

The God Without Boundaries

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[0 : 00] Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning in a time of great concern, concerns about global health, concerns about jobs and our economy.

There are many worries. Father, we pray that you'd help us to be ready to listen to you, that where we're foolish, you'll give us wisdom, that where we are in error, you'll correct us, where we are in pain, that you will comfort us.

We recognize that we are spiritually hungry and we ask that your word to us will be spiritual food that fills us up, that where we are in despair, you would fix our eyes on your hope for us.

For we ask in Jesus' name, amen. Great, well, I don't know about you, but for me, as I look back on my life, the key turning points have often been associated with food.

When I went to visit the law firm that I eventually worked for in London, they took me out for lunch at the Oxo Tower in London. I don't know whether you've ever been there. It's very, very nice.

[1 : 15] And I remember thinking, I could definitely get used to this. I think I should work for this firm. And I did. Nearly five years ago, I came up to Glasgow for my interviews at St. Silas, and we had to stay overnight to come.

And I didn't know anyone in Glasgow, so on the night before, I went out for a curry. And as I tucked into a magnificent Glasgow curry, I thought, you know, if they offer me this job, I really think I should take it.

I think I should come to Glasgow. And on the day that I asked Carrie, Carrie? Cathy. Remember her name. There's never been a Carrie.

On the day that I asked Cathy if she would marry me, and she said yes, I took her out for a Big Mac and fries, which I paid for.

Significant turning points and food. Now, here in Acts chapter 10, we have a major turning point. Certainly a major turning point in this book, Acts.

[2 : 18] Actually, more than that, this is a major turning point in human history. We could even say that if it wasn't for Peter's food vision that day, almost all of us this morning would not be here.

And we wouldn't be here because we wouldn't know God. That's the reality, unless we're from a Jewish background, as some of us will be. And so I hope as we read it, one of the things that we'll feel is deep thankfulness that God gave Peter this vision.

Or at God's character. Now, before we look at Peter and his food, we meet another major character. So the first point, the compassion of God to save Cornelius.

We meet Cornelius in verse 1, and we get the kind of eyewitness detail that is typical of Luke. Verse 1, at Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion, in what was known as the Italian regiment.

And spiritually, he's a seeker. Verse 2, he and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need, and he prayed to God regularly.

[3 : 26] We meet people like this occasionally today, who are not yet converted, but they are sincerely seeking truth. And it's a wonderful thing.

It's a wonderful thing to be like this. It's a wonderful thing when you meet people like this. I was speaking to a man here last Sunday, Sunday morning here at church, who is looking into the Christian faith, and you could see there was an open-mindedness, a willingness to take a fresh look at Jesus.

It's wonderful. And we hear that Cornelius is trying to live a good life for God. But at this point, he is still lost. He's not in Christ.

He doesn't know personally the God that he prays to. He might know about him. He doesn't know him. And in Caesarea, he has no hope unless something changes dramatically.

And then God, in his sovereign mercy, intervenes. So look with me at verse 3. One day at about 3 in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, Cornelius.

[4 : 36] Of course, he's afraid, but the angel says, God has noticed you. And he tells him in verse 5, send people to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon Peter.

He's staying there with another Simon. Simon the Tanner, whose house is by the sea in Joppa. So the next day, day 2, the men that Cornelius sends arrive in Joppa.

And they find Peter's house. Well, they find Simon the Tanner's house by the sea. Peter's there. They knock at the door. They speak to Peter in verse 22. And in verse 22, they tell him about Cornelius who has seen an angel.

And they ask him to come with them. And Peter goes with them. On day 3, Peter sets out. They stay with him for a night. Peter sets out with them on day 3. Some of the other Christians in Joppa go with Peter.

And they head to Caesarea. And on day 4, they arrive in Caesarea. And he meets Cornelius. And Cornelius falls at the feet of the apostle Peter in reverence.

[5 : 38] And Peter says, Get up. I'm just a man. And he goes into the house and he finds this crowd around Cornelius. They've assembled. Cornelius has brought people together because they earnestly want to hear about this salvation.

And in verse 30, Cornelius tells the story again of what's happened to him. So we hear it three times in the chapter about the angel. If Luke, if something is important to Luke, he tells us three times. And in verse 33, he shows this great sign of being a true seeker of God. Not what he's been doing for God, but verse 33, that he'll listen.

Verse 33, Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. Peter speaks to him about Jesus and the Holy Spirit comes.

And it's a second Pentecost. So look at verse 45. The circumcised believers who would come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

[6 : 46] So this isn't something normative or prescriptive for every time someone becomes a Christian. The New Testament does speak elsewhere of a spiritual gift of tongues for some believers.

But here, the reason things happen the way they do is because this is a unique moment in the history of humanity. And we had the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 where in Jerusalem, the Father, God the Father, who had raised Jesus and exalted him to his right hand, sends the Spirit among the people.

And when it happens, they proclaim the wonders of God in different languages. They can be understood. But those people all had a key thing in common. They were all Jewish people.

They were from different nations, but they were Jewish. Here it's Gentiles, people who are not Jewish. And God sends the Spirit in a way that is unmistakably like Pentecost, confirming that his gift of salvation is for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

And then Peter makes the order they should be baptized. Why shouldn't they be baptized? Why would he hold that back from a new believer and they get baptized?

[8 : 04] And he stays with them to nurture them in their faith. It's this breakthrough moment. And of course, God has planned it all along. He chose Cornelius before the foundation of the world, Ephesians chapter 1.

He put Cornelius' name in his book of life. We know that from Philipians 4. And the Bible has been pregnant waiting for this moment when the Christian faith will break across that boundary from God's chosen people, the Jews, ethnically descendants of Abraham, to the Gentiles, to the nations.

So Jesus, when he summarized to his apostles, it might just be worth looking at actually, Luke chapter 24, in Luke chapter 24, he meets, this is the risen Jesus alive again on page 1062.

And it says, page 1062, in verse 45, then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. So he's explaining for them the Old Testament scriptures.

In verse 46, he told them, this is what is written. So he's showing them what you can prove from the Old Testament. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.

[9 : 25] Well, that's Luke's gospel, Luke's first volume. And repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. That's his second volume.

That's what Acts is all about, Luke's second book.

The Old Testament has promised that this will happen. And at this perfect moment, God sent that angel to Cornelius, to Caesarea, so that three days later he could bring Peter to him and God saved Cornelius and the people who were with him.

And in that sense, the story of Cornelius is unique. But we see in the way that Luke wonderfully retells the story step by step, the compassion of God.

and it's good to reflect on that in our own lives. The ways that God's compassion has been at work in our lives.

Could you give some time maybe yourself to reflect on that if you've never done that before? Maybe to write it down in a journal. The ways that God has been at work in your life so that you came to know him.

[10:32] Or if you haven't come to know him yet, maybe the ways that he is at work in bringing you here today. I remember the first time I ran the Great North Run, the half marathon in Newcastle, there were 40,000 people running it.

And I recorded the TV coverage because I was running it. And so you're watching and they do this thing on the TV where they tell the stories of a handful of individuals who are running.

So they pick people out and you find that there's a man running for a hospice who cared for his mum before she died. And a woman running because it's the first time that she's run since she recovered from breast cancer.

And there are people running dressed in costumes for certain charities to raise more money.

People running because they're club runners and they're trying to get their best time. But as the camera panned back to the time bridge and showed the thousands of runners going across, the commentator said, we've heard just a handful of stories, but there are 40,000 runners down here and every single one of them has a personal story about why they're running today.

And in a much deeper way, we get that sense when we read Acts as we know by the time we get to this point in Acts because Luke keeps telling us the numbers that there are over 20,000 people in the church.

[11:55] But every one of those people has a personal story of God's compassion to them, that God chose them before the foundation of the world, that he set the times and places where they would live so that they would meet Christians.

That's in Acts 17. His spirit convicted them of their sin so they knew they needed a rescuer and then opened their eyes to see who Jesus is. And every Christian has a story like that of God's compassion.

Could you reflect on the compassion of God in your own life? Christians who you met, people you saw, things you saw, perhaps a Christian home you were raised in, a Christian parent or grandparent, a Christian friend, and the course of events in your life that one thing led to another. And looking back, you see that God's hidden hand was at work. Maybe you thought you were choosing God, but you see how actually he's been leading you to him. I find it so encouraging to do that in my life.

It's a great thing to do for our thankfulness. But while this chapter looks at Cornelius and his conversion, ultimately, actually, it's a chapter about Peter's conversion.

[13:12] Peter needs to learn that God is more compassionate than he is. So our second point, the compassion of God in the conversion of Peter. Peter, I wonder if there's something in this happening at Joppa.

I don't know much about Joppa at all. The only thing I know about Joppa is that it's where the prophet Jonah fled. So when God told Jonah, the Old Testament prophet, to go to Nineveh, where the enemies of God's people lived, to call them to repent, and Jonah knew that God is gracious and compassionate, so this was an exercise in showing God's mercy to the enemies of God's people, instead of going, Jonah fled to Joppa.

It's where the reluctant evangelist fled. Now Peter is in Joppa. And for Peter and the early church at this moment, the idea that Jesus would be the saviour of the nations is unimaginable.

It's unthinkable. If you were a first century Jew, you couldn't go into the house of a Gentile. You couldn't eat with a Gentile. Every day in your prayers, you thanked God that he didn't make you a Gentile.

They referred to the Gentiles as dogs. To be holy, you had to stay separated from Gentiles, from non-Jews. But the day after Cornelius is visited by the angel, we pick things up again in verse 9. [14:42] So Acts chapter 10, verse 9, about noon, the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

And then the food situation. He became hungry and wanted something to eat. And while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

It contained all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. Peter wouldn't go anywhere near some of those animals.

He knows they're unclean for a Jew. To be holy, you had to stay separated from those foods. And then dramatically, a voice says to Peter three key words, rise, kill, eat.

And Peter protests, verse 15, he gets told by the voice, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. So here's the thing.

[15:45] Those three words, rise, kill, eat, they sound as though they're about food. But as the clean, unclean food law is lifted, the clean, unclean person law is lifted as well.

So in three words, God is signaling that his grace has no boundaries. The same thing happens three times to Peter, the vision and the voice.

Because we know from elsewhere in Peter's life that if you want to get something through to Peter, you have to say it three times. And then he's told to go downstairs and let the men in. And it probably was a comedy moment as he comes downstairs and the men have finally found the house of Simon the Tanner by the seat in Joppa.

And as they approach the door, Peter appears, coming down the stairs to greet them. And in case he still hasn't got the message to go with them, the Holy Spirit has said to him, do not hesitate to go with these men for I have sent them.

And off he goes. And when he arrives at the home of Cornelius, he makes the key point of the whole chapter in verse 34. Verse 34, Peter began to speak, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

[17:07] I now realize Peter has grasped that God is more compassionate than him. That the compassion of God knows no boundaries.

And for us today, it is good to grasp that God is more compassionate than us. When you're helping with an outreach course like the life course that we've got coming up starting soon, and you're inviting people to raise questions, maybe you've been on one of those courses before, usually at some point on a course like that, somebody asks, what about people who haven't heard?

What about people who haven't heard about Jesus? What about the tribesman in the Amazonian rainforest who hasn't heard? Lots of us feel that, don't we?

And this passage, it doesn't answer all our questions about that, but it does help us with a question we can ask ourselves back. What do you think is God's reaction to the reality that people haven't heard of Jesus Christ?

What's God's reaction? Does Acts chapter 10 not show us that whoever they are, wherever they are from, whatever their race, their ethnic group, they're not beyond the limits of God's compassion?

[18:21] I now realize that God does not show favoritism. I remember somebody asking that question and a friend of mine saying to them, well, if you feel that, you'll be really useful then if you become a Christian because there are places you can go if you feel that compassion.

And folks, it's wonderful, isn't it, that God is like this. In our culture, people talk about how skeptical we are today of authority, aren't we? People are very skeptical and being walk seems to me, as far as I can understand it, to be all about trying to be hypersensitive to who is being oppressed by power.

That's what being walk is. And people view everything through this lens that says power is something that people get so that they can be horrible to you, so that they can oppress you.

Well, what about hearing the news is that the being with real power in our universe is overwhelmingly compassionate. That the power that God has, he uses to reach people so that he can save them.

Does that not mean that sometimes it's really good for people to have power? It's good for him to have power. And does it not mean that we might gladly surrender to his authority in our lives because we trust him, because of his compassion?

[19 : 46] We can trust him. He is more compassionate than we are. And who is it that we might most need to hear that about this morning? That God's compassion has no boundaries.

I guess it's going to be different for each one of us, isn't it? Is it Muslims? Is it the Jewish community of Glasgow? Do we trust that God offers his acceptance to them in Christ?

Do we trust that God offers his acceptance to methadone users? That he offers his acceptance to multimillionaires, to investment bankers, to tax avoiders?

He offers his acceptance to people who are transgender. His acceptance is offered to people who deny climate change, people who wear Make America Great Again caps.

I've got this temptation in me not to value the work of mission where it's groundbreaking because the ground is hard and it can take people years to find fruit, to find that people get saved.

[21 : 00] And I think of Stephen Baggett, a man that I met who has spent his whole life in sub-Saharan Africa. He was actually raised there by parents who were missionaries there and then he spent his whole adult life there as a missionary.

And in that time, he's seen barely a handful of people come to faith in Jesus. And the temptation is to think, was it really worth it? Was it really worth having him as a mission partner for those churches?

Was it worth the sacrifice of his life? Think of an extremely gifted young guy in his 20s who went to the Middle East a couple of years ago.

And he's in a country that he's not allowed to name to people because it would be too dangerous for him if it was known that he's a Christian there looking to reach Muslims there. But he's very gifted and the temptation is that I would think, did he really have to go?

Wouldn't it have been better to employ him in student ministry in a student town in the UK? But no, these sacrifices are an expression of the compassion of God by the church today.

[22 : 13] It's costly, but it's reflecting that his compassion has no boundaries. So we go and we support people who go. And how can God show that degree of compassion?

How can he show a compassion to a centurion like Cornelius? Well, we see that in our third point, the compassion of God in the work of Christ. Ultimately, God saves Cornelius in the same way that he saves anybody.

He saves him as Cornelius he is, his word, his unstoppable word. Nobody is ever saved without that. People see visions, but as far as I can see in the scriptures and in experience as well, even when people see visions, they're brought to hear God's word.

And when they hear God's word, they get saved by God. So Luke records for us these awesome words from Peter all about Jesus. First about his life as the spirit-anointed righteous hero.

Verse 38. Look at what Peter says. How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

[23 : 30] And he was seen by witnesses. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They saw him do it. It wasn't done in a corner. They saw him.

And then about his death and resurrection. They killed him. God raised him. We saw him. Verse 39. They killed him by hanging him on a cross but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

He was not seen by all the people but by witnesses whom God had already chosen by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. So these weren't hallucinations. They ate meals with him.

Peter says. They drank drinks with him. They were there with him. It was an actual physical bodily resurrection. And then there's this kind of school RE lessons view of the Bible that says the Old Testament that was all about God judging everyone but then the New Testament came along and that's all about God forgiving everyone.

But just have a look at how Peter puts it in verse 42. He says Jesus he commanded us the apostles so this is the New Testament he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

[24 : 56] But then the Old Testament message verse 43 all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

So that's the Bible coming together as a whole to tell us Jesus is judge Jesus is rescuer and you see the connection between the action of the chapter and the speech the word from Peter.

The compassion of God knows no boundaries because the saving work of Jesus has no limits. who is Jesus going to judge?

Verse 42 all without exception all people without exception the living and the dead there is nobody Jesus will not judge. So who can he save?

All without distinction all people without distinction verse 43 everyone who believes in him can be saved. And so that means for any of us who believe in him the verdict over our life from verse 35 is accepted.

[26 : 03] Accepted. Write it places write it by your bedside write it in your car put it as the screensaver on your phone accepted. That's the verdict on your life in Christ.

Maybe you could start your prayers every day this week Heavenly Father I trust your acceptance of me. and Luke writes Acts to give his people confidence to give God's people confidence who do we rule out as beyond God's power to accept them and to save them?

Maybe because of their poverty and we think they've got too much going on in their life really to engage with Jesus or maybe because of their decadence their riches and we think they don't want for anything they're not interested in Jesus who seems too far away from the gospel for God to be powerful to save them?

For me I remember playing football in a football team where I was in the changing rooms afterwards as there was all this banter about the game and about girls and I just thought I cannot imagine a group of people further from the gospel than these men.

They just seemed so far from the gospel. Well let's have confidence. God is powerful to save anyone and his compassion has no boundaries because the work of Christ has no limits and where will that take you?

[27 : 31] God works through his people. When you think about it it's amazing isn't it? God could have just sent the angel to Cornelius and told Cornelius the gospel through the angel and we'd have needed none of this none of the journeys but instead he orchestrated events so that Cornelius could hear the gospel from Peter and he works through people today.

Just as Peter had to be told by the angel do not hesitate to go do you feel spurred on by the compassion of God to go? Maybe to go to the nations maybe to go to a place where even 2,000 years on from these events people don't know Christians so they've not heard God's word about Jesus.

Rise kill eat I now realize that God does not show favoritism where will that take us? Where could it take you?

Let's pray together just a moment of quiet a chance to reflect on how God may have been speaking to us a chance to hear to just a moment Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are a God of compassion.

We praise you for the work of Jesus, that he was the spirit anointed one who only ever did good. We praise you for his work on the cross and that you raised him and he was seen.

[29 : 45] We thank you for the verdict you give us, accepted. Help us to live with that verdict over our lives. And Father, would you grow in us a compassion for the lost that matches yours, a grasp of your mercy that rules nobody out, and a confidence in your power to save that leads us where you would have us go, that people around us will believe and receive forgiveness of sins.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We're going to respond by singing together to God, so the band will lead us.

Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Email with fingers.

Amen. Amen.