

I. The Lord leads His gospel witness out of familiar ground (vv. 9:32-43).

In Acts 9:32-43, we come to two instances in which the Lord used Peter mightily—first, to heal a man who had been paralyzed for eight years; second, to raise a woman from the dead.

But why did Luke include these two events in his writing of Acts? Did he mean for us to imitate Peter by going out and performing miracles in Jesus' name? And why only these two persons if the answer is "yes"? There were many who remained sick, or who died and were not raised. In other words, there were many for whom no miracle occurred. So, to the one who was healed and the other who came back to life, we call them "miracles". But what about the many not healed or came back to life—what do we call them? Do we call them "miracles" or "miserables"?

Thus, I believe these miracles were not recorded by Luke to teach us to go out and do likewise as a norm, but for some other purpose. Of course, if the sovereign and omnipotent Lord wants to use you and me to do a miracle, He can! Yet, I believe such miracles are not for us as God's people to merely rejoice in staying alive in this imperfect world, but to remember that "this world is not my home for I'm just passing through". God has a better world awaiting us, and meanwhile, He has a gospel mission for us here on earth.

Notice in Acts 9:35, the writer said, "And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him (i.e. the healed paralytic Aeneas), and they turned to the Lord." Luke probably does not mean every single person, but a great number by "all". Then in 9:42, Luke tells us this, "And it (i.e. the raising of Dorcas [Greek name]/Tabitha [Hebrew name]) became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

Luke is using similar descriptions in both cases to show how the gospel of Jesus Christ spread, resulting in the salvation of many. I believe Luke wants us to view these miracles as spiritual lessons of the power of the gospel to transform sinners. Yes, the miracles actually happened, but like Jesus' miracles, they were signs pointing to something even more important. They

show us how the Lord mightily, graciously, and mercifully goes beyond physical healing to impart spiritual healing and new life to those who are helpless and dead because of sin. Miracles from God are not an end in themselves; they are meant to lead sinners to belief and salvation in Christ.

Peter might not be the first of Christ's followers to move out of Jerusalem to minister to others. Philip was already ministering to Samaritans in Samaria and the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert (Acts 8). But Peter was the first of the Apostles; the leading figure in the Jerusalem church then to get outside of Jerusalem to reach lost people with Christ's power and in Christ's name. Both Lydda and Joppa were in Judea, but with a substantial number of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles. The Plain of Sharon covered most part of the area where the Samaritans were. Thus, Peter was actually led by the Lord to leave his Jewish sanctum in Jerusalem to areas where he had to minister among people whom he was definitely not comfortable with.

Also in his two miracles in Acts 9:32-43, his words and actions remind us of how Jesus Himself had ministered in His time—healing the paralytic (a man) in Luke 5, and raising the daughter of Jairus (a woman) from the dead in Luke 8.

So, we learn this lesson: *The person prepared by the Lord to be His gospel witness is willing to leave familiar ground and cross boundaries to minister to sinners in the Lord's power and in His name.*

The Lord is not only bringing people to Himself by bringing down the wall of sin. He is also bringing people to each another by bringing down their man-made walls.

Moving on, we see that the Lord was also preparing another leader-figure—this time a Roman centurion—not to bring the gospel, but to be blessed by the gospel.

We'll now look at how the Lord was preparing Cornelius to break down his man-made wall.

II. The Lord moves a God-seeking worshipper from knowing Him impersonally to knowing Him personally (10:1-8).

In Acts 10:1, we move away from Lydda and Joppa to the city of Caesarea. This was a coastal city about 50 miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was the garrison of the Roman military—there was a cohort of Roman soldiers stationed there.

Cornelius was based in Caesarea as part of this cohort. He held the rank of centurion. In the Roman army, a centurion was a fairly high-ranking officer. There were various levels within the rank of centurion. The highest level of centurion rank was one who would lead a cohort of about 500 soldiers. And

since Cornelius was said to be in a cohort, it is believed that he was at the highest level of the centurion rank.

What does this mean? It means Cornelius was a man of authority who could enjoy some perks. He could send someone to do a personal errand for him; he could have the privilege of having his family with him.

Not only did Cornelius have authority over his junior officers and subordinates, but also over the people in the conquered regions of Judea, Galilee and Samaria. The normal Roman attitude towards people subject to their rule was that of arrogance. The Romans prided themselves on being more civilized and wiser, as well as more powerful than the others. And most Roman officers and soldiers shared this same arrogance and contempt towards their conquered people.

But Cornelius was not like that. How do I know? Because 10:2 gives us three hints:

- First, 10:2 describes Cornelius as “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.” The Romans in general believed in many gods. So everywhere they went, the Roman army would carry shrines for worship and sacrifice. And who was responsible in leading the troops to observe the rites and rituals? It was the centurion.

We are told that Cornelius was a devout and God-fearing man. The word “God” in v. 2 in the original Greek (τὸν θεόν) refers not to one of the many pagan gods of Rome, but it alludes to THE one true God. Cornelius was devoted to and feared this one true God even though he didn’t know Him in a personal sense.

- Second, Cornelius demonstrated his devotion and fear of God with active deeds—he gave generously to those in need. Occupying armies were notorious for taking and looting from the conquered people. But Cornelius was commended here for giving generously to people in need, and not taking from them.
- Third, out of his devotion to God, Cornelius prayed regularly. It is unlikely that he was allowed by the Jews to worship with them because they would consider him unclean. But Cornelius was not to be deterred. He was determined to worship and pray to the one true God as regularly as he could.

Acts 10:22 gives us a brief commentary of how the Jews viewed Cornelius—“Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation ...” Imagine a Roman centurion being praised by the Jewish people like a German military officer being praised by the Jews when they were persecuted by Hitler in WW II—it’s almost unthinkable!

Note that even God had some words of praise for Cornelius through an angel who spoke to him in a vision in v.4—“Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” God had heard his prayers and remembered his gifts to the poor, and God was pleased with him.

What do you think many today will say to Cornelius? I think it will be something like this—“Cornelius, you are a very religious man. You fear God and you pray to Him. Not only that, you also lead your family in the way of godly living. And you have such great compassion and kindness towards the poor. You give to them generously. You don’t despise the conquered people. You treat them with respect and dignity. Cornelius, you are such a good man. Surely, you already have earned your place in heaven.”

But did the angel of God say this to Cornelius in the vision—that he was already good enough for heaven? No. Rather, the angel told him in vv. 5-6—“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.”

Why was Peter to come to Cornelius? The answer is in the last part of v. 22—that Peter would come to Cornelius so that he could “hear what you (Peter) have to say.”

And what was Peter supposed to say to Cornelius? The answer is in vv. 34-43—it is the message of belief in Jesus Christ and forgiveness in Him (i.e. the gospel message).

Yes, we may think that heaven was already guaranteed for Cornelius because he was religious, kind, and compassionate. But no, he was still not good enough for heaven. He needed to hear the gospel from Peter. Yes, he already knew something about the ministry of Jesus Christ. In vv. 37-38, Peter says this to Cornelius, “37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38 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.”

Cornelius knew something about the ministry of Jesus Christ. But the call from God to him was to go from knowing Jesus Christ impersonally to knowing Him personally—i.e. to hear the gospel from Peter and then responding to it in faith.

Cornelius was willing to bring down a barrier as the Lord prepared him to receive Peter and hear the Lord’s message for him. What’s this barrier? It is the barrier of “good enough to go to heaven on my own merits”. Cornelius saw a vision of an angel speaking to him. But that’s not enough for him to know the Lord Jesus personally and respond in faith.

Indeed, the religious, upright, and kind person still needs to hear the gospel so that he can respond personally in faith to Jesus Christ as and when the Lord so providentially grants the opportunity.

Turning our attention away from Cornelius and back to Peter, we now see the Lord preparing Peter to bring down another barrier.

III. The Lord wants His gospel witness to discard biased exclusivity (10:9-23).

10:9-10 reads, “9 ... Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ...”

While his meal was being prepared, Peter fell into a “trance”. What this means is that he was so much drawn to God in prayer that he became oblivious to his surroundings.

And out of that state of mind, body and spirit, he saw a heavenly vision. He saw a large sheet being let down from heaven to earth by its four corners. This sheet spread from North to South, East to West, and carried a message that Peter must understand.

10:12 says that this sheet contained “all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.” And a voice from heaven called to Peter in v. 13, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” In the midst of his physical hunger, Peter saw FOOD in his vision!

But Peter did not shout, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” Instead he protested in v. 14—“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” According to the Law in the Old Testament (Lev. 11; Deut.14), Peter was not permitted to eat these unclean animals. Well, we certainly cannot fault Peter for his faithfulness to the Law. Even in his hunger, he said “no” to food!

When Peter was asked by the heavenly voice to kill and eat, he was not asked to contradict the Law or to observe a changed diet. Rather, the Lord was giving him a command concerning the people he should love and reach with the gospel. The church was not to be exclusively Hebrew, as well as not to view the Gentiles as “unclean”.

In the Old Testament, God gave Israel the dietary law (i.e. some animals were not to be eaten as food) not so much for the reason of health, but very much for the reason of holy distinction. Israel was to make a distinction between the holy and unholy because God had made a distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles at that time of redemptive history.

Yes, the Lord separated the Jews from the others; He made them “distinct” from the others. But He did so not on the basis of Jewish superiority. He did so because He wanted the Jews to demonstrate to the nations the right kind of divine-human relationship that He wanted to have with all people. Only in this sense were the Jews the chosen people of God.

But the Jews distorted this calling of God. They began to believe that God did not favour the Gentiles; that God only favoured the Jews.

In the Old Testament, uncleanness was a matter of externals. Even touching something unclean could defile a person, let alone eating it.

But Jesus said in Mark 7:15-19, “Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean ...” A person is defiled by what comes out of his heart, not by what has been physically touched or entered his body.

Peter was slow to link what Jesus said in Mark 7 with his vision here. The Lord had to correct his protest with these words in v. 15, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” But Peter still could not understand completely. He still held on stubbornly to a rule-based faith.

It is still the same today. Memorizing verses is a great way to let the Word of God dwell in us. But just memorizing does not mean the Word of God will be alive in us. It is only when we memorize and then seek to live out the memorized truths that the Word will become alive in us. In other words, we must not confuse memorizing verses as a rule to obey the Lord with living out the verses as our relationship-building with the Lord.

In Acts 10:13-16, the Lord told Peter three times to eat the animals in the vision. Hebrew linguistics would use a three-time repetition as an emphatic triplet—i.e. to describe the intensity of something. So, the Lord was telling Peter in the vision, “Peter, you see these animals which you consider unclean. But I want you to eat them! Eat them! Eat them!” Indeed, the Lord made His intention absolutely clear to Peter.

Peter had been brought up to believe that Gentiles were never good enough to be loved by God. That’s why understanding and accepting the vision was such a struggle for him. In fact, for a Jew to visit a Gentile was a crime at that time—Peter said this to Cornelius when he arrived at the latter’s home in 10:28, “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.”

Peter was finally enlightened though he was initially trying hard to keep the separation between Jews and Gentiles. He still wanted to get all the rules right. Many today also want to get all the rules right. But Scripture tells us that God sent Jesus Christ to die for us while we were yet sinners; while we still have not gotten all the rules right.

Yes, we don't need to get all the rules right before the Lord can love us. From this perspective, we can then look at every so-called "unclean" unbeliever as a candidate for God's salvation.

The struggle of Peter was between his Jewish close-mindedness towards the Gentiles and the Lord's unconditional love towards all people. This can still be a struggle for many Christians today.

You see, while the gospel calls us to open our arms to embrace others and accept them with the love of the Lord, the old self in us often drives us to reject them in order to protect our own biased exclusivity.

In vv. 19-22, Peter saw the vision and thought hard about it. As he was doing so, three men came to him. Through these men, the Lord was calling Peter not to doubt but to obey. The Lord was saying to Peter, "Don't keep thinking and delaying. You already know what you need to do. Now, move and do it!"

The Scripture indicates to us that Peter was willing to obey. In v. 23a, he invited the men sent by Cornelius into his house to be his guests. In Hebrew culture, the highest form of hospitality you can accord to someone is to ask him to stay with you and eat with you. Peter was willing to let these three Gentile men stay with him and eat with him. Peter had brought down the barrier of Jewish exclusivity and invited the "unclean" to be with him.

What the Lord had to teach Peter was not about food he should not eat, but about people he should love. Like Peter, we too are to love the Lord by loving others whom He died to redeem.

The barrier that the Lord challenged Peter to bring down is that of His Jewish exclusivity. And the lesson for us is this—*we must discard biased exclusivity so that we will not view some people as unworthy of the gospel.*

We now look at the last scene in Acts 10:24-48, and see not only a beautiful picture of Jews and Gentiles accepting each other, but more importantly, a portrayal of the Lord's blessed favour upon sinners.

IV. The Lord builds His church when His people view one another as equal before Him (10:24-48).

We saw in the first half of Acts 10 that God began moving Jews and Gentiles towards each other through the persons of Peter and Cornelius. Cornelius sent for Peter and Peter came.

The eagerness with which Cornelius received Peter and assembled his family and friends to hear Peter is indicative of his sincere search for the truth. But we would do well to notice the deficiency in Cornelius' faith in the fact that he fell at Peter's feet to worship him. Peter was quick to correct him. Thus, we

see that Cornelius had to grow in his understanding of God and man—you worship God only; you don't worship a man.

Peter also had to grow in his understanding of God and man. He made two statements that revealed his growth in this area. The first is in v. 28 where he said to those who have gathered in the house of Cornelius, "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."

The second is in vv. 34-35 where he said, "34 ... Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

If Cornelius had to learn that no man should be lifted above humanity and be treated like a god, Peter had to learn that no man should be debased beneath humanity and be treated like garbage.

Even though Cornelius is a virtuous man with some sense of who God is, he still had to grow in his understanding of divine truth. Clearly he understood something of divine truth. He knew there's one true God whom he desired to worship. But what he did not know was the gospel of Jesus Christ that would save.

Thus in vv. 36-42, Peter preached the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to Cornelius and those with him. Then Peter proclaimed in v. 43—"To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter was not content to leave Cornelius and those with him with just a general notion of God, or of the spiritual world, or of some transcendence. No, as a witness to the risen Christ, Peter wanted Cornelius and those with him to believe in Christ and receive Him into their lives.

As Peter preached and the people listened, something startling happened in the room. Verses 44-47 say, "44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 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. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'"

Yes, the Spirit fell even upon the Gentiles! As the Spirit fell and the Gentiles spoke in tongues and worshipped, Peter asked his Jewish-Christian companions, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The eyes of all the Jews there, including those of Peter, were now fully opened to see this—the Gentiles should not be despised as unclean for they were accepted by God in Jesus Christ just like they themselves had experienced on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

- The Gentiles too could receive the Holy Spirit exactly like them!
- The Gentiles too could be saved!
- The Gentiles too could be baptized!
- The Gentiles too could belong to the Church!

There is no “caste system” in Christianity because Christ is building His church into one people out of all the peoples of the earth!

Conclusion

This last instruction of the Lord before His ascension in Acts 1:8 was a call to the disciples to get out of Jerusalem (their cozy corner); to break down barriers; to cross over boundaries in order to share and spread the gospel to people beyond themselves.

The Lord even used His signs and wonders in Acts as His powerful break-ins to break down barriers of Jewish close-mindedness and that of Gentile paganism in order to birth His church and spread the gospel to all people.

As Christians today, we are also called not to keep the gospel to ourselves, but be willing to bring down any prejudice, tradition, unbelief, and fear that will hinder our reaching out to the lost.

The spread of the gospel will be hindered not because people refuse to hear or accept Christ, but if you and I are slow to heed the Lord’s call to be His gospel witnesses.

Pray that the Lord will find you and me faithful as His gospel witnesses as we match our proclamation of gospel truth with our demonstration of gospel love. Amen!