

Never Say Never

Scripture Lesson: Acts 10: 1 - 33

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 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."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

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, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

The story has only begun, so don't close your Bibles. I'll bring you back to it in due course, but for a few minutes I want to pause and think about the fact that three times the Lord told Peter what to do, and three times Peter said, "No! Never!" But I'm sure that if you could have asked Peter at the end of this incident what he had learned from it, one of the things he would have said is, "I learned never to say never to the Lord."

In 1995 our daughter Amy was diagnosed with a brain tumor. One year later, at age 32, she went to heaven, leaving her husband, Ed, a Presbyterian

minister in a small Mississippi town, with four small children, ages 8, 6, 3, and 2. Amy and Ed had dreamed and prayed about becoming missionaries to Eastern Europe, probably in East Germany, but, of course, her death put that dream on hold.

In the providence of God, the Lord brought Emily into Ed's life. She is the daughter of one of the families in the church where Ed was serving, but by the time he and Amy had arrived there, Emily had moved to Boston, hoping to make her way in the field of book publishing. In an amazing way they met and a friendship began to develop. As that friendship deepened, one day Emily told Ed there was something she needed to tell him about herself. She said there were four things she had promised herself she would never do: she would never again live in Mississippi, she would never marry a man who had been married before, and she would never be a pastor's wife. (I'll tell you the fourth thing in a moment).

I wish I had time to fill in the details of their story, but to get right to the point, a few months later I had the joy of officiating at Ed's marriage to Emily, just as I had at his marriage to Amy ten years earlier. If I had been able to interview every eligible woman in the world in a search for a second wife for Ed and a new mom for the kids, I could not have found anyone as ideal as Emily.

Two years ago Ed and Emily and the kids began to fulfill the dream he had shared with Amy, as they became missionaries in Romania. This is the fourth thing Emily had said she would never do--she would never be a missionary. But there they are, having made a long-term commitment, with Ed heading up a team of nine adults, plus children, for Mission to the Word, the missionary arm of the PCA, and Emily at his side as his co-worker. In just two years they have learned the language, started a Christian school, seen several people commit their lives to Christ, and have begun a Sunday evening Bible study and fellowship time, attended even by the mayor of their town, which they expect will become the nucleus of a new church.

If you were to ask Emily what lessons she has learned from the unexpected way her life has unfolded, one of the things she would tell you is that she learned to never say never to the Lord, because whatever He has in mind for our lives is always better than anything we can plan ourselves.

Jesus had told His followers that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They were faithful in Jerusalem, and through their witness thousands came to faith in Christ in a very short time, and the church grew rapidly there in their home area. But they were in no hurry to move out of their comfort zone. They took no initiative to preach to non-Jews, and developed no strategy to take the Gospel beyond the border. It was as if they were listening to only part of the Master's command, most convenient part, and their response to Samaria and the ends of the earth was *Never*.

So God forced them out of their protected environment by allowing the enemies of the Gospel to turn up the flame of persecution. Their motivation, of course, was to silence the church's witness. But God knew that the heat would only cause the Gospel to expand, which is exactly what we see in chapter 8.

This chapter opens with a reference to Saul (later to become the Apostle Paul) approving of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, which is related in the preceding chapter. The murder of Stephen, Luke tells us, launched a massive persecution (verse 2): *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."* Like seed blown by the wind, the Christians were "scattered," but everywhere it landed, it took root, for as verse 4 says, *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."*

That's how the Gospel began to go into non-Jewish regions, not because the Christians planned a strategy and took the initiative to evangelize Samaria, but because God shoved them out of their nest, and the Gospel was so important to them that they talked about it wherever they went.

In chapter 10, the passage we began to read earlier, God again is at work to overcome reluctance to carry out His plan. This time, surprisingly, it is the reluctance of the apostle Peter himself. Peter's ministry had brought him to the city of Joppa on the Mediterranean coast. Not far away, in the city of Caesarea, lived a Roman soldier and his family, who needed to hear the Gospel. God knew that left to himself, Peter would never have tried to preach the gospel to them, because, as a good Jew, he still drew the line when it came to any sort of interaction with Gentiles. His reluctance would have to be overcome.

So once again, God did something unusual. He sent an angel to Cornelius to tell him that God had taken notice of his prayers and generosity, and to instruct him to send messengers to the coast to find Simon Peter, who was staying in the home of another Simon, a tanner who lived in Joppa. And so, the next day Cornelius dispatched two servants under armed guard to locate Peter.

As the messengers from Cornelius were on their way to Joppa, at the other end God prepared Peter for their arrival. Verse 9: *"About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray."*

The home of Simon the tanner, like most homes in that day, had a flat roof and was arranged around a central courtyard that was open to the sky. Peter could look over the parapet of the roof into the courtyard below, and see in one area Simon's wife preparing lunch and smell the delicious aromas from

her kitchen, and in another the tanning vats, with the hides that were being prepared that day stretched out on drying racks. The warmth of the noonday sun lulled Peter to sleep, and the aromas from the kitchen caused him to dream about food. In his dream he saw all kinds of animals not on his kosher diet, food that he as a good Jew was not permitted to eat. Then he heard the Lord command him three times to eat it, and three times he refused.

We pick up the passage at this point (verse 17):

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

It was at this point that it began to dawn on Peter that though the vision he had seen was about his diet, the lesson it taught was really about people, so that he was prepared for what he was about to be invited to do.

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

And then Cornelius tells his side of the story - the visit of the angel, sending to Joppa for Peter, gathering his family and friends to hear what Peter had to say. Peter then preached the Gospel to those in the house, and they were all converted.

So, says verse 48, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

From this experience of Peter's we can discern at least three reasons why we must never say never to the mandate Christ gave His Church, but must be committed to taking His message to the whole world.

The first reason is:

I. There is no other way of salvation than Jesus Christ

Verse 2 describes Cornelius as *"a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually."* And the angel who appeared to him said, *"Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God."* His spiritual desire and his generosity have been noted by God, but they do not make him acceptable to God. He has caught heaven's attention, but he is not qualified to enter heaven's gate. His praiseworthy traits cannot substitute for faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore he must hear the Gospel and believe. And so, God arranged in this amazing way, for Peter to preach in his home. Some Christians today are embarrassed by the teaching that there is only one way of salvation. The idea that one way is right and all the others wrong strikes many as intolerant, and intolerance is . . . well, it's the one thing people today won't tolerate. Everyone is entitled to their own point of view, they tell us. Let the Muslim worship God in his way; let the Hindu do it in his way; let the Christian do it in his way - but let's recognize that we are all on the same pilgrimage, traveling, albeit by different roads, to the same destination. That's the popular view today.

But it won't do. It would not have been acceptable to the apostles. To them Christianity was a very exclusive religion. Peter made that plain back in Acts 4:12 where he said, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* He said that as he stood before the Jewish rulers and priests, who would have looked much more kindly on him if he had not been so insistent that Christ is the only way.

The apostles could never have approved the pluralistic mindset that is so prevalent today, not and be true to the teaching of their Master. For Jesus Himself had said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me"* (John 14:6). The all-roads-lead-to-God philosophy contradicts the Son of God!

The story of Cornelius reminds us that it takes more than religious devotion, more than generosity, more than the saying of prayers and following a code of ethics and carrying out the ritual requirements of a religion, to get a person into heaven. It takes a divine act of salvation! That's what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. All others tell people what they can

do to earn acceptance by God. Only Christianity tells of a God who has acted to deliver His people from the judgment they deserve for their sin, and that He has done so apart from anything they could do to save themselves.

There is no other hope, no other way of salvation. And that being the case, we cannot be indifferent to the plight of those who do not have a saving knowledge of Christ. We must overcome our reluctance and do whatever we can do to see that as many people as possible have opportunity to hear the Gospel.

No other way of salvation. And second,

II. There is no other plan for spreading the Gospel than the plan of Christ

Just think about what has happened here. God sent an angel to tell Cornelius to send for Peter and to tell him where he can be found. At the same time, He gave Peter a strange vision, and spoke to him three times to make His point emphatic. He communicated by angelic messenger, vision, and personal communication.

But when it came to getting the Gospel to Cornelius, He used none of those methods. He did not reveal it to him in a dream; He did not speak from heaven; He did not send angels to announce it. He sent a person!

That's still His method. He still sends people, people with fears and apprehensions and limitations and weaknesses, people like Peter. People like you and me.

You may have heard about the angels who gathered around the Lord when He returned to heaven following His ministry on earth, eager for a firsthand report of His experiences. He told them that He had died for the sins of the world, and had been raised from the dead and then returned to heaven, and that He had left behind a tiny handful of men to whom He had given the responsibility of telling the world what He had done. There was a moment of silence. Then one of the angels timidly asked, *"But what if they don't do it? What if they fail?"* To which Jesus replied, *"I have no other plan."*

No other way of salvation -
No other plan for telling the world -
And third -

III. There is no higher authority than Christ

An athlete can be kicked off the team for not following training rules. Someone in military service can be court-martialed for ignoring orders. We recognize the importance of obeying authority in these areas. Why is it, then, that we can be indifferent to the command of the One who possesses all

authority in heaven and on earth, and who has told us to go and make disciples?

A young woman went to hear a Bible teacher who was speaking at a conference. At the end of the meeting she went to him to seek his counsel. She explained that she felt God was calling her to become a missionary, but she didn't want to leave the place where she had lived for years, where she was comfortable, and move to a new place. She had some plans and desires of her own, and she didn't want to give them up. She didn't know what to do and she asked his advice.

By this time other people had lined up to talk with the speaker, so he told the woman to open her Bible to Acts 10. He summarized quickly what was happening in the passage, and then pointed to verse 14 where Peter replies to the Lord's command, "*Surely not!*" even while addressing Him in the same sentence as "*Lord.*" He explained that the words "*surely not*" and "*Lord*" are mutually contradictory. To acknowledge that Jesus is *Lord* is to acknowledge His right to direct every detail of our lives; to say *No* to Him is a denial of all that the term *Lord* signifies. He told her to pray over this story while he spoke to the others who were waiting, and to take a pencil and mark through either the words "*surely not*" or the title "*Lord,*" for the two cannot stand together. Either disobedience will cancel out any honest recognition of His Lordship, or else acknowledgment of His right to rule our lives will cancel out our reluctance to do His will. He promised to return when he had spoken to the others who were waiting, and then left her alone with her Bible, and the Lord.

When he returned he saw tears running down the woman's cheeks, and on the page of her Bible, a line through the words "*surely not.*" He heard her quietly whispering over and over, "*You **are** Lord, You **are** Lord.*" She had understood that when God leads we must not drag our feet, when He calls we must rise up and follow, when He commands we must never say never.

Aren't you glad that Jesus did not say "*surely not*" when the Father sent Him into the world on His saving mission?

Aren't you glad that when the moment came to lay aside the glory of heaven, He did not say, "*I've thought it over, and I've decided not to go*"?

Aren't you glad that out of love for you He did not draw back from His mission, even though He knew it would lead to a cross?

Prayer