

There are hinge points in the NT just like there are hinge points in life.

Slide – 01*

And the problem with hinge points, is you don't know what comes next.

That's what we will see in this story.

Like Peter stepping out of the boat.

Or maybe, like Paul getting INTO the boat with a bunch of Roman guards.

Sometimes when we obey God, we are launched into an adventure –

And we discover – it is GOD's kingdom: we are NOT in control.

And in that adventure – in that place where nothing is the same-

Is an opportunity to trust more deeply in God.

And that's what we'll see today.

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We are in our fifth week in the book of Acts. Last week we met Saul – who in chapter 9 becomes Paul.

In chapter ten and eleven we are looking over Peters shoulder again.

This is the same Peter that denied he knew Jesus in the court with the Roman soldiers.

And it's the same Peter who we saw in the upper room behind locked doors in chapter 1 of Acts.

Hiding away for fear of the Jews.

But – it's also the same Peter who addressed the crowd in Acts 2, fearless in the Holy Spirit.

And the same one who stood before the ruling religious leaders in chapter 4.

Those leaders were stunned that this ordinary fisherman was boldly speaking of Jesus.

And they were also stunned that a man was healed at the Beautiful Gate –

a man who had been lame from birth
was suddenly walking and leaping and giving praise to God. /

Strange things are happening. And stranger things are coming. /

By now the disciples are feeling pretty secure.

They are seeing people come to Christ.
They are seeing people healed -- and delivered.

They are seeing JOY and LIFE – it's an *incredible* time.

But it also seems -- they have forgotten something.

In Acts 2 we see the Spirit coming / and the Gospel is heard in many languages.

Because the Gospel is good news for EVERYONE.. not just for Jews.

And this is a tough one for the Jewish disciples.

They have started to think / you have to be good enough for God.. and WE are good enough.

And that way of thinking is a dishonour to the Cross – because only God makes us clean.

The Cross is the great levelling place. We all stand equally in need of mercy.

Only by the sacrifice of a perfect lamb are we made clean.

It's nothing we have done – in fact, the Gospel is only good news for sinners.

If you aren't a sinner you should leave now – you don't need Jesus. /

So the Gospel is for all who are broken and need healing.

And we see again and again in the NT - it's the religious ones - who don't get it.

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Back to Acts 2 – let's remember what Pentecost is all about.

Pentecost is the renewal of the Temple –

WE are the new and living Temple, the place where God's Spirit lives. /

Pentecost is the renewal of the covenant –

Now God's law is written on our hearts.

The quote in Acts 2 is from the prophet Joel –

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit -- on a few people.

No, that's not it –

I will pour out my Spirit – on the good people, the ones who get it right.

No, that's not it either -

I will pour out My Spirit on ALL PEOPLE.

EVEN ON MY SERVANTS, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN,
I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT IN THOSE DAYS..

V21 “EVERYONE – who calls - on the name of the Lord - will be saved.”

Because Jesus fulfills the promise made to Abraham

“through you ALL THE NATIONS - of the earth will be blessed.” /

And now that promise comes to us, who are IN CHRIST..

Which literally means, *In the anointed one..*

Through this good news, and through us – through you and through me -

ALL - the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Why? / Because Jesus is risen! Hallelujah!

So on to our story.. Acts 10.

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The setting for this encounter is Caesarea. **** Slide 03 ****

Caesarea – a city hated by the Jews –

was situated near the northern end of the land of Israel,

On the coast north of Joppa, 80 miles northwest of [Jerusalem](#).

This is a lush area – Roman soldiers were known for complaining about the hot,

Dusty, desert conditions of Israel.

But Caesarea is a beautiful location.

It was known for its Roman baths and the big amphitheatre, built by Herod about 10 BC.

**** Slide 04 **** And this - is WHY it was hated.

Caesarea - was the seat of Roman government, home of Pontius Pilate,

and the Roman legions were also headquartered there.

So Caesarea is a symbol of the oppression – and occupation - of Israel.

Religious – and political – oppression. All the taxes go to Rome.

So here we meet Cornelius – a soldier and an officer –

a Centurion. So he would command a hundred men.

But actually, many Centurions became staff officers /

and would then command an entire cohort.

Typically, a Centurion would NOT have his family with him in his posting,

But we see in this story that his family is here also.

So it's safe to assume that Cornelius was a staff officer,

with more responsibility than an ordinary officer.

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This is the first story in Acts of a non-Jew coming to Christ.

And the story starts with a direct revelation.

An angel appears to Cornelius in a vision.

The instructions are very specific – to send for Peter in Joppa, about 30 miles south.

So Cornelius chooses some servants and a soldier,
and sends them to Joppa to Simon the Tanners house.

The next thing that happens is with Peter in Joppa.

Peter is praying at mid-day –

And he is on the roof, probably because it's more private.

He gets hungry and asks for a meal, and while he is waiting - he has a vision.

He sees heaven open, and a sheet is lowered by four corners. **** Slide 05****

In the sheet are four-footed animals, as well as birds and reptiles.

Some of these things are forbidden in Deuteronomy,

and eating them would make Peter ritually unclean.

So there are *two kinds* of animals in the vision – a mixture of things.

One kind is ok to eat; the other kind is not.

Holy -- and unholy things -- are all mixed together.

But Peter hears a voice and a direct command: "Kill, and eat."

Naturally, he responds that he would NEVER do such a thing.

But three times the sheet is lowered, and the voice speaks to him directly again:

"Do not call anything impure / that God has made clean."

It's probably not really possible to know what this would be like.

But it's clear this would be disturbing and strange to any Jew.

Holiness -- *separation to God* -- that's the way the Jews have lived for 2 thousand years.

What made them different was not just a genealogy.

It wasn't JUST that they were Jewish.

They were different -- separated. And that separation is measured in very careful ways.

There are a long list of things that must be done.

And a long list of things to avoid. A lot of things around food and foreigners.

And this vision -- *shatters* -- that list. /

And even as Jesus followers, we learn to live by our lists.

We stop listening for God's voice.

We stop living by relationship and by the Spirit, and live in the law.

We think we are Holy - because we *avoid* certain things or certain people.

But Holiness is first - something in the heart.

Jesus says, *"Not what goes into a man makes him unclean,*

But what comes out of him defiles him."

And somehow for the Jews the Gospel became so small and narrow.

It was really only big enough for a certain kind of people.

And God wants to break through that. **** Slide -05B****

*? What is it in you that limits what God wants to do?
?Are you listening for God's voice – or living by a set of rules?*

So the next thing we see - Peter hears the Spirit speaking to him,

"Three men are at your door looking for you."

And Peter goes down the stairs and.. These are gentiles!

These are the wrong kind of people!

These are not Holy people as far as Peter is concerned,

And a good Jew doesn't associate with them.

When God really gets hold of us he challenges us to get outside our comfort zone.

And it means I can't protect myself.

It means I have to be open to people who make me uncomfortable.

It means I can't live within the walls / that make my world so safe and predictable.

It's uncomfortable.

It can feel like - holy and unholy things - are all mixed together.

And this is just confusing – why?

Why is this confusing for us? /

First, because we have come to think that it's about being safe -

– when for God it's about love and mercy.

We thought it was about having the right fences –

Have the right kind of friends --

Knowing who is in - and who is out.

And we have spent A LOT of energy - on building our walls.

Now we have to just say goodbye to all that? //

Let's face it – this is absolutely huge.

For some of us it is literally terrifying.

If we think of God as an exacting judge who is watching our every move,

Then every small change generates fear.

It's all about getting it right when we live in fear.

And I know Christian **leaders** - who live with this kind of fear.

Some of them have been believers for thirty years.

Good men - yet, somehow they have not grown beyond this.

And we become so hard on ourselves.

And so judgmental when others don't get it right.

But that is the wrong view of God.

He is a loving Father, not a judge with a big stick.

Look into the face of Jesus to find God.

But for the Jews, with centuries of living by the Law,

This is SO difficult.

And when we are so used to judging those around us,

Because the law has been our standard,

To suddenly let go of all these external measures – it's tough.

We need great grace.

And isn't that the Name of Jesus? Grace, mercy, love.

The Prince of Peace.

There is hope for us, just as there was hope for Peter. /

Second, it's confusing because we have made God- in OUR image.

– and suddenly God isn't who we thought he was.

We shrunk him down into a tribal God – an ethnic God – and he is Lord of the universe.

He isn't the God of Mennonites only –

But also of Anglicans and Baptists and Orthodox.

And not only the God of those who get it right.

But he is **especially** -- the God of the hurting and the broken, the lost and the least.

The God who leaves the 99 – to seek the ONE sheep who has wandered away.

That's our God. ****Slide 06****

As Isaiah writes,

The poor and needy search for water,
but there is none;
their tongues are parched with thirst.
But I -- the LORD -- will answer them.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out (42:1-3)

And when God surprises us – we're uncomfortable.

We trusted in our own ability to figure things out – and we got it wrong.

Or maybe the radio preacher told us one thing,
and now God is telling us something else. /

There is a lot of bad teaching out there.

And many Christians live with a strange kind of separation.

The world is a bad and dangerous place.

And it's partly true.

The world IS dangerous, and there is a lot of darkness.

But God - is breaking into our world!

Behold – the Light has come!

God is tearing down dividing walls!

He sends us out with good news! -- with hope!

And the Spirit - goes before us. //

So here is Peter - the good and Holy Jew –

A Holy Apostle – and even he- hasn't got it all figured out!

And God has revealed himself -- to a Roman soldier! //

Think about this a minute – its mind blowing.

The Holy Apostle is in Joppa - struggling to understand what God is doing..

The pagan soldier is in Caesarea - *and God is speaking to him.*

Do you feel like the ground is being pulled from your feet?

God is talking - to a staff officer in the most violent army that ever marched!

God is talking - to an Officer in the army that is oppressing God's people!

It's all wrong!

God - has made a terrible mistake! //

So we are left with this awful choice.

Either our ideas of God and of Holiness are all wrong – or God is wrong.

We have to become like children again, simply trusting and following Jesus.

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This is the kind of God we serve – he stretches out his hands all day,

He is long suffering - Inviting the lost to come home.

And he *loves it* - when he finds humility and an open heart –
even among unbelievers. /

Maybe we forget this.

We don't control God or possess Him.

We don't decide the limits of the Gospel.

And the larger our vision, the larger God seems to get. **** Slide 07****

In the Narnia stories, in Prince Caspian, Lucy meets Aslan in the forest.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you're bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” he answered.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

In the book of Job, God defends his freedom to be God.

4“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

6 On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
7 while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?

Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom
and spread its wings toward the south?
27 Does the eagle soar at your command
and build its nest on high?

Sometimes we hold so tightly to our faith, or to the Bible,

And we aren’t holding to Jesus at all.

We forget where the Bible points us -- to God.

The Bible is a burning light, a light to the path to God.

Scripture points us to a *relationship* - with a living God.

The point of Scripture -- is to know God and follow Him

Not to have a lot of information ABOUT God. / The point is to KNOW GOD. //

And sometimes we use church or Scripture to stay safe from God.

How sad! Fear always results in religion.

Real faith is all about a living relationship.

And we know following Jesus is not safe. It’s not about safety.

It’s about love and salvation and deliverance.

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God loves to break out of our boxes.

But if we are honest - we like boxes.

We like to keep the Gospel small enough so we can manage it.

Small enough, so that it isn’t too scary.

When I became a Christian I thought the good news was just about personal salvation.

Then I discovered something – so I'll share it with you.

I'm slow sometimes and it took me a while to figure this out. / Here it is.

Jesus - is Lord!

Incredible – right? And that's good news!

And he has a kingdom – and he is coming back to rule!

And here in this story in Acts 10-11, in the Roman empire,

This Roman soldier – who had to swear loyalty to the Emperor.

And who had to worship Caesar as a God –

This pagan soldier - is discovering that God is a king -- and he has a kingdom.

And that kingdom - will stretch across the whole earth!

Because God - is taking us back to the garden.

He is restoring **all things**, until **all the world** reflects his glory.

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**** Slide 08****

And so what will Peter do?

Living for years within the requirements of the Law.

This is not easy for him.

He probably feels like he is risking his salvation.

But Peter does the right thing – he invites them into the house.

This is just wrong by all Jewish standards.

But God is expanding Peter's heart – the Gospel - is much bigger than he thought it was.

So the next day Peter and the group set out for Caesarea ,

And meanwhile a larger group has gathered at Cornelius house.

Peter explains why he has come, because everyone knows this is NOT a normal thing.

Then Cornelius tells his story.

And it's obvious that this is a god-fearing man.

He is a good soldier - who is following the commands of the Lord.

So Peter tells the story of Jesus – and before he is finished speaking,
the Holy Spirit comes on those who are listening.

And it's a good thing that Peter brought along witnesses from Joppa.

Suddenly -- Gentiles are speaking with new tongues and praising God.

Un-Holy things are becoming holy.

And Peter gets it right this time.

“Surely - no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water.”

They have already received the Spirit. They are now “in Christ”.

And news travels fast.

*11 verse 1 – “the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles
had received the word of the Lord.”*

So Peter has been brought beyond his own prejudice.

God is making the unclean, Holy.

God takes the darkest - and most lost soul - and shines His light.

It happened because Peter RISKED his reputation.

And because a humble Roman soldier - obeyed the word of the Lord.

And now Peter has to defend all this - to the council in Jerusalem.

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So the question –

*?Are you so committed to God's purposes
That you would be willing to put aside your own views?*

It might cost you your reputation. /

You might take criticism from the church. /

But we've never done it that way before!

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Peter does a good job. He explains what happened step by step.

And in verse 15 he hits the main point.

*“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them-
as he had come on us at the beginning.”*

Peter is saying, “Remember Pentecost?”

Remember the words from Joel.

This was God’s intention all along – to bring in a harvest from EVERY NATION.

And suddenly - a new chapter is opening.

God has broken out of the box - of religion.

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How big is your box?

If God fits in your box, your box is too small.

This story happens about fifteen years after the resurrection.

All this time, the Jewish Christians still thought the Gospel was for Jews alone.

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We are so sure we know what church should look like.

It should look the same today as yesterday, right?

Yeah – we know this stuff. We’ve been around.

We are so sure we understand the Gospel.

What if we still have God in a box – but it’s OUR box?

It’s familiar and safe.

We have learned to play safe - in most of our churches.

We choose the middle road - and the easy road.

And the result we get - our faith is dying in North America. **** Slide 10****

Each year 20,000 pastors are leaving the ministry and will never come back.

Each year about 2000 churches close their doors.

Eight out of ten of our youth will leave church between 18 and 22 and never come back.

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If we keep doing church today like we did it yesterday, these numbers won't change either.

What worked yesterday seems good enough for us.

It's not good enough for our children.

We need to give permission to our kids to live their faith in THEIR way.

We need to become champions of change.

This is one of the reasons for our multi-congregational structure.

We aren't building for OUR future – we'll be gone.

We are building for our children's future.

What do we need to give them to ensure they succeed?

Can we encourage them to take more risks?

Can we model listening to God - and following Him no matter what others think?

Even their peers?

Even the pastor?

Can we really trust the Holy Spirit?

What choice do we have?

This is not my church. / It's not your church. / *It's God's church.*

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What is it in me –

What is it in you – That limits what God wants to do?

Where do you need to repent and see it God's way?

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you – He is our Teacher.

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers,
half-truths and superficial relationships,
so that you may seek truth boldly
and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression,
and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice,
freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain,
rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out
your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a
difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others
claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God the Supreme Majesty and our Creator,
Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word who is our brother and Saviour,
and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide,
be with you and remain with you, this day and forevermore.