

## **ReStart Week 4: Building Bridges - Acts 10:1-18**

### **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (March 28, 2021)**

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Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. Just one week to go until Easter and we are excited to be worshipping together next week. Yesterday we had a wonderful time during our Joyful Bounty outreach of connecting with different people and families, hearing their stories and praying with them. Thank you to Jan for setting that up, for all of you who donated to make it possible and provide bags of food, and for all of you who gave of your time to serve yesterday.

Today we're moving to week four of our series Re-Start. As we move through 2021, we're praying and seeing God's guidance as to how we can restart and revamp what we're doing this year. We're going through the book of Acts to learn about how the disciples took the message of the kingdom of God and then adopted their Jewish faith to pioneer a new form of faith and ministry. Today we're looking at a big breakthrough in that process that opened up the church to way more people.

Last week we looked at how Philip was used by the Holy Spirit to share the gospel with an Ethiopian eunuch. He was able to have a divine encounter with an important African leader, sparking a new gospel movement, because he responded in obedience. We looked at three things last week:

- 1) Follow God's directions.**
- 2) Remember that God does the work of preparation.**
- 3) Lead people to take the next step.**

Today we're moving up two chapters to chapter 10. Please read with me from Acts 10, starting in verse 1:

**10** At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. <sup>2</sup> He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. <sup>3</sup> One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. <sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

<sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. <sup>8</sup> He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet

being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

<sup>14</sup> “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

<sup>15</sup> The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

<sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

<sup>17</sup> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. <sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

This is the first part of the longest single narrative in all of Acts, so something important is going on here. Let’s start by looking at Cornelius. Cornelius lived in Caesarea, a port city with more Gentiles than Jews on the coast of the Mediterranean. Conflict between these two groups would later spark riots and a war against Rome. This city had been “rebuilt by Herod the Great and named after Caesar Augustus” (Fernando, *Acts*), so had significant Roman influence.

He was a leader in the army, a centurion, which means someone in charge of 100 Roman soldiers. All the centurions mentioned in the New Testament are mentioned positively, including one who said during the crucifixion that Jesus was truly the son of God. Cornelius is continuing this theme of an outsider to Judaism expressing deep faith and devotion. He is described as God-fearing, which probably meant that he followed most of the Jewish law and fulfilled most of the requirements of the Jewish faith except circumcision, which would have made him a full proselyte, meaning a foreigner who had become fully Jewish.

Two aspects of his faith are highlighted – **generosity to the needy**, and his **regular prayer**. He had a good balance of his inner faith, demonstrated by his devotional prayer life, and his outer faith, as seen in helping the poor. These habits were preparing him for being used of God in a special way.

One day, something dramatic happened that would change the course of Cornelius’s life, and change the church as well. He had a vision, and saw an angel. This is what the angel said: “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” Cornelius sent a soldier to bring Peter over to Caesarea.

Ok now let’s shift over to see what’s going on with Peter in Joppa. Peter goes up to pray on the roof of the house at noon, which was not one of the usual hours of prayer. Usually, the hours for Jewish prayer were at 9 am in the morning, 3 pm in the afternoon, and 6 pm at nightfall. Peter also sees a vision, but this vision is different, and is a sheet that is let down to him filled with animals, reptiles and birds. Peter is told to kill and eat. This is deeply problematic and violates several of the Jewish food laws.

Notice what he says: “**Surely not, Lord.**” Let me give you a clue – if you ever find yourself saying No, Lord, something is going wrong. Lord does not mix with no, that’s a contradiction. Kind of like when

my kids say No Dad – just doesn't fly. Our two-year-old Amara sometimes says no very dismissively. BG and I will laugh about that sometimes, because she'll say no Mom in a very patronizing way, it's like, I hear what you're saying mom, but I'm not doing that.

But in Peter's defense, he did have reason to pause. He had more than a thousand years of law and tradition behind him. The law of Moses was very clear about what food he could eat, and what food he couldn't. I'm not going to get into all those details, but it is all laid out in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and the same rules that continue in the Jewish faith for something to be considered kosher today.

As the story continues, Peter is processing the meaning of this vision when there is a knock on the door. The messengers from Cornelius are there to invite him for a visit. The Spirit tells him that three men are looking for him, and that he should not hesitate to go with them, because the Spirit has sent them. Just like we say with Philip last week, the Spirit provides clear guidance on what Peter needs to do, and where he needs to go. He just needs to obey. He invited them into the house, and then the next day travelled with them and some others to go see Cornelius.

There is a **clear contrast** between this story and another person who was also asked to take God's message to a foreign city. The Hebrew prophet Jonah was given instructions to preach in Nineveh, and he went to the same city that Peter would be in many years later, the city of Joppa. But Jonah did not follow God's directions and took a boat from Joppa going in the opposite direction, trying to escape. Peter followed God's guidance and left Joppa going the right direction.

Now, once he got there, just going inside the house of a non-Jew was a problem. This is what Peter said when he arrived at the house in verse 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 makes the connection. It isn't really about the food at all – but the food represents the barrier between the Jews and everyone else. Jesus came to fulfill the law and take down that barrier, opening up the gospel to reach every nation. Here's my main idea for today:

- **Living out our faith requires building bridges to reach people.**

This is not a new idea, and I know as a church we've looked at this before. But as I look at our nation and the challenges we face, we continue to struggle with barriers between people. People continue to be divided along racial, ethnic and religious lines. As Christians, we must be in the forefront of building bridges and connecting people.

Peter said this, starting in verse 34: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."

Lord of all. As a Jew, Peter would not normally have considered sharing the gospel with someone like Cornelius. It took God's intervention to help Peter see that the gospel was for everyone, not just a

select few. By Peter's criteria, none of us here right now would have heard the gospel because we didn't belong.

Now, many of us probably don't have the same issue that Peter had; we don't see the good news as something that belongs only to one group of people. But still, we all carry certain prejudices that can be hard to see but which cause us to shut certain people out without intending to. And even to date, there are people who remain on the outside because they don't fit certain criteria.

We might find it difficult to share our faith with people who have a different religious background than we do, and it is difficult. Sometimes it is people with whom we have many things in common but who we think wouldn't appreciate the message of the gospel. But whatever barriers exist between us and the people around us, God desires us to be the bridge that will reach people from every nation, every tongue and every creed.

### **1) Focus on expanding your perspective.**

I think one of the most powerful tools that allows us to build bridges is listening. I'd ask all of us to take time this week to reach out to someone who has a different perspective from us and ask them how they are doing, or they are processing recent events. This could be someone of a different race or ethnicity, or perhaps a different barrier.

There has been a lot of discussion recently about discrimination and hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islanders, or AAPI. One of my Asian American friends wrote an online post in which he shared examples of the discrimination and verbal abuse he's faced, which I did not realize had been his experience, but also how often other people would downplay it, they would say it was only a joke, or they didn't mean that. He said that sometimes friends will say to him, really you're basically white, you haven't even experienced 'real' racism, and how much that bothered him.

We need to emphasize valuing people as equals, but not seeking to make them the same, because we are not the same. And that's ok! That's how God made us. If we say that someone is basically white, probably that is intended as a compliment that means someone has assimilated well, but it is still holding up being white as the standard, and measuring someone against how close they come. It is in effect erasing that part of their identity.

Last year during our series on politics, I talked about the importance of humanizing people you disagree with. As I was thinking about bridge building this week, I thought about the value of hearing someone else and understanding where they are coming from. In the video we saw earlier, we heard Jerri's story and her fear of sharing the gospel across religious lines, and how she overcame her fear and how God used her to reach across ethnic lines to bring light and hope.

Think about the people that you would be the most hesitant to share your faith with: what reasons do you have for that hesitation? Is it because you don't know what they believe? Are you afraid that they are not interested in matters of the faith? Whatever barriers exist, you can begin to build a bridge by learning more about that person and their life. Find ways to get to know them. Ask about their background, their families, their work. Take time to really listen. As you do, some of those fears might

begin to fall away as you find points of connection between you. And out of that relationship you might be able to share your own story of faith.

When I first moved to Kenya, I loved the chance to learn more about many different parts of the world. One of my best friends was from Denmark, and we would often hang out and talk for hours, and he would tell him about his life in Europe, what their church and their country was like, and all the things that he liked about their government and even their high taxes and regulation and government safety net that provided health care, education through college, and so on. It was a totally different perspective than I had grown up with, and I found it fascinating. That doesn't mean I agree with everyone, but he gave me a perspective that I had never heard before, which I found tremendously valuable.

As borders will open and we have new chances to restart international travel, I hope to organize some mission or exposure trips that we can do as a church. These trips are not for the sake of going in as the experts to an area in need of our help, which has sometimes been a major problem with short-term mission trips, but instead to learn and to experience first-hand what God is doing in an area, and to learn from local leaders and those ministering in a particular community. In terms of missional effectiveness, I lean heavily toward long term missions instead of short term missions. But to broaden our perspective of what God is doing, and where other people are coming from, doing a shorter trip can be very powerful when we go to learn.

## **2) Trust God to be at work.**

Sometimes the greatest barrier that we have to overcome is the fear of how our message will be received. We might feel like we are intruding in other people's lives when God prompts us to share something. But as I mentioned last week, God is the one who does the work of preparation, all we have to do is obey. God had already appeared to Cornelius; Peter's job was to help him understand fully the message of the gospel.

In the same way, God is at work in people's lives all around us. Our job is to be open and receptive to His leading and faithfully obey what He reveals to us, and go where He sends us. If God puts someone on your heart who doesn't know Christ, ask God to begin preparing that person's heart and to give you an opportunity to share with them. You might be surprised that they've just been waiting for someone like you!

I am looking forward to planning out how we can launch and restart new groups and avenues for discipleship like Alpha and Rooted later on this year in a way that builds bridges and is open to people coming from different backgrounds. I don't have all the answers for that, but please pray with me that we can build an inclusive ministry that leads people to Jesus.

Have a good week, and we look forward to Easter next Sunday! You are all invited to attend either online or to join us in person. Please pray with me as we close.