

THE RISEN CHRIST, PETER, CORNELIUS AND US
ACTS 10:23-43

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The place where my family lived in Connecticut was a very Jewish area. Within a mile or two of our house there were five synagogues. On Saturday mornings we saw many Jewish people walking to and from the synagogue. Our neighborhood dentist, who was excellent, was Jewish. We had Jewish doctors. For a few years we were members of the nearby Jewish community center. I took a course from a rabbi there. I subscribed to a weekly Jewish newspaper. In our church I had the privilege of baptizing two or three Jews. For several months we had a Jewish Christian woman and her daughter living with us.

During the course of my exposure to contemporary Judaism I learned of several outreach efforts that Jewish groups had to increase attendance and membership at synagogues and other Jewish institutions. All of these efforts were directed toward ethnic Jews or their Gentile mates.

This is consistent with the history of religious movements within Judaism. Judaism has been an insular faith. Jewish religion has traditionally been very much wrapped up with ethnicity. To say that one is Jewish has generally meant that one's religious faith is Judaism and one's ethnic ancestry is Jewish. Judaism has not totally excluded other people. Sometimes Gentiles have been brought into the Jewish faith by marriage. Occasionally people have converted for other reasons. That does not happen very often.

To the best of my knowledge there is no Jewish missionary society today that sends out missionaries to Africa or to China or to college campuses to win Gentiles for Moses. From what I know about Jewish history that has not happened in the past either. There have been various movements within Judaism, including messianic movements, but the appeal has always been to fellow Jews--- with one exception. That exception is Christianity.

The remarkable thing is that Christianity arose out of Judaism. It is totally Jewish in its roots. Yet Christianity grew to become a worldwide movement that appealed to Gentiles as well as Jews. That is totally out of character with the history of Jewish religious movements. How can we explain such a movement that is so out of character with traditional Judaism?

The answer has to do with the Jewish Messiah we Christians follow who rose from the dead, who ascended into heaven, who made His Jewish disciples in the early history of the church reach out to Gentiles, and who continues to lead His followers today. We are going to find evidence to support that in the passage before us this morning.

In our ongoing study of the New Testament Book of Acts we have seen that much of this book as a whole relates to the activity of the risen Christ. We saw weeks ago that in the first verse of the book the historian Luke, referring to his gospel account, said, **“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...”** Luke’s gospel account ended with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The clear implication is that the Book of Acts deals with what Jesus continued to do after He ascended into heaven.

We have seen in our sermon series that the concern of the disciples was reaching other Jews with the good news about the risen Jesus. But recently we looked at the conversion experience of the Apostle Paul who was commanded by the risen Christ to bring the message to Gentiles. Paul had been a student of the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He had also been a persecutor of the early Christians.

Some who have sought to explain Paul’s changed life apart from any supernatural intervention have suggested that Paul’s change was due to a guilt reaction. Paul was supposedly covered over with guilt for imprisoning and killing Christians. Even if we granted that, it would not explain why he set out to reach the Gentiles with news about the Jewish messiah. There were no Gentile Christians that he had earlier persecuted. To reach out to Gentiles was totally out of character with the mindset of Judaism. The explanation has to do with the risen Christ, with a messiah who was still alive and active and who truly appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, telling him to evangelize the Gentiles. This same risen Christ has power to change even us.

I.

(OVERHEAD ON--- I. PETER AND THE RISEN CHRIST) As we move into our passage today we are going to consider first vv. 23-29 of #10 and PETER AND THE RISEN CHRIST. Last time we saw that the itinerant ministry of the Apostle Peter had taken him to the city of Joppa. (JOPPA) While in Joppa Peter had a vision in which the risen Christ told him to kill and eat unclean animals. That was unthinkable to Peter, who was well aware of the Old Testament prohibition against eating certain animals declared by God to be unclean. So he refused. But when Jesus told him to do it two more times, Peter began to get the message. He probably remembered his earlier threefold denial of Jesus and didn’t want to be guilty of saying “no” to Jesus three times.

While he was pondering this strange vision, representatives of a Roman centurion, a Gentile, showed up claiming that their boss had received a vision in which an angel told him to get Peter from Joppa to bring him a message. So Peter invited these guys into the house.

Beginning in the middle of v. 23 we pick up the story: **“The next day he [Peter] rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.”** The next chapter tells us specifically that there were six Jewish Christian men who went with Paul and the centurion’s men.

Verse 24: **“And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.”** Caesarea was on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea about 25 miles north of Joppa. It was the Roman capital of the province of Judea and home of the governor. Pontius Pilate had earlier been stationed here. Caesarea was also the home of this centurion Cornelius, who had up to 80 men under his authority and was answerable to the Roman governor.

According to vv. 25 & 26, **“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.’”** The messenger of the god or gods in the Roman world was typically regarded as having godlike qualities himself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 27: **“And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. 28 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. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.’”**

The Hebrew Bible did not actually prohibit Jews from associating with Gentiles. What it said was that contact with certain activities and certain people and certain foods rendered one ceremonially unclean. This contact with unclean things was not a violation of moral law. It simply meant that a Jew was rendered unfit to participate in certain religious activities until a certain procedure was followed. Typically this meant taking a ritual bath and being unclean until evening.

By the time of Jesus, however, the Jewish rabbis had come to teach that any kind of close association with Gentiles was suspect. To show up at a Gentile's house for dinner was just a bad thing to do. Even if the food being served was not on the prohibited list, there was potential for violations of all kinds of other laws. The meat might have been offered to idols. It might have come in contact with unclean meat. The hosts had probably violated some of the Jewish laws of cleanliness. So a Jew with any kind of religious sensibilities just did not go to a Gentile's house to eat or hang out.

Peter had been raised with this kind of a mindset. Even as a follower of Jesus he was resistant to the notion of associating with Gentiles. So how did he end up being involved with Gentile evangelism? There was nothing in his personal background or his religious background that could explain his interest in reaching out to Gentiles. He became involved with it because of the risen Christ. Jesus had truly risen from the dead. He was alive and active and leading His church. He had supernaturally appeared to Peter and told him to change his thinking about the laws of cleanliness.

Peter was a devout follower of Jesus. He was the leader of the apostles. But he still had some prejudices that needed to be changed. He had not yet worked out all of the theological implications of the death and resurrection of Christ. He had not yet realized until now that the death of Christ rendered the ceremonial law of Judaism obsolete. But the risen Christ was helping him to do that.

In a similar way we Christians don't always have all of the implications of the Christian faith worked out in our lives. Sometimes our upbringing and experiences have developed attitudes in us that are contrary to what God desires. Sometimes we have ethnic prejudices or religious prejudices or economic prejudices that are inconsistent with God's Word. But the risen Christ can and does change us, even as He changed Peter and his thinking.

II.

Not only was Peter changed by the risen Christ, but so also was the Gentile centurion Cornelius changed. In vv. 30-33 then we come to CORNELIUS AND THE RISEN CHRIST. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. CORNELIUS AND THE RISEN CHRIST) As a Roman officer Cornelius was expected to observe all of the Roman holidays and participate in worship of the Roman gods. The emperor himself was to be regarded as a god. Judaism was monotheistic. There was no allowance made for worship of other gods. It was thus not politically expedient for Cornelius to be a worshiper of the God of Israel. Christianity was even less politically acceptable in that it was rejected even by the Jewish religious leadership. So why did Cornelius become a follower of Jesus? It was the power of the risen Christ.

Look at vv. 30-33: **"And Cornelius said, 'Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour [which would be 3 PM], and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing 31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33 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.'"**

Cornelius is functioning as an evangelist before he has even become a Christian. The next chapter confirms that at this point he still does not have saving faith in God. But the Lord is clearly working on him. The risen Christ is drawing Cornelius to the true faith. He has sent an angel to Cornelius, and he has arranged for Peter to deliver the gospel message. In terms of social and political standing it was not expedient for Cornelius to become a follower of Jesus. But the risen Christ was at work in him.

Cornelius has gathered a crowd filled with eager expectation. This is what any good preacher loves to have. This congregation is not there to be entertained. They are not there to hear Peter's political views. They want to hear a message from God. Hopefully that is the primary reason you are here, and hopefully that is what I am able to deliver.

Many of us here have also had the experience, like Cornelius did, of being drawn to Jesus. We may not have been seeking spiritual truth. We may not have been looking for God. But things happened and people came into our lives and the risen Christ just seemed to be pulling us toward Himself. It was the power of the risen Christ. Perhaps that same power is at work in some of you in range of my hearing today.

III.

Peter then in vv. 34-43 delivers THE MESSAGE ABOUT THE RISEN CHRIST. (III. THE MESSAGE ABOUT THE RISEN CHRIST) According to v. 34, **“So Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality...’”** Peter’s divine vision plus the arrival of the men from Cornelius immediately afterward plus the testimony now from Cornelius about his own vision lead Peter to the conclusion that God wants the gospel made available to the Gentiles. God does not show partiality.

The Lord had favored the descendants of Abraham in making them the recipients of His special blessings. But His intention was that the nation of Israel would be a light to the Gentiles, pointing them to the one true God. (GENESIS 12:3) God had told Abraham in Genesis #12 v. 3, **“...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** That was both a prophecy and a command. There are many additional references in the Old Testament to God’s desire that the other nations be exposed to spiritual truth by the activity of the Jews. For the most part Israel failed to catch on to its responsibility to bring spiritual truth to the other nations. Even Peter and the other apostles of Jesus were slow to catch on to their responsibility. But now Peter was getting with the program. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v.35 Peter continues, **“...but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”** Peter is not saying that everyone who has a general respect for God and lives a pretty good life goes to heaven. He is saying that God is looking for people like Cornelius, people who are genuinely seeking spiritual truth and who are trying to please God

In the story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 4:23) at the well Jesus said to the woman, **“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”** The Father is looking for people like Cornelius and the Samaritan woman who are searching for spiritual truth. He welcomes them. Ultimately He brings such serious searchers into a relationship with Himself through Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Peter goes on in v. 36, **“As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 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.”**

Peter probably went into more detail than this. Luke may be summarizing this part of the apostle’s message. But Peter assumes that his Gentile listeners do know something about the basic facts of Jesus’ life and ministry. Although Caesarea was a Gentile city and these people were Gentiles, Jesus had caused a big enough stir that news about Him reached everywhere within the province of Judea. Cornelius may well have visited

Jerusalem on military duty and had further exposure to news and information about this Jesus.

In v. 39 Peter continues, **“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.”** We have looked at a couple of other sermons of Peter recorded earlier in this book. In those sermons Peter used the Old Testament a lot to prove his contention that Jesus was the Messiah. Here he doesn't quote from the Hebrew Bible at all. Why is that? He is dealing with a Gentile audience that is not familiar with the Bible. So instead Peter focuses on the story of Jesus. We Christians need to always tailor our message somewhat according to where the people we are addressing are at spiritually.

In vv. 40 & 41 he comes to the Easter story: **“...but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 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.”** Jews and Romans put Jesus to death, but God raised Him from the dead. Such a claim is unique among the religions of the world. Buddha didn't rise from the dead. Mohammed didn't rise from the dead. Joseph Smith did not rise from the dead. But the claim of the early Christians was that Jesus experienced a physical resurrection from the grave.

Christianity is not just a philosophical system. It is a faith system that is based upon certain claims of historical truth. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 15:14) In 1 Corinthians #15 the Apostle Paul says, beginning in v. 14, **“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith is vain. (1 CORINTHIANS 14:15) We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that He raised Christ, whom he did not raise.... (1 CORINTHIANS 15:17) And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”**

Christianity is not just a nice religious system that may be helpful to some people. It is a system that claims to possess absolute moral and spiritual truth, based upon true historical events. It bases this truth claim on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus did not literally rise from the dead, forget it. Don't bother with Christianity. But if He did rise from the dead, then we have an obligation to listen to what He and His disciples said about the meaning of His death that preceded it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Peter claims that he and other disciples of Jesus were witnesses of His resurrection. He says that he ate and drank with Jesus after He rose from the dead. They were convinced that Jesus had conquered the grave.

Why didn't Jesus appear to those outside the circle of the disciples? Why didn't He appear to the Jewish religious leaders? Because their hearts were hardened. It would have done no good. They had already been exposed to the miracles of Jesus. They had heard His teaching. They had rejected it all. They would not believe because they didn't want to believe. Jesus made Himself known to those who were ready and prepared to proclaim the message about His death and resurrection.

Thus in vv. 42 & 43 Peter says, **“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. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”**

This risen Christ said that He has a claim over all humanity. In v. 36 Peter said that Jesus is Lord of all. Because He has risen from the dead and because He has been appointed Judge of the living and the dead, we need to listen very carefully to what He wants from us. Peter says that this Jesus offers us forgiveness of sins.

This offer of forgiveness of sins does not always communicate well in our modern culture. The thinking of modern man is that we have no need for forgiveness. We humans are not really sinners. We are basically good creatures. Phyllis McGinley was a Pulitzer Prize winning author and poet. She once observed, **“People are no longer sinful. They are only immature or underprivileged or frightened or, more particularly, sick.”** (“The Province of the Heart,” 1962) If that is the case, what they need is a doctor or a therapist.

The Jews, however, recognized the problem of sin. Their sacrificial system was built upon it. Even many of the pagans recognized the sinfulness of humanity. Animal sacrifice for sins played a role in many of the religions of that time. The testimony of Peter and the testimony of the Bible is that the whole reason for Jesus’ death was that mankind has a sin problem. There is a holy God who has standards of conduct that He requires from us. All of us at times violate these standards. Jesus died upon the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind.

In order for that sacrifice to benefit individuals Peter indicates that there is one responsibility that must be fulfilled. He says that people must believe in Jesus. Forgiveness of sins does not result from church membership. It does not result from being baptized. It does not result from trying to live a good life. It does not result from walking forward in a religious meeting. It does not result from giving money to charitable causes. It results only from believing in Jesus, who died for our sins and rose from the dead. That is the message of Peter. That is the message about the risen Christ.

IV.

In vv. 44-48 we come to THE POWER OF THE RISEN CHRIST. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE POWER OF THE RISEN CHRIST) **“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.”**

Before Peter could finish his message, miraculous things began to happen. Acts #2 describes what happened several years earlier to the disciples of Jesus who were gathered in Jerusalem on the feast day of Pentecost. Jesus had told them to wait for the

coming of the Holy Spirit. On that day Luke says that there was something like tongues of fire that began landing on the heads of the disciples, and these Christians began to speak in the languages of the Jews around them who had been raised in other parts of the Roman Empire. They were speaking languages that they did not know. This miracle of tongues was the result of the working of the Holy Spirit. Peter had been a recipient of this blessing. Perhaps some of his other Jewish Christian friends present in Cornelius' house had also been present. Certainly all of them knew about it.

Now Peter and his Jewish Christian friends saw the same thing happen to these Gentiles. Luke says they were amazed. Perhaps some of these Romans were speaking Hebrew. Maybe they were speaking Aramaic, the primary language of Judeans. The whole mindset of the Jewish Christians was still that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be right with God. But the fact that they were receiving the Holy Spirit just like the Jewish Christians did at Pentecost meant that it wasn't so. Faith in Jesus was all that was necessary.

In v. 47 Peter says, **“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”** Peter was not the kind of philosophical thinker and theologian that Paul was. But he could not miss the clear implication of this miracle. These Gentiles had been accepted by God on the basis of faith in Jesus alone. Water baptism was the appropriate response to demonstrate their new spiritual allegiance.

Notice that water baptism followed belief in and acceptance by Jesus. Notice also that these Gentiles had been born again apart from water baptism. There are a few Christian groups which say that water baptism is necessary for eternal salvation. These Gentiles were clearly already accepted into the family of God before they were baptized in water. Baptism is something that is commanded by Jesus. But it is not what truly makes us a Christian. It is intended as a demonstration or a sign of the spiritual change that has already taken place within us.

According to v. 48, **“And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.”** Thus we see the power of the risen Christ at work in the lives of the early Christians. (JOHN 16:7) The night before His crucifixion Jesus told His disciples, **“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”** That Helper was the Holy Spirit. The miracle in the house of Cornelius was the result of the work of the risen Christ who ascended into heaven, but who continued to direct His followers by means of the Holy Spirit. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The explanation for the behavior of Paul and the behavior of Peter and the behavior of Cornelius is the risen Christ. Jesus Christ was God who became man. He died to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose from the dead, and He ascended into heaven. But this risen Christ is still alive and active today.

John (JOHN BOWMAN) was a successful executive at an advertising company in Manhattan. Among the more successful ad campaigns that he led was the Army publicity that used the theme "Be all you can be in the Army."

For years the rest of his family came to our church in Connecticut. John came at Christmas and Easter. From his perspective it was fine if the rest of his family wanted to do that and if this church stuff help them in some way. John didn't need it. He was a self-sufficient, educated, talented individual. He had learned to handle life on his own. But then things at work began to get difficult. He encountered situations that he did not know how to handle.

John felt prompted to start reading the Bible. As he read through the New Testament, he became convinced that Jesus was God and that he needed to have a relationship with him. So he asked Jesus to come into his life, and he started coming to church.

A remarkable thing began to happen. John played the guitar a little bit, but he had never really sung in public, and he had never composed a song. Soon after he became a melodies and words of praise started coming into his mind. John started to write down what came to him. He began singing occasionally in church. Sometimes he would ask about what I was going to be preaching about the next Sunday. He started coming up with compositions that related to my sermon subjects. After a while this high powered advertising executive became the music leader in our little church, composing music on his own. How do you explain that? How is this changed life and this sudden production of Christian music to be explained? It would seem to be the power of the risen Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

That same power is available to us today. It may not have the same exact effect on you that it had on John. It may not result in the same kind of miracle that happened in the house of Cornelius. But it will change your life. Most importantly it will provide forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

The way to receive it is by faith in Jesus. That's it. Nothing else. Peter said in v. 43, **"To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."** The gospel message is that Jesus was the Son of God, the Second Person of the trinity, who became a human being. He lived a sinless life. He died upon the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven. That is the content of the message that we are required to believe. The response that God requires from us is faith--- not just an intellectual agreement that these propositions are true, but an actual trusting in these claims and in Jesus Christ Himself. If you have never placed your faith in Jesus, why don't you do so today!