

## REACH|13 (Part 2 of 3)

### Divine Appointments

Acts 10

Mark Vroegop

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*"At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 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." When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 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." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. 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." (Acts 10:1–28, ESV)*

Today is the second week of our spotlight on our passion for missions at College Park. We spend more Sundays on this particular focal point than any other because the need is that great, the Great Commission is that important, and because our passion for global evangelism tends to leak. This is not just true for us; it has always been an Achilles heel for the church.

For example, William Carey is considered the father of the modern missions movement, but his initial vision to reach what Carey called “the heathen” was met with strong resistance. In 1791 he presented his vision to a gathering of church leaders, and he was rebuked. A long-time friend and mentor told Carey that “when God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.” It seems shocking that someone, especially a church leader, would say such a thing. But sometimes our vision for the world grows dim and cloudy.

D.L. Moody, an American evangelist in the 1800’s, was often criticized for some of his unconventional methods. One day a woman shared her disagreement with Moody regarding his methods. Moody said, “I agree with you. I don’t like the way I do it either. Tell me how you do it.” The woman replied, “Well, I don’t do it.” At least she was honest. Moody’s reply has become a bit famous: “Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.”

The connection between these two stories is the simple fact that if we do not regularly remind ourselves and challenge ourselves about the need to reach people with the gospel, we will easily drift into spiritual complacency. That’s a negative way to say it.

Positively, I mean this: The need is great and God is always creating divine opportunities, and we need to be sure that we do not miss them. In other words, we need to be careful that we do not miss and that we even look for divine appointments – to realize that if “this is for that” then “it’s time for that.”

I think that one of the greatest biblical stories as it relates to divine appointments is found in Acts 10 – the story of Peter and Cornelius. And I’d like to use this story as a platform for us to consider some of the opportunities and barriers that are in our lives as it relates to reaching people with the gospel.

### **A Gospel Opportunity**

The encounter between Peter and Cornelius is part of a bigger story in the book of Acts regarding reaching non-Jewish people with the gospel. Prior to the death of Jesus and the book of Acts, a Gentile became part of God’s family by becoming Jewish, embracing the ceremonial requirements, sacrifices, and the Jewish law. But after the death of Jesus, that changed. At least it was supposed to change.

Peter is a devout Jew who is a follower of Jesus and who has been charged by Jesus, after His death, resurrection, and ascension, to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Cornelius is a Gentile and a Roman centurion. The contrast between Peter and Cornelius is central to the message of this text.

## **Cornelius' Vision and Request**

In verses 1-8 we are given some background on Cornelius, and we are told what happened to him. First, we learn that he was an influential and religious man. He lived in Caesarea, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea which was the central Roman city for the region of Judea. It was built by Herod the Great and named in honor of the Roman Emperor Augustus. Caesarea was the location for the residence of the Roman Governor (Pontius Pilate in Jesus' day), and it was a military stronghold for the Roman Army. Cornelius would have given leadership to at least 100 soldiers.

But we also learn that he was a "devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God" (Acts 10:2). Now that sounds like he was a convert to Christ, but that is not the case. These statements about Cornelius indicate that he lived in God-fearing way and that he was a religious man. Keep this in mind because we will come back to it when we talk about Peter's sermon at his house. For now, just note that Cornelius was a religious but unconverted Gentile who was searching for the truth.

Secondly, we read about a vision from God. Verses 3-8 tell us that Cornelius had an encounter with an angel who told him that his religious observance had not gone unnoticed by God and that he was to send for Peter (v 4-5). He was even told where to find him! Cornelius immediately sent two of his servants and one of his devout soldiers (likely a religious man too) to Joppa to bring Peter to him.

## **Peter's Vision and Command**

Acts 10 shifts the scene from Caesarea to Joppa and from Cornelius to Peter. As Cornelius' men are on their way, Peter went up on the housetop for prayer (v 9). The text tells us that Peter was hungry and had a vision. Verses 11-14 record the vision:

*"and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."'" (Acts 10:11-14, ESV)*

God was using Peter's hunger to communicate a very important and radical message. Peter's spiritual heritage would have required him to eat only that which the Jewish law called clean. And Peter protested that he has never eaten anything that would violate his Jewish heritage.

God has other plans for Peter regarding the Law and, by implication, the spread of the gospel.

*"And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven." (Acts 10:15-16, ESV)*

At first Peter might think that the vision was simply about a change in the dietary laws. But those laws were not just about food, they were about a line of demarcation and spiritual separation from all non-Jewish people. The food restrictions were part of a greater distinction between Jews and

Gentiles, and to this point the gospel had not been taken to the Gentiles. Jesus' message and His ministry were targeted very specifically to the Jews (see Matthew 10:5-6). So God's statement here is not just about food; it is about calling people "common" or "unclean." The sacrifice of Christ was complete, the command to reach all nations had been given, and the Jewish barriers for the Gentiles had been lifted. The food laws were fulfilled in Jesus.

However, the implications of this for the Gentile mission did not fully register in Peter's mind and heart. Verse 17 says that he was "inwardly perplexed." Therefore, the timing of Cornelius' three men and another statement from God (vv 19-20) set the stage for Peter to understand what is really happening here. It was not a coincidence that the sheet was lowered three times and there are three men. And it was not a coincidence that the men arrived immediately after the vision of the clean and unclean animals. All of this was part of a divine appointment for Peter for the accomplishment of God's mission.

### **In Cornelius' House**

When Peter arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius had gathered his close friends and relatives, and Peter recounted the clear message from God regarding his visit.

*"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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." (Acts 10:28-29, ESV)*

Peter clearly saw the connection between the dream and the divine appointment that God had for him. After Cornelius explained the events in his life and why he had called for him to come, Peter proceeded to preach the gospel to those who were gathered in Cornelius' house.

Verses 34-43 record Peter's message:

*"So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 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. 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, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 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. 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. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:34-43, ESV)*

This is a great presentation of the gospel, but the point of his sermon is not just the gospel presentation. It is to present the gospel to people who were formerly considered "common or

unclean.” The gospel came to people to those who others considered unreachable. That is important to remember when you read verse verses 34-35. Some have taken these verses to mean that Cornelius was already saved, as if “acceptable to him” (v 35) is the same as justification. But that is not what this text is saying. A few reasons:

- 1) Acceptable does not mean justified. Instead, the word means to be marked by a favorable manifestation of divine pleasure, and it is used in 2 Corinthians 6:2 for the “acceptable time of salvation.”<sup>1</sup>
- 2) Peter, when describing the events in Acts 10 to a group of spiritual leaders in Acts 11:14, identified the angel said to Cornelius that they could receive a message “by which you will be saved...”
- 3) The spiritual leaders in Acts 11:18 rejoiced that God had granted the Gentiles “repentance unto life.”
- 4) If you look to the end of the chapter you will see that the Holy Spirit falls on them, they speak in tongues and worship God. This outward display was surprising because it was not the normal way that God had worked in the past; it was meant to validate that the gospel had genuinely come to the Gentiles and to link this moment to what had happened at Pentecost when the Spirit fell on devout Jews.

Incidentally, this is one reason why I do not believe that speaking in tongues is normative for today. Possible? Yes. Normative? No. Some have taken this text out of its context and suggested that speaking in tongues is a requirement for genuine salvation or they see it as a normal expression of being “full of God.” But the point in Acts 10 is the unusual work of God outside of the Jewish context. Tongues validated the initial and unusual movement of God.

So it seems clear that Cornelius and his family were not genuinely converted until the moment that they heard the gospel. That is important for two reasons.

## **Two Implications**

The call to preach the gospel to people who were devout and “acceptable” is significant for two reasons:

First, it is good to be reminded that as good a man and as successful a man as Cornelius was, he still needed the gospel. Even though he was devout, feared God, gave alms, prayed continually, and was called “acceptable” by Peter, he still needed to hear and respond.

This is a good reminder, especially in light of the fact that we live in a family-oriented, Midwestern values, relatively conservative community. While our fair city is not perfect, it is a good place to live and it is easy to assume that our good and respectable co-workers are in a good place spiritually

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Acts 1-12 – The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1994), 301.

because they are good people. It is easy to have our spiritual boldness dulled by the morality, goodness, and respectability of the people we encounter. The spiritual needs of moral and religious-sounding people are just as pressing as people in crisis, but it is easy to not see the divine opportunities in front of us because we see people through a moral or behavioral lens. Cornelius still needed the gospel. And without Peter's message, he would have not heard the message.

So, Acts 10 reminds us that the gospel needs to be communicated to people who are clearly morally bankrupt, but it also needs to be declared to people who are deeply religious and even moral. We cannot allow the "goodness" of people to lessen our passion to see the gospel brought to them.

Secondly, there is something very interesting that Paul says in verse 35. Formerly (verse 28) Peter said that God had shown him that he was not "to call *any person* unclean or common." The focus of that statement was clearly on the individual. But verse 35 has a different nuance. Peter says, "...God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." I've already established that "acceptable" does not mean justified or saved. So what is Peter saying?

Our passage seems to be saying that there are people within particular global people-groups who are being prepared by God to seek Him. God is calling people from every tribe, language, and tongue. Cornelius was such a man, and it was God's plan to reach him.

However, Cornelius' religious fervor was not enough. He needed to hear the gospel. His seeking need to reach its fulfillment in finding Jesus.

The point here is that God is on a sovereign mission to reach people, and we are an essential part of that mission. God wants to connect those who are seeking Him with those who possess the Good News. And I would suggest that He is doing that all the time – more often than we might even realize. God is on a mission to reach the world, and He desires to do it through the church – through you and me.

So part of our role during these three weeks is to remind us about the mission of God so that we can look at our lives differently. We need to ask ourselves:

- Why has God placed me in my neighborhood, my job, and in proximity to the people who I meet on a daily basis?
- Why has God given me financial resources and what are the implications for reaching the world?
- Why has God brought me to College Park Church with all the focus on unreached peoples?
- Is God calling me to consider taking my career to a foreign field so that I can reach the people who God is calling?
- Is God asking me to take this gospel-sharing mission as my new calling in life?

All that I'm asking you to do today is to think about the connection between God's mission and your mission. I'm asking you to consider what God might be doing. I do not think that you will have a vision telling you what to do like Peter did. But I do believe that God is in the process of reaching people, and we need to consider our role. Cornelius needed the gospel and Peter needed to bring it to him. And God was behind it all.

### **Barriers to Consider**

There are reasons why we do not think this way. There are barriers and challenges that we need to identify. Let me share a few from my heart and have you evaluate yours.

**Theology** – There can be a barrier to embracing God's mission because of too much emphasis on God's sovereignty or human responsibility. Some people make so much about God's sovereign purposes that they lose the urgency of the need – "God will reach them without my help." Or people trust so much in the human condition that they believe that all true seekers will eventually be accepted – "They will eventually find what they are looking for." Both extremes lead to missing God's mission.

**Prejudice** – It is sad but true that racism or prejudice can enter into the equation. The gospel can be hindered because people believe that certain people are unreachable because their culture, their background, or their past is too great to overcome. Subtly one can believe (although not usually verbalized) that certain people groups are so backwards that they do not even deserve the gospel.

**Self-centeredness** – Having a gospel mindset means that you are going to look beyond yourself, your needs, and your personal fulfillment. And it is very, very easy to become overly focused on ourselves, filling our schedules and our lives with many great things but leaving no room for divine appointments.

**Approval** – Reaching unreached people or reaching anyone with the gospel will require you to confront your fear of man – the fear of what others will think of you. Peter dealt with this in Acts 11 when he returned from his trip. He was accosted by the spiritual leaders when they heard about his visit to Cornelius' house. Reaching out requires creativity and risk. And you will have to step outside your "comfort zone."

**Certainty** – The way God works is rarely in a straight line, and His mission is rarely predictable. It is not always clear, certain or absolute. Peter was asked to go with Cornelius' men, and he was not sure about the mission before he left. So if you wait until the opportunity or the conversation is safe and unequivocal, you will never do it. God's mission involves risk.

Now I share these things with you so that you can see the contrast between the amazing opportunity that stood before Peter and all the reasons why it would have been easier to not go Cornelius' men. There were many, many reasons to not leave Joppa.

And there were many reasons why William Carey could have given up his passion for the “heathen,” and many reasons why D.L. Moody could have lessened his desire to reach people with the gospel.

There are many reasons why you and I could easily sit through another REACH month and remain unmoved and unchanged. But I hope and pray that you will not do that.

My prayer is that in some way and to some extent you will be motivated to see your life, your gifts, and the divine appointments around you through a different lens today.

My hope is that you will look and pray for divine appointments.

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