

In the late 1940s, Charles Templeton was a close friend and preaching associate of Billy Graham. He effectively preached the gospel to large crowds in major arenas. However, intellectual doubts began to nag at him. He questioned the truth of Scripture and other core Christian beliefs. He finally abandoned his faith and made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Billy to do the same. He felt sorry for Billy and commented, "He committed intellectual suicide by closing his mind." Templeton resigned from the ministry and became a novelist and news commentator. He also wrote a critique of the Christian faith, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*.

Journalist Lee Strobel interviewed him for his book, *The Case for Faith*. Templeton was 83 and suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Templeton spoke to Strobel about some of the reasons he left the faith.

Eventually Lee Strobel asked him about Jesus and was surprised at the response. Templeton replied:

I know it may sound strange, but I have to say I adore him! Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. He is the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, I miss Him.

Templeton's eyes filled with tears and he wept freely. He refused to say more.

As believer's... we do sometimes doubt... don't we...?

Brother Lawrence once said: "*When we are in doubt, God will never fail to give light when we have no other plan than to please him and to act in love*

for him.” ... I believe that there are plenty of Scripture verses that back up the truth that Brother Lawrence expressed.

This morning in our study through the book of Acts... we have an incredible passage that provides a lot of insight to three common questions... which produce *doubt* in Christians lives. Here are three questions that often make us doubt – which we will touch on in today’s narrative.

#1. Is simply being sincere enough with any religion or belief system sufficient to win God’s favor...? Will God notice the genuineness and authenticity of a Buddhist monk... for example... and provide him with an opportunity to receive salvation...?

#2. Would God really send someone to Hell – if they grew up in another part of the world... and in a culture that never even heard of Jesus...?

The first two questions are similar. This third question is different... but it causes many believers to doubt their faith...

#3. Does God truly effect change in our life – and if so... HOW...?

The first two questions have threads that run through our passage and I will point out how our passage can help douse the flames of doubt we may have because of them. But it is this third question that our passage is primarily concerned with... “Does God effect needed change in our life... and if so... HOW?” ... We will deal with all three questions... but most of our attention will be given to the question of “how God makes change in our life” because that is the main emphasis of our verses.

As we pick up our passage this morning... the events we are about to study... occurred 6-10 years after Pentacost. Commentator Kent Huges

places it at 7 years after... and Warren Wiersbe places it at 10. ... But we should notice that Jesus has returned to Heaven... the Holy Spirit has come and filled believers... and nearly a decade of early church history has already passed. The church has certainly grown numerically... and in their Spiritual understanding. But a major change was needed – it had to happen... in order for God's Church to move forward. - Prejudice had to be rooted out.

So... as we study how God effects change in our lives... the change we will see Him effect... is an issue that our contemporary society currently faces – prejudice. ... With the racial tensions so strong in our Nation right now – we need to be sure that God has effectively produced this kind of change in our own lives!

So this incredible important passage today... actually brings our attention to four issues that can create a lot of havoc in a believer's faith. ...Does sincerity account for anything (if a person doesn't have faith in Christ)? ...Would God send someone to Hell who never had a chance to hear about Jesus? ...How does God effect real change in us? ...(and) Is there any type of prejudice that lingers in my life?

It is indisputable that prejudice and partiality exist. From the beginning of time prejudice has existed (Cain and Abel, Genesis 4:1f). Prejudice is everywhere in the world—in every nation, state, city, and neighborhood. Prejudice (discrimination) even exists within families between parent and child, brother and sister, family and relatives. Feelings toward and against people are a tragic reality.

There are at least two basic reasons for prejudice. **#1.** People differ. They differ in nationality, color, beliefs, religion, speech, looks, behavior, ability, energy, position, status, social standing, possessions, wealth, birth, heritage. Prejudice arises when people feel they and their differences make them better than others. **#2.** Mistreatment causes prejudice. ... When a person mistreats others or is mistreated by others... his nature is immediately aroused to become prejudicial and judgmental. They delve into behaviors of ignoring... neglecting... joking... gossiping... opposing... cursing... abusing... fighting against... persecuting... passing over... segregating... enslaving.

Our present passage strikes a fatal blow against prejudice. It shows forever that Jesus Christ has erased all prejudices and barriers between people. Jew and Gentile are now one in Christ Jesus.

The Jews... like all other people of the earth... had developed their own laws and customs... and every Jewish child was born and reared in the environment of those laws and customs. ...They... like all other people... were steeped in their own nationality and looked upon other people with suspicion. ... However... there were two factors which made the Jewish prejudice run deeper than most.

#1... For centuries... the Jewish people had been mistreated... enslaved... and persecuted. There is no other ethnic group of people that has experienced more than the Jewish people. ... Throughout known history... the descendants of Abraham have been conquered by army after army... and by the millions they had been deported and scattered over the world. Even in the day of Jesus they were enslaved by Rome. Their religion was

the binding force that kept Jews together... in particular their belief that God had called them to be a distinctive people (who worshipped the only true and living God) and their rules governing how to eat... how to sleep... how to work... how to worship... how to wear clothes... how to marry... how to extract justice and civil law... yada... yada... yada...

Their belief and their rules kept them from alien beliefs and from being swallowed up by other people through intermarriage. Their religion was what maintained their distinctiveness as a people and as a nation.

Jewish leaders knew this. They knew that *their religion* was the binding force that held their nation together. Therefore, they opposed anyone or anything that threatened or attempted to break the laws of their religion and nation.

#2. (The second factor which made the Jewish prejudice run deeper than most) ... was that the Jews misread and misinterpreted God's Word and purpose for them. God had called Abraham and given birth to the Jewish nation for one primary purpose—that they might be His people, His witnesses, His missionaries to the rest of the world. God had given the Jews His Word and instructed them to take His Word to the world and tell them about God. They were to bear witness that God *is*—God does exist—and that men are to worship and serve Him and Him alone.

It was here that Israel failed. Instead of proclaiming God and His Word of righteousness and morality to the world, Israel separated itself from the world, hoarding and claiming that God and His law were theirs and theirs alone. They became *separatists*, extremely prejudiced, building barriers

and partitions between themselves and the other people of the world (Gentiles). Prejudice became so deep-seated that attitudes such as these were adopted: ... They called other people "dogs." ... They would have no contact with a Gentile unless absolutely necessary, and then after contact, they had to go through a religious ceremony to be cleansed. ... They would not help a Gentile woman who was giving birth lest another Gentile be born into the world.

It was into such a world that the church was born, a world of extreme prejudice. ... How was God going to overcome and break down the walls and barriers of prejudice that had been built up through the centuries of history? ... How was He going to get His church... His people to break away from their Jewish roots and reach out to the whole world? Does God effect this kind of change inside His followers today... if so... how?

I know that we need to get to today's passage... (and we will)... but it is important for us to realize that God had already begun this work of change in Peter... from what we can see in last week's passage.

Last week we saw Peter had two very positive ministry experiences that must have helped turn his attitude around. ... He had been ministering in Gentile cultures... healing Aeneas (a paralyzed man)... and raising Tabitha Dorcas from the dead. ... These two miracles had occurred in Gentile settings. God's power was operative through Peter in a pagan environment... among the "goyim". This had a softening effect on Peter's prejudice.

After this final miracle "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon" (Acts 9:43). The significance of this is that a tanner's place of business was anathema to a fastidious Jew. It was highly unpleasant and smelly, and animals were slain there. Tanners were ostracized and had to live fifty cubits outside of town. Rabbinical law stated that if a betrothed woman discovered that her fiance was involved in tanning, she could break the engagement. However, Peter had met a Jewish tanner who loved Jesus, and he was willing to associate with him. God was at work in the impulsive apostle's heart. The old biases were wearing thin.

God has a way of softening our prejudices - ***if*** - we are the least bit willing to learn. ... Peter's attitude toward the world was mellowing. But a bigger change was still to come.

Acts 10:1-2

As a Roman centurion... Cornelius might have had a command of 100 men under him. The regiment that he was linked to was generally stationed in Austria... but 1st century documents confirm that it had indeed been deployed to Palestine at this time. God was orchestrating a work of bringing an influential man... who would eventually move back to Rome... and take the Gospel with him.

Our text says Cornelius was "devout and God-fearing... and prayed to God regularly." As a typical Roman he had been exposed to the Roman gods—Jupiter, Augustus, Mars, Venus, etc.—but found they were not real and could do nothing for him. While stationed in Palestine, he had been exposed to the enlightened concepts of Judaism and had become devoutly

monotheistic. As a result, he, a Roman soldier, gave offerings to benefit those in need among the Jewish people.

Was he a sinner? ... Yes. ... Outside the covenant? ... Certainly. ... A swine? ... No. ... He was a noble and spiritual-minded Roman army officer who was longing for the true God—"he and all his family." ... In response to the deep yearnings of this centurion's heart... God met Cornelius in a vision.

You will notice that the Holy Spirit very clearly is underlining for us a very important fact. Here is a man who is religious... devout... sincere... earnest... and prayerful... ... but he is not regenerate. (He is not yet saved.)

There are many people today who think that all you need to do to be acceptable in God's sight is to be religious... to be sincere... to be generous... to live a good... clean... moral life. ... Here is a man exactly like that... but he is not yet born again. ... You see... those characteristics (in and of themselves) do not give a person eternal life. But we do see them here as a prelude to eternal life. ... They indicate that his heart was hungry... open... and ready... but which has not yet received Christ.

There are many people like this today... earnest people... sincere people... there could even be some here this morning who are moral... upright... and generous... but who are not yet born again. ... All the morality and generosity will come to no avail until it leads you to the gift of God which is eternal life in Jesus Christ. ... That is what you need! ... That is what this man needed... and God was moving to answer the need.

I believe that Cornelius is a great model of the truth the author of Hebrews would later write in his epistle...

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that...” (Look closely at this)... *“he rewards those who seek him.*

Cornelius wasn't a believer in Christ, but he was seeking God and was reverent and generous. Therefore... God is about to bring the Gospel to him. This shows that God "rewards those who sincerely seek him". Cornelius's story demonstrates God's willingness to use extraordinary means to reach those who desire to know him. Those who sincerely seek God will find him! ... God made Cornelius's knowledge complete.

This is Scripture's answer to that oft-repeated question, "*What about the poor pagan, that 'good' heathen, who wants to know God but never had a chance? Is he lost?*" ... The answer is that God will get light to such a person. ... God will enable him to hear the gospel.

Now how will God get the gospel to Cornelius? The barriers seem insurmountable. The church at this time -- and for the first 6-10 years -- was exclusively Jewish.

Acts 10:3-8

The piety and good deeds of Cornelius... in no way... earn salvation for anybody. But they can indicate a sincere desire in a person to know God... and God notices that! ... The prayers of Cornelius and his alms had come up for a memorial before God... and God brought the gospel to him. ... God had divinely choreographed everything in His Own unique way.

It is significant that God did not just give Cornelius the whole Gospel in the vision... instead he has to send for Peter and his men. We are about to see God use several men to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Service for God is indeed a great privilege. ... God does not need our service. He can just as easily bring the Gospel in a compelling manner through visions and angels or other miraculous means. But he doesn't.

Salvation is a divine work of grace... but God works through human channels. ... Angels can deliver God's messages to lost men... but they cannot preach the Gospel to them. That is our privilege—and responsibility.

Acts 10:9

Just as Peter was heading to the housetop to pray... the messengers of Cornelius were approaching the city of Joppa to seek Peter. ... (Wow!) God had everything timed perfectly. ... With this new detail – we should again be impressed at how Divine providence works for the sincere seeker.

The servants from Cornelius would be approaching Peter soon with the request to visit and help Cornelius. ... However, Peter was not ready.

Why? Cornelius was a Gentile and Peter was a Jew. There still existed that deep-seated racial discrimination between the two. Welcoming and visiting and sharing in the homes of each other was out of the question. ... Peter was just not ready for these Gentile men to approach him with the request to visit Cornelius the Gentile... not yet.

But **God** was ready. ... (LISTEN) ... It is God who makes the difference.
God can (and does) break down the worst kind of prejudice (which we see here.) God can reconcile the Jew to the Gentile and the Gentile to the Jew. God can reconcile man to man; He can bring peace to men and between men. Let this truth go deep within your soul if you are as concerned about the racial tension that we see happening in our nation right now! As terrible as it may be (and it is!)... we are about to see God (in our passage) break apart centuries old prejudice and hatred between Jews and Gentiles.

Acts 10:10-20

This vision came to Peter... very significantly... at the noon hour... when Peter was hungry and waiting for his lunch. ... And what did the vision entail...? - **Food!** ... The vision that the Lord gave him... matched both the need of his mind and the condition of his stomach. Just as God had carefully choreographed it for Cornelius... God was now divinely choreographing it for Peter!

One of the questions we began with this morning was – How does God bring needed change to you and I. Our example here demonstrates that God meets us where we are... and He will sometimes use our circumstances for a stronger impact.

I think how God changed Peter... is how we can expect Him to change us. He enters into our context and He moves us step by step. ... First He softens Peter by bringing to successful ministry in a Gentile setting... then He has him stay in a tanner's house... then he waits until Peter is hungry... and then He impacts him with the context of food. ... (Do you see that?)

In his vision... undoubtedly there were swine and perhaps a buzzard... an owl... a seagull... reptiles... lobsters... and four-footed winged insects. It was a repulsive smorgasbord! Peter found the picture all revolting—and the command to kill and eat shocked him even more... for he had always observed the basic dietary laws God had given to his people. ... Since Peter had never eaten anything that was not kosher... he balked at such an unholy meal! His protest was understandable in the light of his upbringing. Any serious Jew would have reacted in the same way.

The four corners of the sheet in the vision correspond to the four points of the compass—north, south, east, and west. ... Peter was about to see in living color his cold attitude toward the entire world—or at least toward non-Jews.

It is easy to see what this attitude... if left unchecked... would have done to the spread of the gospel. Large areas of the world would have been written off as beyond God's grace. All of us who are Gentile believers would still be without Christ!

Even though Peter's refusal was in the most polite terms, it was still wrong. Dr. W. Graham Scroggie wrote, "*You can say 'No,' and you can say 'Lord'; but you cannot say 'No, Lord!'*" ... If He is truly our Lord, then we can only say "Yes!" to Him and obey His commands.

Notice also the marks of legalism here. Peter says, "*Lord, I have never eaten anything common or unclean.*" "*I have never...*" -- that is the language of legalism. "*I have never done anything like that in all my life.*"

This is the way you can recognize a legalistic spirit. It is being proud of the negative... proud that you have never done something.

Now it is true that as a Christian... led of the Spirit... there are things you will not do. ... There are things that are wrong to do... that are harmful... and God has forbidden them - for our own protection. ... It is not wrong that there are things that you will not do. ... What is wrong is being proud that there are things that you will not do. ... The world is not impressed by the fact that we Christians will not do certain things.

Many professing believers expect the world to be impressed. ... But guess what... They are not impressed at all! If all we can say is that we don't do certain things then we have nothing at all to interest a non-Christian.

What non-Christians are looking for... are Christians who are able to live at a level of life... where non-Christian are completely unable to live... They are impressed by Christians who have hearts that are filled with faith... and confidence... even in the midst of a tumultuous and crumbling age. ... What impresses the non-Christian is to observe Christians whose homes are filled with loving acceptance of one another... who can communicate with each other... and thus are able to have a home that is bound together with warmth... joy... and peace in the midst of a world where homes are falling apart on every hand.

I was moved to tears a few weeks ago... as I read and heard reports in the secular media like this (which was in the Washington Post):

The relatives of people slain inside the historic African American church in Charleston, S.C., earlier this week were able to speak directly to the accused gunman Friday at his first court appearance.

One by one, those who chose to speak at a bond hearing did not turn to anger. Instead, while he remained impassive, they offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul, even as they described the pain of their losses.

“I forgive you,” Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. “You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul.”

The importance of Peter’s vision is seen in the fact that it was given a total of **three** times. ... When God repeats... is it not because He is senile or forgetful... but because something is very important. God was bringing about much needed change... over a deeply entrenched problem. ... This was a very important vision indeed...

Peter did not catch on right away **how** the vision should be applied. (Verse 17 shows that he was profoundly perplexed and verse 19 says that he pondered it.)

God does not always reveal everything to us at one time. Pharaoh (of Joseph's day) and Nebuchadnezzar (of Daniel's day) both had messages from God which took **time** for them to understand. When God makes changes in yours and my life... He probably wont reveal everything to us all at once either.

Acts 10:21-23

Peter responded with immediate obedience to God's leading. In verse 21... he immediately goes down stairs and meets the men... as God told him. ... Then God made the message understood... about the sheet and all the formerly unclean animals.

Whenever we obey God and act upon what He tells us to do... He gives us more understanding. ... What a mistake it is... when we stomp our petulant little foot and demand that God give us **full** understanding... that He must answer **all** of our questions... before we obey Him.

Well... the barriers are crumbling. ... The walls are breaking down! ... Peter invites these Gentiles in to be his guests. That is the first step. He had never done anything like that before. ... The fact that Peter allowed the Gentiles to lodge with him... is another indication that the walls were coming down.

Now... here are some of the important take-aways from our incredible passage this morning...

First, the idea that "one religion is as good as another" is completely false. Those who tell us that we should worship "the God of many names" and not "change other people's religions" are going contrary to Scripture. Cornelius had piety and morality, but he did not have salvation. Some might say, "*Leave Cornelius alone! His religion is a part of his culture, and it's a shame to change his culture!*" ... God does not see it that way. Apart from hearing the message of the Gospel and trusting Christ, Cornelius had no hope.

Second, the seeking Savior will find the seeking sinner.

Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV)

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Wherever there is a searching heart, God responds. This is why it is essential that we as God's children obey His will and share His Word. You never know when your witness for Christ is exactly what somebody has been waiting and praying for.

Third, do we have hidden (or not-so-hidden) prejudice in our own life? Do we see those around us as potential heirs of grace? Do we view those who are different from us and who do things we do not approve of as candidates for the kingdom? Our attitude makes all the difference. If we are anti-Semitic, we will never lead a Jew to Christ. If we have written off a relative, he or she may be written off for eternity. If we are elitists, most of the rest of the world will never experience grace through us.

Peter's attitude changed that day. ... God changed him, and he can change us!

Jesus said...

Matthew 12:30 (ESV)

Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

You can judge your life by that statement. What is your effect on others? Are you gathering? Are you healing? Are you harmonizing? Are you breaking down middle walls and healing schisms and bringing people together? Or are you dividing? Are you creating factions? Are you separating? Are you sending people into little groups that are each other's throats, one against the other? The great lesson that God taught the

Apostle Peter on this occasion was that these Gentiles were to be his friends, and to be accepted by him.