

**Follow whom to Speak to
Acts 10 (Summarized in Acts 11)**

Brothers and sisters in Christ – or should I say fellow gentiles who have been granted the repentance unto life by God...

How do you feel – especially if you have any Italian background in you – that the early church in Jerusalem was quite upset with the Apostle Peter for going and having Christian fellowship with “*an uncircumcised man*” who was a Roman centurion from the Italian Regiment?

In fact it was a bit more than Christian fellowship; Peter had gone to minister to a Roman Centurion, a God-fearing man named Cornelius who had received a vision from an angel telling him to send for the apostle Peter.

Now you can find all these kinds of details about this story - and I will be referring to a number of them this morning - from the forty eight verses in Acts chapter 10.

In the interests of time we read about this story from Acts 11 this morning, because it succinctly summarizes all the story of Cornelius and Peter in a much more manageable eighteen verses.

So this visit - as we heard - resulted in the Holy Spirit being poured out upon Cornelius and all who had gathered together in his house to hear Peter speak.

But how do you feel knowing that the early Jerusalem church was a bit put out and offended and had criticized Peter for having gone out and fellowshiped with the likes of us!?

We might be feeling like “*hey wait a minute... what’s so wrong with us gentiles that you would have a problem with Peter doing this!*”

Especially when Peter’s actions meant that us Gentiles were now receiving and participating in God’s promised blessings to Israel.

And I bring this up because It's good for us to be reminded of what it's like to be the ones on the outside, the ones whom others might raise an eyebrow about – because we are so used to being the ones on the inside and the ones who may do some raising of the eyebrows when we hear about some new and perhaps unconventional ministry efforts to reach out to people who are outside decent society.

Some of you have heard me share the story of how a church fellowship got started in a Gentleman's Club/Hotel that is situated next to the Guelph Bible Conference Center as a result of an interaction that took place when Dunamis Fellowship was running one of its conferences at the Bible Center.

That certainly raised my eyebrows the first time I heard it – but praise God there is a group of people bringing the good news of Jesus out into one of the dark places of the world where it needs to be seen and heard – and as a result not only are people coming to know Jesus but the spiritual interference

and attack of the enemy that used to come from that location during Dunamis Conferences has been significantly decreased.

So that is a good example of how Christians need to move OUT and GO in order that the good news of the Kingdom may advance.

And we have been laying the groundwork for us to be equipped to do that over the past couple of months.

We've looked at how to identify Spiritual thirst in people when we are interacting with them... are they looking for forgiveness? Do they need to know if they are good people? Maybe they need healing? Or perhaps like Cornelius in our scripture passage this morning they searching, seeking for the true God.

And we have also been talking about what kind of story we can share with people about how Jesus has met our own spiritual thirst... as a big picture story, or a transformation story or a deliverance story, or a story of undeserved grace.

Which in truth friends – when we forget about the undeserved grace that God shows us – leaves us stuck in a place where we are critical and suspicious like the early Jerusalem church was about Peter’s ministry to Cornelius.

Because as you may recall from last week’s message, for all the amazing stuff that was happening in the early Jerusalem church – miracles, teaching, worship, fellowship and thousands of people being converted...

No one was making any plans to GO OUT of Jerusalem to make sure that Jesus’ command in Act 1:8 was being fulfilled – *“you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth!”*

And you know we’ve been wrestling with that same reluctance to GO OUT at Valleyview as well... we’re really good at being friendly and welcoming people to COME HERE... but we need to work at GOING OUT.

Now I have really been wrestling not only with how to encourage us and motivate us to GO OUT, but also with the timing of this emphasis and focus that God has brought to my attention.

Because I know that many people in our congregation are going through their own personal challenges and struggles right now - illness, looking for work, family challenges and so on...

So how can I bring this message of Going Out into our community at a time like this when people are wrestling and struggling to deal with their own situations? It doesn’t seem very pastoral to me, I’d rather just gather everyone in and offer prayer and ministry time until we’re all in a better situation and then look at Going Out.

But brothers and sisters in Christ, it was only because of going through hard times that the early Jerusalem Church actually went out. It was only when they were persecuted that many

of them decided to leave Jerusalem and move out into Judea and Samaria.

So that would have been very difficult and hard times – leaving behind family or friends... some of whom may now be persecuting you for being a Christian, you may have been thrown in jail – some were even killed.

So leaving Jerusalem meant leaving behind the life you had built there and starting over somewhere else – so these early believers were going through hard times, as hard as any that we may be facing today – yet Acts 8:4 says *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”*

But as I reflected on this it struck me that it is precisely when we are going through hard times, of whatever kind, that our testimony and witness to Jesus is most powerful.

You see we often think that what “sells” people on Jesus is how He can make our life better now... in this world – by giving us healing, deliverance, provision and so on... but those

who really encounter the person of Jesus in receiving those gifts – come to realize they are only a foretaste of what is promised to come.

They truly grasp the HOPE of the return of Christ, they know a better day is on the way, and so they can endure and weather the hardships of this life because of the promise, the reality of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting! Amen.

Now I won’t deny the reality that the hardships we encounter in this life are difficult, they can be gut wrenching and painful and desperate – that is true... but we can’t we let the experience of those hardships deny the greater reality and truth of the promise that there is a better life coming when Christ returns.

No sickness, no death, no pain, no war, no persecution, no climate change... no more left or right... no more sin and evil, just a renewed heavens and earth and an eternity spent in relationship and worship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You see friends -when we **know** and believe and trust that this life is not all that there is, we have a hope that takes us through hard times, and we can share that hope with other people - our circumstances make it powerful!

People can't deny the power of that hope – they may not understand it, comprehend it, because their hearts are still captive to the illusion that this reality is all there is, and they can't fathom how they will function if that were to fall apart on them somehow...

But sharing Jesus when we are in times of hardship shows that the pursuit of “the good life” has no power over us, Jesus does instead and we have the solid, concrete, rock solid promise of an everlasting and eternal life – so when the good life isn't so good we are not swept away.

Remember what our Lord said in John 16:33 – and it is why I have spent so much time reminding us of it this morning... *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.*

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Now don't misunderstand – I'm not minimizing our hardships or struggles, telling you to deny what you feel, deal with your grief and pain through putting on a good face, or saying that this world and its concerns doesn't matter to our Lord. Not at all...

What I am saying is that however much you are engaged in the hardships and struggles of this life – you need to be equally, if not more reminded and encouraged of the reality that there is a better life coming when Jesus returns – because that is part of how Jesus helps us make it through this life.

So – brothers and sisters in Christ, I belabor this point this morning so that we understand how it is that even in the midst of the struggles and the trials of life that we are going through – we can see how it is possible to still GO OUT – and in fact it may be through some of those struggles that the doors to GO OUT open up for us.

So – the early Jerusalem church had been scattered out across Judea and Samaria and the church had spread outside of Jerusalem as a result of that, just as Jesus had desired.

So brothers and sisters – what else do we find in this story that can encourage us as we GO OUT into our community to share Jesus?

Well – some good news in that GO OUT isn't just a random command to just be out in our community not knowing exactly what we should be doing – but we're OUT here... rather in this story we see God setting up a divine appointment between someone who is seeking God and someone who can reveal more about God to them.

In chapter 10 we are introduced to Cornelius as someone who is *“devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.”* (vs. 2) If we were to describe Cornelius according the kinds of spiritual thirst we looked at in January we would say that He is someone who is

thirsting for God, so God makes arrangements for Peter to be invited to go and share the gospel with Cornelius.

So brothers and sisters, what this shows us is that God can set up these kinds of appointments.

There are people in our community who because of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit are searching for God, they are seeking what is right, they want to know their Creator... Now you might not know about this, you might not see it because it's not something that people share openly about with just anybody - instead we see people crowding the shopping centers, the movie theaters, the coffee shops, the gyms and so on...

But in the midst of those crowds of people there are those who are seeking and searching and looking for something more in all of that – they are thirsty for God and God can set-up a divine appointment for us to connect with them, just as He did for Peter and Cornelius.

But are we willing to accept an invitation to go to them?

Peter had to have a vision about clean and unclean animals to help him understand that God was going to send him to include the gentiles in His promises to Israel and then he was able to know what he had to do when Cornelius' soldiers showed up to ask him to come with them.

Now before we get into accepting invitations – it's important to notice the importance of prayer and worship in how God sets up this divine appointment.

It is noted in 10:3 that Cornelius receives his vision at 3pm in the afternoon – which was one of the regular times set aside for daily prayers and worship of God, and in 10:9-10 we are told that Peter went up on the roof in order to have a quiet place for a time of prayer around noon, and he was probably fasting as well since the scripture notes that he became very hungry.

And it was during this time of prayer and fasting that he went into a trance and received the vision of the sheet with the clean and unclean animals.

So, these divine appointments come out of time spent in intimacy with God through prayer and worship and fasting. Why? Because when we spend time with God in this way we are open to hearing Him speak to us and give us the direction we need to hear.

Now, God gave pretty clear directions to Cornelius; *“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.”* (10:5)

But not very clear instructions to Peter... in fact the English translation should read *“While Peter was still ‘perplexed or puzzled’ about the vision”* (10:19)

So – sometimes it's very clear what we need to do, and other times we are going to need to wrestle and contemplate and

think about what God is showing us – and be ready to recognize and follow the opportunities the Holy Spirit nudges us towards when they come – for which these vision or pictures have prepared us.

Just like Peter did when the Spirit told him after the vision *“there are three men looking for you – go with them.”* (10:19-20) and then realized what his vision was about when he arrived to minister to a gentile household.

Brothers and sisters, we are in a time right now at Valleyview when we need to be in prayer and worship, perhaps fasting, together as a community with God so that we are able to, as a body, recognize the Holy Spirit speaking to us as a church about some sort of divine appointment that God is setting up.

As you know, a couple weekends ago we hosted an Ignite Conference – it was a very intimate powerful time of prayer, worship and teaching – and in one of the times of prayer we received a scripture passage from Isaiah 43:19 *“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I*

am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

And we received an image as well, as it was described, of openings into our surrounding community from our church, and water flowing into our church and then out into the community through those openings.

So what exactly are these openings into the community?

We’re not exactly certain yet – we are still praying for the Holy Spirit to reveal to us specifically what they are – but one thing is for certain it is spending time in prayer and worship in intimacy with God that will prepare us to hear the Holy Spirit speak to us about something, some opportunity or person or invitation that we will then recognize as that opening through which the Holy Spirit will bring living water – Jesus Christ – into our surrounding community.

So, be open to listening for what the Holy Spirit may say to you about this in our times of prayer and worship together

and be willing to share that with our leadership, because what you share might just be the confirmation we need to recognize the Holy Spirit pointing out a specific opening.

Now I also want to encourage us to spend regular time in prayer and worship, even fasting, because we especially need to be in God's presence when we are going through hard times – it helps to remind us of our hope, reassure us of the reality of God's promises, and it strengthens our endurance and our faith – especially when we are together with our fellow Christians, but even on our own – just as Peter was by himself on that roof-top.

And we can ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us a particular person that He wants to set up a divine appointment for us to connect with – because there are many many people outside of the Church that are seeking God and God wants to reveal Himself to them through Jesus – and He will use us to do that – just as He used Peter.

But what if the Holy Spirit shows us something or someone that we are reluctant about?

That's a major part of this story, and we already know that we are reluctant to GO OUT because we are used to people COMING HERE, and an additional part of that reluctance for Peter in this story was also going place and fellowshiping with people that a good upstanding God-fearing Jew didn't do.

So now we get around to responding to invitations – after we have talked about the importance of our prayer and worship time with God... we are in the right place to respond with the right motives and empowerment of the Holy Spirit to receive invitations from our non-Christian connections to go and be with them in order for the Holy Spirit to use us and set up those divine appointments.

Maybe they invite us to go out to the bar after work with them... maybe over to their house for a party... maybe to see their favorite band play a concert... or go watch the Flames or the Stampeders or another sporting event...

But brothers and sisters, if you spend time in prayer and worship asking God to start showing you the openings into our community – I do guarantee that they will start to open up and the Holy Spirit is going to nudge to you walk into them.

And if we are reluctant... well, all I can say is trust what God has told and don't worry about what the "church-people" are going to say.

In fact the encouragement to overcome our reluctance in this story not only comes from the example that God wants to bring in the gentiles through Jesus - people from all nations, all races and their cultures irregardless of their religious backgrounds – and it comes to us from the example of Cornelius' willingness to obey.

He was a gentile soldier, but he understood what it meant to receive orders and to obey and to go – so he sent his soldiers to go and get Peter and then he gathered all his family and relatives together, and he was ready to obey whatever Peter was going to tell him.

Friends – the whole key for us here is really obedience isn't it...

It's not really whether or not people are interested in God or seeking him – the Holy Spirit can draw people as He did Cornelius.

It's not about whether God will actually tell us who we need to GO OUT to and give us the direction we need for that – God wants to speak to us about it.

It's not even about whether we have all our stuff together, or that we're in a good place in life or going through struggles and hard times – that actually only increases the power of our witness and sharing.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it all boils down to whether or not we will obey and follow the Holy Spirit when He says "GO"

Jesus said "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15)
Let us follow the nudge of His Spirit and obey. Amen.

