

GOD SHOWS NO FAVOURITISM

Acts 9:32-11:18

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Tell me what you see in this picture. Some people see a duck, others a rabbit. What you see all depends on how you perceive things, where you stand on an issue. The way we perceive things depends on our beliefs about what is true. We call that a 'worldview' or 'paradigm'. Have you ever heard of the term 'paradigm shift'? It is when our thinking about something is turned on its head and we look at it from a whole new way. You will remember that in the Middle Ages people thought the earth was flat and that the sun went around the earth. That made sense given experience tells us the ground is basically flat and we see the sun move through the sky. But then Galileo discovered that the earth was round. It's the earth that goes around the sun. In Galileo's day that concept was unacceptable. Even the church gave him a hard time for espousing heresy. The shift in thinking was momentous. Everything had to be rethought from the new perspective.

Here in Acts 10 we have a huge paradigm shift. It was as momentous as in Galileo's day. We know that something very significant is described in Acts 10. That's because so much of the detail of the narrative is repeated in Acts 11. Luke probably wrote the whole of the book of Acts on an eleven-metre-long roll of papyrus. That limited what he could include. So, if he wrote at length on an issue and then repeated all the details, you know he is saying 'Take note of something dramatic here!' The story hinges on the Jew-Gentile divide. Jews had nothing to do with Gentiles. They were regarded as 'dogs' and 'fuel for the fires of hell'. Gentiles were not to be associated with. You didn't go into their homes. If you had to buy things from a Gentile merchant, you washed it carefully first. Jews saw themselves as God's chosen people. The Gentiles were to be despised. That's the background here.

In Acts 9 Saul was shipped off to Tarsus to get him out of the way for a while. With peace in the country, Peter travelled around freely. He healed people and even raised the woman Tabitha from the dead. But as wonderful as all that was, the greatest challenge was about to face him. Could Peter cross the divide between Jews and Gentiles? Luke gives us a hint there was a mental shift developing. He tells us (Acts 9:43) "...Peter stayed in Joppa... with a tanner named Simon." A tanner dealt with the skins of dead animals. The significance is that Jews were not to be associated with dead

things, or those that touched them. So, God had been at work in Peter, loosening him up. After all he had been preaching to the Samaritans as well. Then we see God personally intervenes setting the stage for the huge shift in thinking.

(Acts 10:1-8) He starts off by directly contacting a Gentile through a vision, *"...a man named Cornelius, a centurion."* The choosing is not random. He was a man hungering for a relationship with God. An 'angel of God' tells him to *"...send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter."* Cornelius was a Gentile, an uncircumcised person. Tired of paganism, he turned to the God of the Jewish people. He read the scriptures and attended the synagogue. He had to sit up the back, though, because Jews didn't fellowship with Gentiles. Cornelius feared God, but he was not a proselyte. That would have meant being converted to Jewish ways and, above all, being circumcised. The early Christians, like Peter, being Jewish, thought a Gentile could become a Christian by becoming a Jew first. That meant being circumcised first, and then accepting Jesus. After all that's the way it happened for them. I think we can understand that. What we have been through we assume others should too. It's all we know. We all operate out of our own understandings.

But God was about to adjust Peter's beliefs. He took the initiative by giving him a vision as well (Acts 10:9-23). *"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 and birds. 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, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven."* What is this all about? Peter was still very Jewish and unable to comprehend that God would want to relate directly with Gentiles. At the time of Acts 10 the church had existed for as much as 10 years. And during that time the church consisted only of Jewish believers. So, all the men were circumcised. They no longer offered sacrifices, because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. But they still avoided things like eating the unclean foods listed in Deuteronomy 14. The key issue of Peter's vision was God saying, *"Do not call anything impure what God has made clean."* In other words, in Jesus, the time had come to do away with the things that separate. It was time to interact with Gentiles. It was OK to go into their homes, eat their non-Kosher food and praise the Lord together. It was time to consider all people clean. No one was to be despised or considered inferior. We see that the lesson was not easy for Peter to accept. The vision had to be repeated three times. It shows how hard it was to put aside thousands of years of his peoples' history and religion. Paradigms don't shift easily. Peter was still trying to work out the meaning of the vision when God showed him its point. The Spirit told him about the men from

Cornelius and that he was to go with them, *"...for I have sent them."* God himself had sent those Gentiles to Peter. God himself had destroyed the dividing wall of hostility through the work of Jesus.

As Peter went to Caesarea, he took some Jewish Christians from Joppa. They would be needed as witnesses to what was going to occur. Peter entered Cornelius' home without hesitation. But he still felt the need to say: (28) *"You are well aware that it is against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."* Here was the big issue on which the paradigm shift occurred. This was a huge moment for Peter. He still felt the need to point out the Jew-Gentile divide. But since God gave Peter the vision, he did what he was told. Notice how keen Cornelius was. He fell in reverence at Peter's feet, so hungry was he for the gospel. And notice also what he did. He had invited all his family and friends. Isn't that wonderful? He knew God was bringing someone to teach him. He wanted to share it with all those he loved. It reminds of a time in Sydney when a new migrant attended our church. I was invited to dinner and found she had invited all those in the boarding house as well. She said 'I have invited my friends so you can tell them about Jesus'.

The first thing Peter said was a stunning admission. Here is the heart of the issue of this part of Acts. *"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears and does what is right."* This is a huge moment. Listen to Peter as the paradigm shifts, the penny drops, and everything is seen differently. For so long the Jews thought they were special. And they were, as the bearer of the Christ. But always their special place was so that they would be *"...a light to the nations."* The shift in understanding here is huge, of earthquake proportions. The church would struggle for some time yet to come to terms with all the ramifications.

(Acts 10: 34-43) When Peter spoke to them, he did what he always did. He preached about Jesus. He told them about what he and the disciples had witnessed, about what Jesus did and said. He spoke especially about Jesus' death and resurrection. And the fact that there were so many witnesses who saw Jesus alive again. Peter climaxed his sermon by saying that whoever believes in him receives forgiveness of sins. That is the fundamental point, isn't it? That is why Jesus came, died and rose again. To bring reconciliation, to bring us back to God. The response was 'astonishing'. (Acts 10:44-46). *"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 Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God."* See the initiative of God here. He is personally involved to

make the point crystal clear. God took the initiative in putting aside the prejudice of the Jewish Christians. *"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard..."* Before Peter can finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit came on the people and they spoke in tongues. It was Pentecost all over! But with one huge difference. These people were not Jews. All those at Pentecost were Jews. Yes from "every nation" but still all Jews. Now Gentiles had received the Spirit and spoken in tongues. Look again at what Luke writes *"The circumcised believers (who had come with Peter) were astonished that the gift had been poured out even on the Gentiles"*. See the language "they were astonished!!" In other words, this was unbelievable stuff. This was totally unexpected. Why does Luke mention "the circumcised believers"? Because the thought amongst these Jewish Christians, Peter's witnesses, would have been like this. After Peter preached, the people would have expressed interest in Jesus. Then if there was belief, out would come the knives. The men would first have been circumcised to be good Jews. Then later the Spirit should have come upon them. Now the Spirit was poured out as a sovereign act of God. He was letting everyone know that he accepted Gentiles into the faith, as they were. Peter recognised this as the act of God. It was in keeping with the vision he had. So, he said *"Can anyone keep these people from being baptised...?"* In other words, it was obvious these Gentiles had been received by God. So, they as Jewish Christians should as well. Even if it was very different to their thousands of years of thinking. This was God's doing and showed his will. This event was a watershed event in Acts. The paradigm had shifted. In Acts 1:8 that Jesus said to the disciples *"You will receive power when the spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."* Now, again with God's intervention, the last area of this program was now in play.

But a shift in paradigm does not come easily. (Acts 11:1-3) "The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Like with every change in the church, there are those who lead the way, seeing God's call, and others who criticise and want to pull things back: 'We have not done this before. This is not how we do it. This is not how God has worked with us in the past'. Or as they would have said it then: 'What have the circumcised got to do with the uncircumcised?' So, Peter explained what happened and Luke goes into exact detail of all of it, all over again. As I said at the start, this was a huge paradigm shift. It needed to be said again and again: "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could oppose God." Now we can see why God needed to step in and do what he did. We can argue at length amongst ourselves, but not against God. So finally, the penny dropped, and the people understood. (:18) *"When*

they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life".

Thank God for that! Otherwise where would we be? We too are Gentiles. God's deliberate intervention, overturning the ancient 'Jew-Gentile divide' paradigm, shows the extent of his grace. God shows no favouritism. The gospel call is to be extended to all the peoples in all the world. That includes our communities. In our congregation we are a mainly white, middle class, educated community. We may well tend to hang out with our own kind. But wherever the Spirit provides an opportunity to witness for Jesus we should use it. In fact, we should deliberately strive for those opportunities. No matter the person's ethnicity, gender, gender identity, political views, wealthy or homeless, all should be given the opportunity to hear of God's love and respond. God shows no favouritism. Whoever God brings our way should be welcome. There is also something else. We are also going through a major paradigm shift. Christendom is gone, where we assumed our society was Christian and everyone respected the church. We are in a secular culture where we are being forced by God to rethink how we do things. Our traditional church structures assume people come to church. Our focus has been on nurturing those within the church. But now God is giving the churches a huge shake up. We are being made to see that we need to do much more in bringing the gospel about Jesus to our communities. Not from a position of acceptance and power. But with humility and grace. And to do that we need to rethink how we do church. We may say 'But this isn't our way. We haven't done it that way before'. We can be as stubborn as Peter, till the penny drops. We need to listen to God and trust him. We are to follow him to continue the mission of bringing hope. The forgiveness and hope that comes in Jesus.