

“A Vision for the World”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in chapters ten through twelve in the book of Acts. There's a lot going in these chapters. We're going to be looking at a number of things that helped shape the direction of the early church.

This is one of the more pivotal sections in this study; one of those places where the believers could have gone in (one of two) almost opposite directions. What happens in these chapters was crucial for the future life of those early believers and the direction their ministry would take.

It's also one of those sections (for the same reasons) that is pivotal for us. If we catch it and what it says (and means), it'll send us in one direction, consistent with what God wants. If we miss it and fail to make the connection, we'll end up going somewhere far different, and (ultimately) missing out.

To help us get there, I want to come at it a bit differently today. We've been doing some rather general things as we've worked our way through; taken on some larger themes. Today I want to get a bit more specific; go after some of the detail.

Under the overall theme of “A Vision for the World”, I want to touch on a number of things that (I hope) will help us see what this vision is all about. In chapters ten through twelve (and we're going to have to move quickly), what we find are a series of pairings: two conversions, two churches, two disciples, and two gods; two conversions, two churches, two disciples, and two gods. I want to spend some time with each, figure out what was going on. Then, at the end, (as if that's not enough), I want to give you two conclusions to close it out.

Let's get into it, starting with the two conversions. Chapter ten is where we're starting. It's the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his encounter with Peter, a disciple of Jesus.

Now, we all know about Peter, and we'll get to him in a moment. Let's focus (for the moment) on what happens with Cornelius. (His is the first conversion.) In verse two (it says) that “he and his family were God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” He wasn't a believer, but he was a “God-fearing” man. He wasn't a follower, but he was as religious and devoted as you'd find.

Sounds like many people today; devout people, religious people; folks who know (and believe) there's a God. What they don't know is what God has done for them in Jesus. What they don't believe is what God has accomplished for (all of us) in Christ.

That's who Cornelius was. He was a devout man. He was a religious man. He knew there was a God. He even feared his God. What he didn't know was the person of Christ.

What happens (in the story) is that he has this “vision.” He's told by God to send some of his men to Joppa to bring back Peter, and so he does. Once they meet they have this conversation (Peter tells him about Jesus), and by the time it's over, (at the end of the chapter), Cornelius and (those with him) are all baptized.

That's the first conversion; this man named Cornelius becomes a believer. He converts from being a person who knew God and who feared God, to becoming a follower of Jesus. Keep that in mind as we move on to the second.

The second has to do with Peter. Now, maybe that sounds (a bit) strange, because Peter was already a believer. He knew Jesus. He was chosen by Jesus; one of his disciples. Not only that, but he was an apostle, committed to spreading the faith. What happens with Peter is not that he comes to know his Lord; (he already did), but that he comes to know and understand his Lord's heart.

Remember the story? Peter also has a vision. His vision is one (it says), and try to imagine it, in which “the heavens opened and a large sheet was let down by its four corners.” In it (it says) there were a number of animals that were (according to Jewish law) considered to be “unclean.” Then it says a voice came (from the heavens) and told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” But Peter says, “No way. It's all unclean.” And (it says), “it happened three times.”

That's when Cornelius shows up, tells Peter about the vision he had been given; and that's when Peter finally begins to know and understand the heart of Christ, that when he died, it was not just for those who were Jews (for the chosen), but for the entire world.

Now, let's stop for a moment and think about what just happened. Two conversions: the one of this God-fearing man who becomes a Christian; the other of this Christian believer who finally understands the heart of Christ.

Do you think that still happens today? Do you think those same two (different kinds of people) still exist? Sure they do. Our society is filled with "devout and religious" people who have no idea what God has done for them in Christ. And the church is filled with people who have yet to fully grasp the heart of Jesus for those who are lost.

Now, I'm not going to ask you to raise your hands, but if you had to choose (between the two) to which one you can best relate, where would you put yourself in this story? Where would you place yourself on this spectrum of conversion?

That's really what this is. (I hope you realize that.) It's not just a story about Cornelius and Peter. It's a story about you and about me; about us. Every one of us needs conversion. There's not one of us who's 100% where we need to be.

Where would you put yourself on that spectrum? Between Cornelius and Peter, where do you think you fall? Are you one of those "God-fearing" people but who, for whatever reason, isn't quite yet on board with Jesus? Or are you one of those who is (totally on-board with Jesus), but not yet fully in line with his heart?

I won't ask for your hands. Maybe you're both. Maybe you're neither one. Maybe you're a little of each. It doesn't matter. What matters is what happens moving forward. What matters is what happens with whatever it is that needs converting.

Here's the bottom line: if we're going to make an impact in this world for Jesus, we need (first and foremost) to pray for God to make an impact on us. Ask yourself (and be honest): "Lord, what needs to change in my life? What needs to happen (in me) for me to live each day with the heart of Christ?"

Those are the questions we need to ask, if it's going to happen. Those are the things that need to change (in us), if change is ever going to happen through us.

Let's keep moving: two conversions, two churches. Did you notice the two churches mentioned in these chapters? The one was already there in Jerusalem. The other was soon to be there in the city of Antioch.

It's interesting how different those two churches were and how they're each described. The one in Jerusalem was what we might call a "mono-ethnic" church. It was a church made up people who were all Jews. They all had the same background, the same ethnicity.

It reminds me of how the Lutheran church started in this country. People from Germany, some of the Scandinavian countries, other parts of Europe; when they first came to America, that's what it was. There were German Lutherans, Swedish Lutherans. My father's first call was to a Norwegian Lutheran Church. That's where he met my mom. I wouldn't be here were it not for the Norwegian Lutherans. I'm glad there was a Norwegian-Lutheran church.

But that's not the vision. The one (in Jerusalem) was mono-ethnic, made up entirely of people who were Jews. The other (in Antioch) in the process of forming was made up of Jews and Gentiles alike. It wasn't mono-ethnic. It was multi-ethnic. It wasn't just Jews, but it was beginning to represent the vision God had for the world.

In fact, do you know what happened in Antioch? Do you know who started that church? Do you know what it ended up doing? In Jerusalem, it was Peter and John and the some of the (other disciples) who started it. That's where it all began.

In Antioch, do you know who started it? I couldn't tell you who started it. (The Bible doesn't say.) All it says is, in chapter eleven, verse 19, there were believers "scattered by the persecution"; in verse 20, (it says) "some of them, from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to tell the good news about Jesus." (It says) "Some of them began to tell the story of Christ."

That's who started it: some of them. Some guys with the gospel; some guys who had just learned about Jesus; no seminary training, no church-planting experience, they knew nothing about making disciples. They just heard the gospel, believed it, shared what they knew with others, and the church in Antioch started.

Do you know what those guys started? Do you know what the church in Antioch would become? Just as Jerusalem had become the center of mission to the Jews, the church in Antioch would become the center of mission to the rest of the world.

We're going to see that in the chapters ahead as we move through this series. The church in Antioch becomes one of the greatest missionary-sending churches in all of history. And it was all started by some guys who believed the gospel, and who, (because they believed the gospel), couldn't keep it to themselves.

Now, we could spend the rest of our time (here today) on what we just said. (This section is filled with lessons.) An openness to change? A willingness to be stretched? A desire (more than anything) to let the heart of Christ lead us into places (and with people) who still don't know what God has done? We could spend all day. We're not going to do that. We'll draw a few conclusions at the end.

Suffice it to say that what happened in Antioch is what God wants to happen in San Jose. A few guys who knew Jesus. A few gals who had come to faith. All they did was share what they knew with those they knew. All they did was to allow their own hearts to be shaped and molded by the heart of Christ.

Two conversions. Two churches. Two disciples. The beginning of chapter twelve, the story takes quite a turn. (It says), "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also."

Now, we didn't read that part of the story, and we're not. Peter ends up in prison; he ends up getting out. By the end of the chapter it's all over. He moves on. But it's so different with these two.

Did you hear it? It happens so quickly; it almost goes unnoticed: James, one of the three in Jesus' (inner circle), Peter, James, and John; one of the leaders in the church. In a matter of two verses, he's gone. No explanation, no commentary, no tribute, nothing! It just moves on. It's so different.

James is beheaded as a follower of Jesus. Peter is rescued as a follower of Jesus. There's no explanation why one devout follower is dead and the other devout follower is still alive. (We always want to know.) Those are the questions to which we always want an answer. Some things we'll never know.

Don't get too caught up in trying to figure out where God is working and why, (in some cases), it appears as if he's not. He's always working. He's always moving the kingdom ahead. Not always how we think it should happen. Not always in ways we can understand. (That will always be the case in world tainted by sin.) But God is working, and it is moving forward, and that's where we put our trust.

Two conversions, two churches, two disciples, and two gods. At the end of chapter twelve it says, "Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. On the appointed day (it says), he sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately (it says) because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." (Don't you love the detail?) "But the word of God (it says) continued to increase and spread."

Here's the deal. It's not hard to follow. There's only one God in this world and it's not you. There's only one (in this life) who is in charge of life and it's not us. Every breath you take comes as a gift. Every day you live is nothing more (nor less) than a sign of God's goodness and grace.

Herod was a man who wanted the applause of others. He loved the praise; so much so that when he saw that it "pleased the people" that he had beheaded James, he imprisoned Peter. He wanted more. He thought it was up to him. It wasn't up to him. (It never is.) It's always up to God...for Herod and for us.

Don't miss the point. God refuses to share praise that belongs to him. Mark it down. God will not share his glory with another. He may (for whatever reason) allow it to happen for a time; but with time, it will stop. He will bring them down. It will not continue.

Now, I'm not suggesting anything in saying this. I'll let you be the judge. We each need to take a hard look; but if there's anything there at all, even a small place in your life that needs a pride-reducing conversion, today's text is a good reminder of how important it can be. For Herod, it was the final word on his life. He loved the praise of men instead of the applause of God. Don't ever let it be said of us.

Two conversions, two churches, two disciples, two gods, and (now) two conclusions, and I'll make it brief. Number one: we are not here (as the church) only for us. We are here (as the church) for the world for which Jesus died. Whatever we do, it must always have at least one of its two eyes on the world.

Jesus loved the world. He died for the world. He gave his life so that we (and they) could live. We need to keep pushing it. We need to keep praying it. We need to keep asking ourselves if our hearts are truly aligned with the heart of Christ.

If they are, it'll happen; if they're not, then (perhaps we need) a conversion; because we simply cannot settle for being a Jerusalem, when God has created us to be an Antioch.

And number two: God's kingdom will grow to the glory of Christ. God's kingdom will grow to the glory of Christ. We're going to see that happening in these next few weeks as we continue our study in the book of Acts. Beginning in Jerusalem, and then out into Judea and Samaria, by the end of the book, the gospel will have made its way all the way to Rome. It keeps on going.

But this isn't (as we've been saying all along) just a story about what happened back then. It's a story (also) of what God is doing today. God's kingdom is growing to the glory of Christ. God's kingdom will grow, until the day Jesus returns.

Until that day comes, let's stay focused. Gathering as a community, scattering throughout the week, each of our stories will be different, some things we'll never figure out. (We'll always wonder.) But our allegiance will remain with Christ. Our applause will always be only for God. This is his world. This is his church. In Christ, we all belong to him.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you today for the calling we have in Jesus and for bringing us together in this body we call the church. We ask for your Holy Spirit to work in us to bring about whatever conversion needs to happen. Bring our hearts into alignment with the heart of Jesus. Open our eyes to the opportunities we have each day to share our faith. Help us to see the world as you see the world. Loved by you, saved and made right in Christ, brothers and sisters that we are, working always for your praise and glory, enable us to trust; all for the sake of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.