

“...our God so Surprising”

- Acts 9:32 – 10:48 -

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32 Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. 33 There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. 34 And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately. 35 So all who dwelt

at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. 36 At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. 37 But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. 39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. 43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner. **Chapter 10** 1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" 4 And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. 5 "Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. 6 "He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." 7 And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. 8 So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa. 9 The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10 Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." 15 And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." 16 This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. 17 Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. 18 And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. 19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. 20 "Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." 21 Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" 22 And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. 24 And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. 28 Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. 29 "Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" 30 So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, 31 "and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. 32 'Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.' 33 "So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God." 34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. 35 "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him 36 "The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all— 37 "that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: 38 "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 "And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 "Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, 41 "not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 "And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. 43 "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." 44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. 45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.



I wonder how many of us have reluctantly surrendered a decision, our obedience, or perhaps even our lives to God, and ultimately did so based on a belief that it was simply the right and righteous thing to do. Then how many of us went on to expect perhaps nothing more than a clear conscience, only to be thoroughly surprised by the richness and magnitude of his dealings toward us and the journey of our lives?

Like the miracle of the water being turned into wine at the wedding: not only was the miracle a great gift, but the wine was awesome, compelling the master of the banquet to remark “*ahhh...you have saved the best wine until last!*” In fact, Jesus often surprises us on both ends of the spectrum. Would anyone doubt the surprise of those in attendance in the temple that day when Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and drove the people from its courts with a whip? Jesus did a lot of surprising things, and that fails to even touch upon the surprising things He said in His teachings! Things like “eat my flesh and drink my blood” and “sell everything you have and come and follow me?” In Luke 14:26 Jesus said “*If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.*” No one would argue that *that* is surprising!

Peter was a guy who seemed to repeatedly experience the surprising God. From the moment he sat down his nets and began to follow Jesus he must have been lived in a near constant state of awe and wonder at the wonderful albeit often crazy things his Lord would do in his midst.

Our text begins with a couple of those accounts. The first was concerning Peter and a man by the name of Aeneas, who had been bedridden and paralyzed for eight years. No doubt He and his family had tried every physician and medicine available. Notice that true miraculous healing has certain attributes. One, Jesus gets all the credit; and two, the result is not glory for the healing, but *converted lives*.

Then there was this woman by the name of Dorcas. We read clearly that Dorcas was a woman of action. She lived out her faith not merely from a church pew but moreover in the practical realm. Hers was a faith that benefited others. “Faith that moves” is the true manifestation of a gift of the Spirit. For the gifts that are bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit are for the benefit of the others and for the “edifying” (the “building up”) of the body of Christ, *which is all of us!*

Peter was on a roll apparently when it came to his faith in Christ. It’s almost like he thought this living Jesus could do *anything!* After all, over the past three years, he had seen some truly incredible things. But this time, could it be he was biting off more than he could chew? After all, Dorcas was *dead*, and everyone knows “dead” is *permanent*, right?

Generally speaking, *yes*. But Peter knew his Lord was a “surprising” redeemer, a surprising physician! After all, *He* already proved that death could not stop *Him!* In fact, He went so far as to offer that same “triumph over death” to each of us His true reborn children and, on that particular day, to a woman named Dorcas.

The language that Peter uses here in the original text, is almost the exact words that Jesus said to raise the little girl from the dead in Mark 5:41. His apostles were apparently quick studies! Certainly the more ‘surprising God events’ that we personally witness and personally experience, the more faith we acquire to participate in the next ‘impossible’ matter.

And as in the previous miracle, the result here too was new *believers* and new *faith*. It’s the fingerprints...the *evidence* of God having visited a situation, in that He so often seems to “kill two birds with one stone.” He gave these believers back someone that was close to their hearts, and furthered the Kingdom at the same time by displaying His manifest power and glory, *even over death*.

The text says that those present believed “in” or “on” the Lord. The word in the original text is “epi,” the “*upon*” of scriptural faith. This is the word we understand as part of the “upon” experience of the Holy Spirit. Those who came to *believe*, believed more than just in the *existence* of Jesus. They came to believe *upon* the surprising Jesus Christ. They surrendered their control of their lives to the One who triumphed over death.

Despite the testing that Peter was now going to endure, it seems that already he was, on some degree, no longer bound by the cultural mores of his time. For Peter was staying with a tanner, which at that time was a trade that most believed to be “religiously unclean.” For Peter, furthering the Kingdom was far more important than living by the fears and the trepidations of a society that feared those thought of as “untouchables.” The gospel and the work of the kingdom was more important than reputation, social position, popularity, or personal gain. It was the example his Redeemer had given him. All the rest mattered little to Peter! He had already “died” to himself on that beach some time ago, the words still echoing in his head, “*Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.*”

In chapter 10 of Acts, we see a significant shift in direction for the church and its future. Up until this time, all those involved in the kingdom of God had, in one way or another erroneously reserved salvation for those who “came in” via the “Jewish door.” There had been exceptions, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, but he still was strangely “acceptable” because of his position in life. But now God was going to reach beyond the “status quo.” The gospel was ready to break out of its manmade boxes. The “good news” was “coming in the back door.”

This man Cornelius was an unlikely convert to say the least. For he wasn’t a Jew, and in fact, he was a centurion in the occupying army that held the Jews in bondage! He was the “antithesis” of Saul the “*Jew of Jews.*” One could easily call Cornelius the “*Gentile of Gentiles!*”

Cornelius was a Roman “centurion,” which was the equivalent to a sergeant or a captain in today’s army. He oversaw 100 men who were solidly *Roman*. For this man to be accepted into the ranks of the redeemed was beyond the scope of the average Jewish mind. Even for Cornelius to look to the redemptive path of “*the Way,*” would seem to have been nearly impossible. Ah! Another case of the impossible, but as before “God was in the house...”

This man Cornelius already had his eyes firmly upon the Creator. Like many folks even today, it seemed he knew and understood that Jehovah was God and that He alone was the sovereign Creator. But Cornelius, like untold thousands who have followed, lacked one crucial thing: the actual means to reach that Creator, the door to open a relationship and communication. For that, he needed a mediator; *he needed Jesus.*

Cornelius had been pulled out of the crowd by God Himself. He had, for some time, been a praying individual and one that gave of his finances to the church regularly. But his prayer life and giving was not the *reason* he was chosen by God. Cornelius gave *of* himself because his heart was “toward God.” This Cornelius was going to stretch the believer’s understanding of grace, but was the church ready to be stretched?

God, as He often does, was of course “working both sides.” Again, *two birds with one stone.* While He supernaturally met Cornelius to prepare his heart, he went ahead of him to meet with Peter to prepare his! Oh to participate in such “surprising” moves of God! For what occurred here was not only a profound event in the lives of these men, but would forever change the direction and the nature of the church.

While Peter was certainly a born again Christian, he was, like so many of us, still holding onto aspects and beliefs that affected his service to God. Let us remember that salvation in Christ is *saved, being saved, and will be saved.* Meaning that our redemption is more than an event, but moreover a process of surrender and growth in the Spirit. Throughout our lives we are asked repeatedly to “take another step” toward Christ and holiness. As long as we draw breathe we are repeatedly at such a place.

Spurgeon once said concerning this event that “*Peter had pretty much put God in a box of limitations, and now God was going to shake Peter up to change his thinking. He can do the same for us. “Shake yourself up a little, my brother...”*

Being a “good Jew,” Peter had never eaten anything that was not “kosher.” So while embracing the Lord’s grace, he was still holding onto elements of self-righteousness instead of selling out to the Lord’s

“righteousness by faith.” Peter, like all of us, battled for the personal control over his life, but for God, the *giving love* was the most important thing.

In verses 13 and 14 we see that the communique from God was clearly recognized as such. And yet despite such clarity, Peter bucks its implications and its ramifications. How many of us have at one time or another been guilty of answering our Lord in this same manner? We know what He is telling us, but the cost...*oh, the perceived cost* of obedience to what He is telling us! Can the two words “no” and “Lord” ever find solidarity in one sentence directed toward our Redeemer?

Ironically, the man who carried the remorse of denying Christ *three times*, now told the Lord **no three times**. It is easy to believe that a reaction such as this is reserved for the unredeemed. Yet believers can be just as guilty, yet *we* are without excuse!

Finally, upon surrender to God, Peter acquiesced. But Peter wanted to be sure and he wanted to be transparent. He gains points with me for that by the way. Peter was not going to “fly solo” on this. The stakes were too high. When he went with these men, he took some witnesses with him, for “*in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word might be established.*” (2 Cor 13:1)

It seems that Cornelius was excited to see Peter. For he fell to Peter’s feet and began to worship him. Having had that happen to me on mission, I would imagine such freaked Peter out a little. It did me! Peter could have jumped on this opportunity, and basked in the adoration. But Peter wasn’t looking for anyone to “bow and kiss his ring.” He knew who needed to get the glory, and it wasn’t him. Our text says Peter lifted him up, saying, “*Stand up; I myself am also a man.*”

Peter went on to state the obvious: *he technically wasn’t supposed to be there*. But he **was** there, and it appeared God had brought him. *So what’s this all about Cornelius?* Cornelius responds by giving Peter the “cliff notes” of *his* vision (*his* meeting with the Lord’s emissary).

Clearly God was showing no partiality. He was not adding anything to the cross or the free gift that goes along with it. But that day Peter came to the understanding that the Father didn’t want *him* to add anything to it either. We can gather further that God is also giving *us* the same direction. *We* aren’t to add anything either. Nor are we to take anything away from it. I pray that as a church we will always remember that fact!

Peter began now to share the true and unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ. He shared the *facts* and testified that he was a witness of the surprising power of their reality. The Lord had left explicit instructions to His apostles to *preach and testify* to the people. Little did they know at that time that “the people” also included Gentiles, and even *Roman soldiers!* May we forever embrace those crucial words, “*whoever believes!*”

But Peter was just the messenger. It was God who now came to put the final “surprising” touch upon this blessed scene. The Holy Spirit settled now upon this eclectic group, and suddenly the lines of social, economic, and ethnic standing become *very* blurred. They were all now just children of the Creator!

Those of Jewish blood that were present were astonished. They never thought that the God they worshipped, the Savior that they adored, would open His arms to *any* and *every* individual that was willing. How the staunchly religious world can be guilty of the same today, forgetting that God loves the guy in jail, the junkie on the street, or the skateboarding punk out on the sidewalk. God sees no difference. Do we? If God loves them *in action*, what would He have us do?

Peter was now pretty deep into this thing. He could have backed out in an attempt to save himself from what could be trouble. But Peter knew his Lord had spoken, and he apparently was not going to deny Him again. Further, he wasn’t going to tell Him no again. This is the life of a godly man. One who does the right thing, not the easy thing. Most will not chose such a path. Because he did, Peter would go on to experience a life of “our God so surprising.”