

“But God!” (17)

I was reading an article about sales people, and one in particular caught my attention. It seems as though one saleswoman despite her best sales pitch for life-insurance was unable to persuade a couple to sign up for a policy. And so as she stood up to leave she left her unconvinced clients saying these words, "I certainly don't want to frighten you into a decision, please sleep on it tonight, and if you wake up in the morning, let me know what you think."

And I guess the point of the story is that some things need more consideration than others. The last time we were together we left Peter in **Acts 10** after receiving the same vision three times, leaving Simon the Tanner's house with the three messengers which Cornelius had sent from Joppa. Some commentators have suggested that Peter's hospitality to the three messengers in Joppa suggests that he had already worked out God's intent for him to preach to the Gentiles. But others believe that the text doesn't tell us if Peter fully understands the meaning of his visions yet, he is possibly still giving it some thought.

And so Luke goes on to tell us in **Acts 10:24-26** "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."

Now I don't know about you but I don't think I have ever met anyone whom I consider worthy of me falling to my knees with exception of Jesus Christ of course. But I do know that here in Britain if you meet royalty for example you're expected to curtsy if you're a woman or bow if you're a man before them. But when Cornelius met the apostle Peter he bowed down before him but rather than just accepting such adoration or encouraging it in any way, Peter told Cornelius to get up because he too was a man.

Do you remember in **Acts 14** when the apostle Paul healed a man with crippled feet? And when the crowd saw what had happened they shouted out in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" and they gave Paul and Barnabas new names and the priest from the temple of Zeus was going to offer sacrifices to their gods for Paul and Barnabas.

Luke records in **Acts 14:14+15** "But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them."

Paul and Barnabas wouldn't accept worship from them because they recognised that they too were only humans. They too like Peter knew where to draw the line. You see we have godly men and women within the Lord's church throughout the world who are worthy of respect. Some are worthy of respect because of their spiritual maturity, some because of their Bible knowledge and some because of their good deeds.

But loved ones we should never put them up on a pedestal for everyone else to admire and praise them. Peter was a man who had all of these things I just mentioned but he knew where to draw the line. Peter understood that he was an apostle of Christ but he also remembered where he came from. He was a humble fisherman who became servant for Christ but he was still a human being.

He wouldn't allow anyone to place him high above anyone else. He would have remembered Jesus' own words in **Mark 10:45** when Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." You see loved ones there's nothing wrong with receiving encouragement from others but there's something seriously wrong when you accept that praise without giving God the credit for it.

That's one reason why so many preachers and teachers of God's word become so proud. Week after week they preach a sermon or teach a Bible class and everyone around tells them how wonderful they are. And you can always tell who these people are because they cling on to every single word that someone tells them and then they repeat those words to anyone else they meet. Because they want everyone to know just how wonderful they are.

And you don't have to be a preacher or teacher either, you could be someone who does nothing but good deeds all day long but you can't wait to tell everyone what you have been doing. Because all you're looking forward to is hearing some praise for yourself.

The story goes that during the days of **John Wesley** and concerning his work among the coal miners of Cornwall, whole villages were transformed from a gambling, swearing, and Sabbath breaking people to men and women of sobriety and godliness. In every home there was a picture of **John Wesley**, the man they all knew and loved. And the story goes that one day a stranger visited one of these humble homes and saw the picture hanging on the wall. And the visitor asked the man, "Whose picture is that?" And the old miner reverently lifted his hat and said, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."

Peter himself wrote in **1 Peter 5:5** "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Peter understood what it meant to be humble, that's why he wouldn't accept any bowing down from Cornelius. But he also recognises that if Cornelius and his household are going to receive him, he wanted them to remember that he was simply a servant, sent to them by God.

And so Luke goes on to inform us what happened when Peter went inside Cornelius' house. **Acts 10:27-33** "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?" Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Peter has finally understood the meaning behind the visions. You know I love those two little words, 'but God' because it tells me that God is always one step ahead of my thinking. Paul says in **Romans 5:7-8** "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. **But God** demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Paul says, you know maybe a good friend might die for you to show that they love you, **but God** proved that He loves you because Christ died for us. When Paul is writing to the church at Philippi, he tells them about **Epaphroditus** almost dying. He says in **Philippians 2:27** "Indeed he was ill, and almost died. **But God** had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow".

Paul says you know Epaphroditus almost died, **but God** had different plans for him. Peter says in **Acts 10** that I shouldn't even be here with you guys because you are Gentiles **but God** has different plans. And so now this God fearing centurion named Cornelius, his family and friends opened their hearts to receive the Lord's commands from Peter.

And Peter was taught a powerful lesson from God. A lesson that God had been trying to teach His people for generations. **Amos 9:7** "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?"

Micah 6:8 "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God". The lesson which Peter had to learn was that acceptability to God no longer depended on national descent, but upon character. In other words you don't need to become a Jew to please God.

And Peter learned that lesson when he says in **Acts 10:34+35** "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Make no mistake about it loved ones, there is no such thing as a superior race in Christianity.

Galatians 3:26-28 "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". Paul might have added, it doesn't matter if your young or old, from England, Scotland, Ghana or Botswana, you all one in Christ.

Do you remember in **Matthew 16** when Jesus asked the disciples who the people thought Jesus was and then Jesus asks Peter who He thought He was and Peter said that Jesus was the Christ?

Jesus said to Peter in **Matthew 16:18+19** “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Now notice that Jesus says, ‘I will give you the keys’, plural. Now we all know what keys are used for, they are either used for locking or opening something up. Well in this case the keys were to be used to open the way back to the Father. And in **Acts 2** when Peter first preached, he used one of those keys to open the way back to the Father for the Jews.

And what we’re about to see here happening in **Acts 10** is Peter using the other key to open the way back to the Father for the Gentiles. **Acts 10:36-43** “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen-by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter never got tired of preaching the gospel, he begun his sermon by preaching the simple gospel message he had already proclaimed to so many Jews. Peter says that first of all, the Jews had learned that Jesus was the means of man obtaining peace with God and his fellow man and for that to happen Jesus had to be Lord, or master, over all.

But this is interesting because when you read the text here, it comes across as if Peter presumed they had already heard of the preaching of Jesus which had spread through Judea and Galilee, beginning with the message of the forerunner, John the baptizer.

Peter presumed that they knew about how Jesus was God's anointed and had performed numerous acts of kindness and healing. And he tells Cornelius and those listening that he and the other apostles stood as witnesses of the good Jesus did and the terrible trial the Jewish leaders put Him through, followed by his death on the cross.

He goes on to tell them that they could also testify that God raised Him up and made Him known to certain witnesses, some of whom even ate with him. And then finally he tells those listening that the apostles were given a commission to testify that Jesus would ultimately judge both the living and dead. And he says, even the prophets had referred to the coming Messiah through whom those believing on his name could receive the remission of their sins.

Have you ever been trying to have a conversation with someone but you always seem to get interrupted? That happens all the time in our house, if Helen and I are trying to have a conversation with each other you can just count on it that our children will interrupt us with all sorts of questions and requests. Even when I’m preparing sermons like this one, every time I’m going over my sermon before I preach it I can guarantee that either my phone will ring, or someone will come to the door and that happens every time.

Well in a lot of ways that’s what Luke records happens next, Peter is in the middle of a sentence when something truly miraculous happens. **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 the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.”

Luke says that Peter was in full flow with his sermon when all of a sudden these Gentiles, who had never gotten rid of their uncleanness through circumcision and sacrifice, were speaking in tongues and magnified the name of God.

Now remember that the Jews thought that no one else was acceptable to God unless they were a Jew. This event clearly shows us that God has other plans. This event shows us that the Gentiles could now enter the church through baptism without first submitting to the requirements of the Law of Moses.

You don't have to wonder **what does this event mean?** Peter understood fully well what this event meant, that's why he says in **Acts 10:47+48** "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days."

In other words Peter drew the obvious conclusion and asked how anyone could forbid these Gentiles the opportunity to obey Christ by putting Christ on in baptism. And notice when God gives a command people need to obey it. Luke says after the entire group had obeyed the Lord, they asked Peter and his companions to stay for a few days.

Now I have heard many people who claim that Holy Spirit baptism is still happening today and they use the events of Cornelius' household as proof. I believe that Holy Spirit baptism was an experience unique to the first century. And so let me try and explain why.

Like any good Bible student should do, we need to ask the question **what was its purpose?** Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Joel in **Joel 2:28+29** foretold of a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon "all flesh" or "all people" as some translations have it. The expression "all flesh" is not relating to every human being because even animals have flesh. But the phrase "all flesh" merely embodies the two major segments of humanity, from that ancient vantage point. In other words, the Jews and the Gentiles.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel's prophetic declaration, remember in **Acts 2:16ff**. And when he did that he was revealing that the prophecy was **beginning** to enjoy its fulfillment that very day. When Peter and his Jewish brothers visited the family of Cornelius in the city of Caesarea. The Spirit of God was "poured out" according to **Acts 10:45** on Cornelius, his family, and near friends at that time.

Now when Peter is explaining the situation to the other Jews in Jerusalem, he tells them in **Acts 11:15-17** "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

Peter defended their acceptance of the Gentiles **to the Jewish church** and then he identified the Caesarean experience with the events that occurred "at the beginning." In other words he says what happened to us on Pentecost, happened to Cornelius' household. So let's get back to the question, **what was its purpose? Why did the apostles receive the Holy Spirit?**

The purpose for which the apostles received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was unique. Remember the Lord promised **his apostles** that **they** would receive an unparalleled measure of the Spirit's power to **guide them** in teaching the gospel. The Spirit would bring to their memories the things they had learned from the Savior according to **John 14:26**. He would guide them into all truth and declare unto them things to come according to **John 16:13**. The Lord promised they would be able to proclaim his message, unfettered by the need of personal preparation; rather, gospel truth would be "given" to **them** as **they** required it according to **Matthew 10:19+20**.

Now here's the important question we must ask ourselves. **Was this another instance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit?** I recall, a few years ago, being taught that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred **twice** during the New Testament period, **once in Jerusalem** on the Day of Pentecost when the first Jews obeyed the Gospel, and **once at Caesarea** when the first Gentiles became Christians.

That explanation was both simple and satisfactory because it dealt very effectively with many of the arguments made by so-called 'Pentecostal' and 'Charismatic' groups, who still continue to claim to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. But I don't now believe that this explains what happened in the house of Cornelius. I don't think that this was a second occurrence of baptism of the Holy Spirit.

We must ask ourselves the question, **to whom was the baptism of the Holy Spirit promised and why was it promised?**

1. It was personally promised by the Lord to **His apostles** and never promised to anyone else. Cornelius wasn't an apostle. **John 16:7**. 'But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.'

2. Those to whom it was promised were instructed to wait to receive it. **Acts 1:4+5**. 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'

3. When **they** received the baptism, it would guide **them** into all truth, **they** would receive new revelations, and **they** would be granted total recall of all that **they** had been taught by the Lord. **John 14:26** 'But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.'

John 16:13+14 'But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.'

4. **Their** baptism in the Spirit would endow **them** with power and bestow on **them** the authority to become His witnesses. **Acts 1:8+9** 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.'

On the Day of Pentecost, the Lord's promise was fulfilled. **Acts 2:33**. The Holy Spirit fell on **the apostles**, not on the listening Jews, nor on the 3000 who obeyed the Gospel. But, in contrast, in the house of Cornelius the Spirit fell upon the listening Gentiles.

The two events are obviously quite different, and the only point of similarity is the fact on the Day of Pentecost, in the house of Cornelius the Holy Spirit signalled His presence and approval by enabling these seeking Gentiles to speak in languages they had **not learned** and.

They received the forgiveness of their sins, **Acts 2:38** and they received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, God's own gift to those who obey Him. **Acts 5:32**. There is no Biblical evidence that Cornelius or his household had the teaching powers like the apostles did. There's no Biblical evidence to suggest that they could lay their hands upon other people, and pass on spiritual gifts like the apostles could.

The purpose for Cornelius being granted the Spirit was to **demonstrate to the Jews** that God was ready for the gospel to be offered to the Gentiles. This was evidenced by the fact that even Peter initially resisted the idea that the Gentiles could become Christians as we saw in **Acts 10:14ff**. This was also evident in the fact that the Jews of Jerusalem when they learned of the matter, criticized Peter.

Acts 11:2+3 "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him (and look at the question they asked him,) they said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." It was the miraculous demonstration of the Spirit upon Cornelius and his associates that turned the tide. And the effect of this divine act of Gentile acceptance remains intact to this very day.

And so loved ones there is no need for a modern, supernatural outpouring of the Spirit to accomplish the same purpose. Holy Spirit baptism is not necessary to one's salvation today, nor is it a demonstration of our salvation. It was a phenomenon of the first century, unique to those circumstances.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians in **A.D. 62** he confirmed that there was but "**one baptism**" in **Ephesians 4:5**. Clearly he's talking about "**water**" baptism, the very practice that was to continue "**to the end of the age**" as Jesus commanded in **Matthew 28:19+20**. The Jews didn't think that no one else was acceptable to God unless they had been circumcised in the flesh and been converted to Judaism.

But loved ones **aren't you glad like our sermon title says; 'But God' had different plans? Aren't you glad that God shows no favouritism between nations?** I am for one am very glad.