

God's 'prayer-meeting' with Peter

- Acts 10:1-23
- You ever had a prayer meeting with God? I'm not talking about the kind that YOU initiated. I hope you have those every day. No, I'm talking about the prayer meeting that God initiates. It's a southern colloquialism, kind of similar to, being taken to the woodshed. I heard a friend of mine say the other day that he had to have a little prayer meeting with one of his employees. He could just as easily have said, "I had to take one of my employees to the woodshed." Same meaning. That's what we see happening here with Peter. Peter goes up on the rooftop to pray at noon one day and ended up having a little prayer meeting with God. The man who came down from the rooftop that day was a very different man. And as a result, the church was a very different church from that point on. God's little prayer meetings can seem insignificant at first glance, but they are often direction changers, not just for a person. It was July 2, 1505 when lightning almost hit Martin Luther and he decided right then to become a monk. He was a bad Catholic, it turned out, because that first little prayer meeting with God in a lightning storm led to many others, which led to the Reformation. The effects of God's prayer-meetings with Luther are still being felt today.
- Luke must have thought this event in Peter's life was important. He writes about it in his own words in chapter 10. Then he lets Peter tell the story in chapter 11. Then the incident is part of Peter's testimony before the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. It's of huge importance to Luke in his story of the early church and the progress of the Gospel because it represents a turning point. Away from the Jews, or exclusively-Jewish, and towards the Gentiles. I don't think any of us can fully understand the enormous gulf that existed between Jews and Gentiles. We know a little about racism and so we can borrow from that and get a feel for what's going on here. But it's not big enough. This was religious bigotry, and it certainly wasn't justified by the Old Testament. John Stott writes, "The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as 'dogs', and developed traditions which kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile, even a God-fearer, or invite such into his home." So that's why some say that this story is as much about Peter's conversion (from a racist) as it is about Cornelius' conversion (from a sinner). Let's look at the story itself, and then I want to make four observations.
- Who? Cornelius. 1- A leader of men. Century=100 men; centurion, like a Captain. Cohort=6 centuries, or 600 men. Legion=10 cohorts, or 6000 men. 2- A God-fearer. Most likely meant that he did everything the Jews did except submit to circumcision and make sacrifices. He went to the synagogue, worshiped, kept the dietary laws, gave alms, prayed. Giving and praying are singled out here by Luke. Hey, God-fearing people give and pray. 3- A faithful family man. What was important to Cornelius, he shared with his household. Even the men under his command, most likely. (vs 7, a devout soldier). 4- A reputable man. Verse 22, he was well-spoken of by the entire Jewish nation!
- What? A vision. It was 3pm and an angel appeared in a vision to Cornelius. God has heard your prayers and seen your giving. Send someone to Joppa, to bring Peter here.
- Who? Peter. You know who he is. But Peter is about to find out something about himself that he didn't know. And about GOD that he didn't know!
- What? A vision. Sometime around 12:00 noon, the day after Cornelius has seen a vision. Peter is praying (good thing to do at noon; or 3pm; or any time!). In the vision, Peter sees something: a sheet let down from heaven (this is ordained by God) and in it are all kinds of wildlife. Some that would make Peter hungrier than he already is; others that would make his stomach turn because they are unclean. Then GOD (not an angel) says, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." Now, let's pause a moment. Whenever God speaks from heaven, there's something very important going on. He spoke when Jesus was coming out of the water, having been baptized into His public ministry.

And He spoke when Jesus appeared on the Mt. of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, not long before Jesus would go to the cross and fulfill what was written in the Law and the Prophets! Now God is speaking from heaven again. "Rise Peter, kill and eat." Three times. And Peter was horrified! Even to the point that he would say, "No way!" That's a paraphrase. Peter says, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." Peter says, "Lord, I cannot obey You. Because, Lord, I have always obeyed You!" There are two other times when Peter told Jesus no. Matthew 16:21-22, "No, Lord, you will NOT go to the cross." And John 13:8, "No, Lord, you will NOT wash my feet!" About this time, the sheet is removed back into heaven. Peter is "inwardly perplexed," and there's a knock at the door down below.

- Who? Three men from Cornelius' command. What? They tell Peter the story of the angel's visitation. And wonder of wonders, Peter invites them in to eat a meal AND to spend the night. Three Gentiles. He got it. He learned what the Lord meant when He used a visual aid. It had nothing to do with food, although we know the dietary laws of the OT are NOT requirements for us. It had to do with men whom God created. More about that next week.
- Four lessons we can take away from this pivotal story in the life of Christ's church.
- #1 - You can be greatly used by God when you're not perfect, or even mature! When the church was born on the day of Pentecost, Peter was the first to preach the Gospel to the Jews. Then Peter, along with John, was the first to preach the Gospel to the Samaritans. Now Peter is going to be the first to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles! But until that day, up on the rooftop, Peter was still a racist. The good news is that God can use us in spite of our shortcomings, however huge they may be. Every single person God has ever used to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ was a sinner. Here's the even better news. God loves us exactly the way we are and there's nothing we can do to make God love us any more or love us any less. BUT God loves us enough not to leave us where we are. He will invite us into His little prayer-meetings.
- #2 - Much of our walk with Christ, especially as a new Christian, is un-learning. Peter had learned very well, his whole life, that some foods were unclean. But listen to what God says: "What God has made clean, do not call common." Truth is, pork WAS unclean. But God has made it clean. Truth is, the Gentiles WERE unclean. But God has made us clean through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Truth is, EVERY person is unclean. Jews, Gentiles, slave, free, male female. But what God has made clean, we are not to call common. So much of what we learned as children has to be unlearned when we come to Christ.
- #3 - God opens our eyes through His Word. He spoke His Word to Peter in this story. And He HAS spoken His Word to us. It's all right here. Are you bound up in sin? Don't wait around for a vision or a visitation. It's already been given! Read the Word.
- #4 - God leads His people on HIS timetable. Not ours. So, we can be patient with one another who have not had the same revelation from the Word. Or who is not at the same maturity level. Or is simply not walking in the truth. Doesn't mean we ignore their sin. But we can be patient with them. A word the Lord opened up to me early on this year is from Romans 2: "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life." The phrase that leapt off the page to me was this: "patience in well-doing."