

GO WHERE GOD SENDS YOU

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

Steve Zeisler

Christ is the great lion Aslan in Narnia, the imaginary world created by C. S. Lewis in his marvelous series of books for children, the *Chronicles of Narnia*. There is a conversation in the first book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, that is often quoted, with good reason. Four English children have come to Narnia together, and they are in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. Mr. Beaver announces that Aslan is on the move, and things are going to change. The children begin to question him about Aslan:

“‘Ooh!’ said Susan... ‘Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.’

‘That you will, dearie, and no mistake,’ said Mrs. Beaver. ‘If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.’

‘Then he isn’t safe?’ said Lucy.

‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver. ‘Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.’” (1)

Acts 10 is our text in this message. I hope you have observed the obvious in our studies so far: there is nothing safe about following Jesus. The first seven chapters record the story of the gospel in Jerusalem. And it wasn’t safe—filled with adventure and miracles and joy and glory and honor and love, but also with prison and beatings.

In chapter 8 the gospel began to spread because of persecution, first to Samaria, the country nearest to the land of the Jews. Most of chapters 8-12 are about a further spread of the gospel to regions closest to Judea. In these chapters we meet three people whose stories are told in some detail. The first is an Ethiopian eunuch, and the next is Saul of Tarsus, better known as the apostle Paul. Both of these men are surprising converts. “Aslan” is not predictable.

The third person is the one we are going to read about in chapter 10, the centurion Cornelius. This too is a surprising conversion, and we will consider it in two messages. The apostle Peter had to be challenged and changed in order for him to participate in seeing Cornelius converted, and we’ll look at the text from his perspective in this message. In the next message we’ll look at many of the same details, but from Cornelius’ perspective.

Peter was taught something previously unthinkable: that Gentiles were beloved of God, accepted by God, and would have full status as members of the church without having to first become Jews. That was a seeming impossibility. It was shocking for Jews to discover that God would pour out his Spirit on non-proselyte Gentiles. Gentiles never expected it themselves.

Of course from our perspective the idea of Gentiles in the church is completely familiar. The majority of Christians since the close of the New Testament era have been Gentiles. But we can learn lessons about the surprising ways of God from this text. The Lord Jesus isn’t safe, but he is good. Acts 10:1-29:

Now there was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually. About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in to him and said to him, “Cornelius!” And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now dispatch some men to Joppa, and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a certain tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” When the angel who was speaking to him had departed, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were in constant attendance upon him, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

And on the next day, as they were on their way, and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four

corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." And again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them Myself." And Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." And so he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he arose and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. And when it came about that Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man." As he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me."

What lessons are there for us in what Peter experienced and learned? There are two main ideas. One is the challenge raised by Peter's discovery that he is prejudiced. The other is his need to trust and learn from God about what holiness really consists of.

The problem of prejudice

What do we discover about prejudice? It's very difficult to admit prejudices in the modern world. There are few things more widely disparaged than exclusivity of any kind, or distinctions between people. Prejudice persists nonetheless. The triggers for prejudice are varied. They include race, class, economic position, education level, language, gender, nationality, and culture. There are many ways people can be lumped together and disparaged.

Let's consider the text. Why was Peter given a vision, repeated three times, instead of a verbal explanation? Peter had heard the voice of God before. At Jesus' baptism he had heard God say aloud, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). That was a straightforward statement of fact. And on the Mount of Transfiguration he had heard the voice of God say from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). That was a straightforward command to listen. But in this case, there wasn't a voice from heaven saying, "Peter, go to Joppa and evangelize Cornelius." Instead, he was shown a sheet filled with animals. The animals included both ritually clean and unclean animals. So there would have been lambs and pigs next to one another in the sheet. The vision commanding him to eat what was before him would have been revolting. Yet it was repeated three times. Peter found himself uttering the logically impossible sentence: "Not so, Lord."

Emotional reactions of disgust or antagonism occur below the level of conscious thought. To be told the facts is not enough. Peter was made to experience revulsion. We, too, often need to discover by experience what is in our hearts.

Luke says that Peter was perplexed by what he saw, and that he was reflecting on it. He was wrestling with God. We can imagine him in prayer, asking what it meant. "Why? All my life I have made assumptions, and now they don't seem to be correct." He was struggling, asking God to give him understanding of these things.

But when Peter finally was commanded to act, he obeyed without hesitating. In verse 23 he invited Gentile visitors to come in. Again in verses 46-48, when Peter preaches the same gospel that he preached at Pentecost and the Spirit descends upon Gentile believers, he will make the immediate connection: "We should offer them baptism, because they are as fully Christian as we are." Feelings of prejudice are subtle. We learn to change our thinking by changing our behavior.

There is another story of a centurion that Luke tells in his gospel. A centurion sends word to Jesus asking him to save

the life of his servant who is about to die. But he says, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You; but just say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Luke 7:6-7). It was considered shameful for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. It would tarnish the reputation of a great rabbi to even approach the home as if he were going to enter it.

Yet in this text it says Peter invited his visitors in, and then when he went to Joppa, he went into the home of Cornelius. If we would learn to care for people whom God cares for, we will show genuine hospitality. And we will accept invitations from unfamiliar sources—eat the food different people eat and enjoy the world they live in, appreciating what may seem foreign to us.

I first traveled to Israel with a study group in the mid-seventies. We discovered connections to the Bible everywhere we went. And Israel was emerging as a nation. The desert was blooming. The Israelis we met were enormously proud of their country. But the person who made the biggest impression on me was a Palestinian. I didn't expect this. The professor who was guiding our tour took us into the Arab quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, to an antiquities shop. He said on the way in, “I want you to meet one of the godliest Christian men I know.” This man was dressed just like his neighbors. He had an accent just like that of his neighbors. He was an Arab Palestinian, and he loved Jesus. We sat down and talked about antiquities, shared a glass of tea and a time of prayer. I expected to be fascinated with the ancient history brought to life in the places we visited. I was not surprised at being impressed with the accomplishments of modern Israel. The unexpected experience was of warm Christian fellowship with a man who looked just like his Muslim neighbors.

In addition to being prejudiced Peter was confused, and he had a second lesson to learn in this regard.

Confusion about holiness

Peter felt as if God were changing the rules on him. He had avoided pork and other forbidden things in order to remain clean in God's sight, and now it was the divine voice that contradicted all he had been taught.

It continues to be hard to know how to live a holy life, doesn't it? There is a difficult requirement that we face every day, and that is to be different. “Do you not know . . . that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20a). We live in a culture in which we must stand out. We cannot be the people we used to be. We cannot be like those with whom we live and work, our neighbors with all their values and their disinclination to know God. But at the same time we can't be loveless, self-impressed, and remote. We have to be “in the world but not of the world.”

Of course there are moral categories that don't change no matter what, where there is no real debate. There is a moral fabric to the way God made life. Some choices are not difficult; we know that things like theft, murder, and adultery are always wrong

There is another category of choices we need to make. Because of individual personal weaknesses we may need to adopt personal disciplines that don't apply to others. Use of alcohol or certain types of entertainment may be off limits for one individual but not for others. You and I should discover those things that are not good for us even though in themselves they are morally neutral.

But there is a third category of choices that I think is conceptually more difficult, and that is what Peter was struggling with. The ceremonial law for the Jews concerned things like circumcision, diet, food preparation, clothing, tithing, and observing the Sabbath. These laws had long served the Jews as ways of marking themselves as devoted to Yahweh. They were claiming allegiance to and dependence on Him rather than the gods of Canaan or Rome.

The same dynamic occurs today. The issues of allegiance to Christ vs. the gods of this world have different markers, but we still have to make choices. Spiritual disciplines for us may include fasting for a day, or declining invitations to lavish meals in order to spend time with the Lord. It may be turning down an opportunity to go skiing for the weekend because we want to spend time in church on Sunday with people who love God. It may mean declining an investment opportunity because we've decided to give to the cause of the gospel, or to the poor. Skiing is not offensive to God.

Christians make investments honorably before the Lord every day. There are times when we eat lavish meals with a good appetite and praise God at the end. But there are occasions when we have to say no to something, to miss out on some pleasant entertainment in order to spend a day being quiet before the Lord, or even say no to Christian activity in order to attend to God.

We must say no to the idols that claim that money gives life, to the worship of activity for its own sake, to the notion that prominence and winning competitions and succeeding at climbing ladders really mean something. They are all idols, and at some point we say, “I will say no to the idol and turn my face toward God on this occasion. I need to remind myself who I am, and I need to stand for something in the world around me.” But it is hard to make those choices. We can join Peter in realizing that we need God to help us to see through the confusion in order to live in a way that is healthy.

Let me make a couple of observations that come out of my experience. One is that almost always, turning from this world’s idols and to God starts with a negative. You’ve got to say “no” to something in order to say “yes” to God. But be careful. Saying no by itself may seem to be the end of the story, especially when you are discouraged or depressed or uncertain. When I feel weakest and most unsure of myself, I look for something to say no to as if that will please God by itself. But God has no pleasure in that. We need to say no in order to say yes, choosing against something in order to embrace him or take up a challenge offered by him. Christians are often tarred with the brush that we are all about denying things without ever having a hopeful contribution to offer. That shouldn’t be so.

The second observation from my experience is that holiness should never be about distance from people. We don’t choose to be different in order to be far from our non-Christian neighbors. The imagery Jesus used is that we should be a light to the nations, a city set upon a hill. When we light a candle, we put it on a stand, not under a bucket (Matthew 5:14-15). The point is, holiness ought to communicate hope. We need to declare, “God is good to me, and he will be good to you, too,” not, “God is good, stay away.”

Like the children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we often want our Christian experience to be predictable and safe and undemanding. So our year becomes routine: “I will go to this retreat in the fall and that retreat in the spring. I have these events I do at Christmas time, and here are my Easter plans. And in the summer the family does these things. Tuesdays I go to this Bible study, and on Saturdays I go here, and Sunday nights I do this, and I have routine conversations with these friends...” Such lives are very predictable and very safe. One year looks like another, one conversation goes like another, and so on. But what we are doing is avoiding adventure in our effort to mark ourselves as Christians. That is a great foolishness.

“Aslan” is on the move. He is good and he is the King, but he is not safe. And if we are really finding ourselves caught up with the presence with Christ in this world, the last thing life will be is predictable and routine and inflexible. When the wind of the Spirit starts blowing, where will we observe the presence of God? Hopefully in church, but also in prisons, rehab centers, bars, country clubs, political conventions, fraternities, consciousness-raising sessions, poetry readings, tobacco shops, blues clubs, locker rooms, loud Pentecostal churches, tattoo parlors, army barracks, company board rooms, secular universities, and everywhere else. We will learn to trust Christ in the confusing business of being holy.

In closing I want you to take to heart the word of the Lord to Peter: “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” Nothing started out clean. The only things that are clean or valuable or worthy are those things that have been cleansed by God. That includes you and me. We are made clean by his death on the cross, his love for us. So don’t ever let yourself be called unholy. What God has cleansed we must not reject in favor of anybody else’s opinion.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, © 1950, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York. P. 64.

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Steve Zeisler
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