

NEW FRONTIERS

SERIES: PETER'S PROGRESS

By Danny Hall

When I was a little boy my parents took us on vacation to visit my dad's sister and her family who lived in Pennsylvania. Now, for a southern boy growing up in Atlanta, going across the Mason-Dixon Line all the way up to Pennsylvania was going into enemy territory anyway, with all those Yankees up there. And then my Uncle Bob didn't go to church, so he was sort of a novelty to me, because I didn't know anybody who didn't go to church. One Sunday morning we were visiting at their home, so we weren't going to church. The window was open in the bedroom, and I heard church bells playing some old, familiar hymns that warmed my young boy's heart. I went down and said, "Do you hear those bells?" They said, 'Yes, that's coming from over at the Methodist church.' I was shocked, and I said, "But they're playing *Baptist* songs!" My view of the kingdom of God had been so defined by my Baptist boyhood heritage that I didn't even know that Methodists could sing our hymns!

So many of us have a mental picture of the kingdom of God. Even in our best moments we try to define it. Sometimes, in our worst moments, we don't even accept that it could be anything other than what we want it to be.

At this point in our study of the life of Peter, God is opening Peter's eyes more and more to what the kingdom of God is about. We have been examining how God took this man from being a fisherman on the shores of Galilee, called him to follow him, trained him, and brought him to a fuller knowledge of the Messiah, increasing his understanding of the wonder that Jesus was the Messiah, as he grew him up to be a leader in the church.

We now find ourselves beyond the cataclysmic events of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter has launched out as a leader of the church in the power of the Spirit, fearlessly proclaiming who Christ is more and more every day. He has perhaps become the point-person in the early church, the voice that is most often heard, at least publicly, wielding a great amount of leadership and influence.

God has changed Peter's understanding of what Messiah means. You see, the opposition that is already growing to the apostles' message represents a disagreement, if you will, over the nature of Messiah. The opposition comes primarily from the leaders of the Jewish community. Peter has already been jailed twice so far in the story, and the pressure is growing. Peter and the rest of the new believers are proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, and they have therefore challenged the history and the power structures of their own culture and nation. God has changed Peter's understanding of who Messiah is, to the effect that the establishment of his kingdom at this time will not be a political overthrow of Rome's control of Palestine, but will rather be a spiritual kingdom that God is setting up, of which Jesus is the King.

In the passage we'll look at now, God takes Peter one step farther. He expands not only Peter's

concept of who Messiah is, but also his concept of what the kingdom of God is. We're going to jump into a wonderful story in Acts 10. It's very instrumental in the development of the early church as well as in Peter's own growth. This is the story of Peter and the Roman centurion. Now, we will not examine this story in great detail, but if you'd like to do further study of the details, Steve Zeisler preached two fine messages on this text in his recent series in Acts (Discovery Papers 4754 and 4755). One message is from Peter's perspective and the other is from the centurion's perspective. In this message, though, we're going to focus on how God is expanding Peter's vision of what the kingdom of God is about.

God shows no favoritism

There are two things that happen almost simultaneously. We begin with this Roman centurion in Acts 10:1:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.

Cornelius was a Roman soldier stationed at a garrison in Palestine. He is obviously a Gentile, but now he is living and working in Palestine, in the town of Caesarea. Verse 2:

He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

The second thing we find out about him is that he's not your average Roman soldier. We don't know his history. Perhaps being stationed there in Palestine, in his effort to get to know the people around him, this Roman centurion has had his eyes opened to the God of Israel. Whatever else we can say about him, the fact that he is a God-fearer means that he has come a long way, perhaps to being totally converted to Judaism, but certainly to being a sympathizer who seeks after the Jewish God. This centurion has a very open heart to God, and he longs to know more about God.

Verses 3-6:

One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now 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."

The disposition of this man's heart has been to know God. God answers that prayer and says, "I want you to send for this man named Simon Peter. Have him come and visit you." So the next

day the centurion sends his servants off to get Simon Peter.

Verses 9-16:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 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 of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times....

Just to make sure Peter doesn't miss anything, God repeats this vision three times. Peter is pondering this, and all of a sudden there's a knock at the door. The Spirit tells Peter, “These people are coming for you; go with them.” So when he goes down and opens the door, he tells

them, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?” They tell the story about Cornelius the centurion. So Peter goes back with them to Caesarea to Cornelius’ house.

Then Cornelius explains to Peter all that God has been showing him, his heart to know God, and what God told him to do. In 10:34-35 Peter has this incredible opening up of his understanding:

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Peter has now had a new expansion of his idea of the kingdom of God. He’s gone a little bit farther, and God is going to take him farther yet. But the first step in the expansion of Peter’s understanding of the kingdom of God is that God shows no favoritism. The kingdom of God is open to everyone, in every corner of the earth, as symbolized by those animals of all types lowered on the sheet. Everything God created is pure and clean, so to speak.

Peter then goes on to tell the story of Jesus to Cornelius.

Faith in Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit

Verse 36:

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

And then he rehearses all that God had been doing. Now let's jump all the way down to verses 44-46a as Peter is concluding his message:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Now their minds are opened wide. Peter is telling the message of Jesus, because he has recognized that the message is not just for him and his Jewish brethren, but for all people. God is not partial toward anyone. But there would have been an assumption in the minds of Peter and the men who came along with him that the way one would come into the kingdom of God was through the Jewish door to faith. They had seen that pattern. There were Gentile proselytes who saw God as he was revealed in the Torah and in the nation of Israel, and came to believe in him.

But now something absolutely out of the ordinary happens. These people don't have to be circumcised. They don't have to move toward joining the Jewish culture and faith to gain access to Jesus. As Peter is preaching the message of Christ, the Holy Spirit falls, and right before the Jewish believers' eyes, these Gentiles are converted. Now, how do they know that? Because the Holy Spirit in his sovereignty has chosen to manifest his presence through the gift of speaking in

tongues and through praise.

Now, we do not have time in this message to examine the question of speaking in tongues with all of its multifaceted implications, but at this point in the book of Acts, it's key to understand that in order for God to demonstrate the presence of the Spirit in new groups of people, he allowed the manifestation of tongues as an undeniable sign of the Holy Spirit's presence, so that these Jewish believers had no question whatsoever that the Holy Spirit was on these people, that his Spirit was alive in them, and that God had brought them into his family right there before their eyes.

Verses 46b-48:

Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

So not only have the Gentiles' eyes been opened to the glory of God, but Peter's and his companions' eyes are opened in a new way as they see God doing this miracle of bringing these Gentiles into the kingdom of God through faith. These Jewish believers have been taught from the time they were children that there are two great markers of the people of God: circumcision and possession of the Torah, the Law. Now God is radically expanding their idea of the kingdom of God. The kingdom now has two new markers: faith in Christ and the presence of the Holy

Spirit.

Peter eventually goes back to Jerusalem, and the people of Judea hear about this. There is great questioning about what's going on, so Peter explains what happened. We'll pick up in Acts 11:15-17:

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”

There are those markers again: “[They] believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,” and, “The Holy Spirit came on them.” Peter has now come to understand a great new truth about what God is doing.

The kingdom of God is not about becoming Jewish. It's about faith in Christ and the presence of God in the lives of his believers and in the community of faith. God is expanding the idea of the kingdom of God beyond the borders of ethnic Israel to the whole world; his love and compassion for people extend to everyone everywhere.

I want us to look at one more report of Peter, where we see just how far his thinking is coming. In ensuing chapters, Paul and Barnabas are sent out on their first missionary journey from the church at Antioch. Away from the home bases of Jerusalem and Antioch, they are now farther out into the Roman Empire. More and more Gentile believers are coming into the kingdom of

God, and the question of whether or not they have to be circumcised and become Jewish rages on. It comes to the forefront in Acts 15, when the leaders of the church are gathered to discuss this issue. Peter speaks in that discussion. Acts 15:6-8:

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

This is the third time that Peter has said: “God gave them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us” (referring to Cornelius and his household). He goes on in verses 9-11:

He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Did you notice how he flipped the ideas? Up until now he has said, “They received the Holy Spirit as we did.” Now, he turns that simile around, and I think it’s critical: “*We* are saved as they are.” In that one turn Peter is saying, “All that I had held dear—my ethnic heritage, the possession of the Law, my keeping of the Law, my circumcision—none of that matters when it

comes to who is in the kingdom of God and is therefore acceptable as a child of God. I'm saved the same way all those Gentiles are. I bring nothing to my salvation apart from faith in Christ. I know I'm part of the kingdom of God not because I'm circumcised, not because I studied the Torah all my life, not because I'm Jewish, but because I have believed in Christ and the Holy Spirit is in my life." Peter is now seeing the kingdom of God in all its great fullness. It's for the whole world. All come to God through Christ by faith, on the same plane, with the same need of forgiveness and transformation by his saving grace. The kingdom of God is based on nothing but faith in Christ, and is marked out by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So the question for us now is, what difference does that make? How do we ourselves see the kingdom of God?

Being part of the building of God's kingdom

I've been around missions for a very long time. I went to a college that had a great emphasis on missions. Later I went overseas serving the Lord. But if you study missions at all, you know there was something called the modern missionary movement around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It paralleled some secular events, which God used to extend his kingdom. One was the rise of colonialism, where Western Europe and the United States began to colonize many other regions of the world. Now, there were a lot of bad things that came out of that, and a lot of good things. But one of the things that happened was that God opened people's eyes to the fact that there are a lot of people in other regions of the world. God used that to draw

people out of the church in Europe and the United States who were willing take the gospel to the regions that had never heard it before.

However, like Peter, they had an idea of what the kingdom of God was. And while many people came to faith, wonderfully, and many great things happened, part of what these missionaries took with them was their culture, because their idea of the kingdom of God consisted of European and American forms of church. So when people came to Christ in many places around the world, for a long time what the missionaries tried to do was turn them into European or American Christians. Sometimes some great mistakes were made in the way they handled other peoples' cultures.

There was a second wave of the modern missionary movement after World War II. Thousands and thousands of people in Europe and the United States went out around the world after the war. It was one of the biggest booms in missions history. A farmer from Nebraska would see a part of the world he had never seen before, and his eyes would be opened. All of a sudden, to people who had never paid much attention to the rest of the world, because of the growing world media and because of the course of the war, the world became a smaller place. So God used all the bad things that were going on then to open people's eyes to the need of the world.

Do you know where the greatest missions movement is right now? It's in the churches in the southern hemisphere and in the developing part of Asia. The number of missionaries going out from churches in Central and South America, in Africa, and in parts of Asia dwarfs the number going out from the United States and Europe. That's a wonderful thing. And where did those

people come from? They are the fruit of the labor of missionaries who took the gospel to them. Now God has matured these churches and they're becoming missionary churches themselves. God is building his kingdom, exploding the growth of the church around the world in the face of all kinds of opposition.

But it's taking on new and different forms. Sometimes I look at those churches and think, "Those churches don't look like what I'm used to." So the question arises when we look around the world, and even at our own congregation: How do we envision the kingdom of God? And how many times has our vision of the kingdom of God been limited by our narrow definitions?

Once again, what are the central markers? They are faith in Jesus Christ, with all that it means, and the presence of the Spirit. But as God transforms people and draws them together as the body of Christ, we are beginning to see that the church truly is universal and worldwide. It's incredible what God is doing. So I have to ask myself: "Am I willing to walk with God into that, whatever God would do to build his church? Or am I still stuck on hoping that my church will come out to be a comfortable place that I feel good in, that the church will look like what I want it to look like?"

When I look out across our congregation, I see people from all over the world. At one level we really rejoice in that, but I wonder how many of us are worried about it deep down inside. That can be the case for believers of both Caucasian and Asian heritage, or whatever ethnic background people have. There are parts of this that are sort of uncomfortable. Well, good! God is doing great things building his church. He explodes all racial and ethnic barriers and reaches to

every level of need. This is not just about prejudice, it's deeper than that. It's about what we believe about the kingdom of God, about our attitudes toward that, about what God might do in and through us.

So I find myself being challenged to say, "God, I don't want you to build the church that *I* want. I want to be a part of the church that *you're* building, wherever that will take me, whatever you might do, however you might do it. Open my heart the way you opened Peter's heart to embrace what you're doing in building your kingdom."

Yesterday I had the privilege of participating in the memorial service for John McWilliam, one of our longtime PBC missionaries who went to be with the Lord on Easter Sunday. I got to represent our church at that service and read one of the Scripture passages. The passage that I was asked to read was very dear to John's heart. It's from Romans 10. I want to share an excerpt. Romans 10:13-15:

"'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"

One of the things that people said over and over again about John yesterday was that he had

beautiful feet. Wherever God would send him, he wanted to go. His wife Charlene shared with me that although John was born a Scot, God gave him the heart of a Latin. He learned Spanish in college, and he had a Latin personality and disposition toward life that he embraced. For a while God sent him to Italy, and he also worked in Bulgaria. Wherever he went he tried to learn some of the language. He just wanted to take Christ everywhere. One person after another reminded us that the thing that mattered most to John was telling people about Jesus. The summation was that he took the good news across every barrier that man might place before him. He wanted to go and share Christ and love people. At the time of his death he was involved with Medical Ambassadors, which is a marvelous work that not only shares the gospel, but shares it in the context of meeting the physical and emotional needs of people as well, helping them deal with disease and poverty, doing it in the name of Christ, with the message that there is hope in him. What a wonderful legacy John left.

I wonder of myself just how many times I still get it wrong. I'm so worried about my own agenda, so worried about my own comfort, so worried about making the outcomes of church ministry be what I want them to be. But God keeps saying to us, "Just get out of the way and let me work. Get on board with the movement of the Spirit to do what I want to do in and through you, to build my kingdom in ways you could never imagine." It is a great experience to be part of what God is doing in building his kingdom!

Perhaps you could never in a million years imagine what you would do with, say, troubled teens. Could you imagine that the Spirit of God could empower you to just love kids in a way that would transform their lives? Could I be among people I don't understand, who live at a level I

can't comprehend, and engage them in the love of Christ? Can I walk across the street and talk to a neighbor I have not met yet, but who may be of a different race and a different religion, of some background that I don't know? Can I believe that God might be building his kingdom on my block?

The call Christ has for us is to imagine by the power of the Spirit what he might do if we will embrace *his* building of *his* kingdom. He's expanding our thinking as he expanded Peter's thinking. And part of our progress, as it was Peter's, is to let God open our minds up to what he might do.

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Sixth Message

Danny Hall

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