

BREAKING INTO THE NEW DIMENSION

Acts 9:32–11:18

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We're going to look at Acts 9:32–11:18. To kind of set a framework for this I want to take a moment to review where we are in our outline of Acts. So far, we've looked at two major themes in the Book of Acts. First, "The Birth of the Church," in Acts 1–5. The second major theme has been "Persecution Leads to Expansion," in Acts 6:1–9:31. We're on a program in the Book of Acts that takes us from the beginning of the church in Jerusalem and through the moving of the gospel out of its cocoon of Judaism into all the world and ultimately to Rome. The journey from Jerusalem to Rome is thousands of miles long. But as the Chinese proverb says, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Sometimes in our journey of life there are critical steps which we take which seem short in distance. As we see tonight, the steps that are taken are short steps geographically but they are light years in terms of spiritual advances. We ought never to despise the time that God is working in small ways in our life or in a church. In the Book of Acts, chapter 1 through 5, the gospel is localized primarily within Jerusalem. The commission to the entire world is simply not being done. Because before we can do acts of great strength, we must be in a position in which we can in fact do those things. The church will need to grow and mature and have its own basis of relationship established before it can reach out to the broader world.

Perhaps you're at a moment in your life in which it's taking a long time to lay a base of operation. I have been in some conversations in the last few days with my son regarding some decisions he's making. It really struck me that the most important thing I've done in my whole life is, hopefully, invest time and effort and prayer and life and ministry into those two children,

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Evangeline and George Paul. They haven't done anything great yet in the way the world, or even the church, measures greatness. But there has to be a seed time. There has to be a developmental time. I'm expecting great things from them. Evangeline evidently isn't called to the ministry. I'm expecting her to somehow go into business. Through the profits she makes, I'm expecting her to float a generation of missionaries. I'm expecting her to make a good, solid contribution to God's work. And I'm expecting my son, George Paul—in the base that's been established in his life and his interest—to be a Christian C. S. Lewis or something like that. Yet, if it's not God's will that he do that, I can be at home with that as well. But what I'm saying is that we spend years and years and we look around and they're gone and we say, "What came as a result?" Maybe there are epochs in our life where all we do is establish a good, sound base for the next step in the church. Because God, in addition to His concern with building us personally, is concerned with building His community on earth and extending His mission.

From Acts 6:1–9:31, we're seeing the gospel move out beyond Jerusalem. Not through the freewill of the church, but through persecution, which shoves a reluctant church out of its cultural shell and brings it to people who are not quite Gentiles but neither are they quite Jews: Samaritans. Now tonight we have what I call "Breaking Into the New Dimension" where the gospel is going to get out of the halfway house of Samaritanism and into the full-scale life of Cornelius, a full-blown Gentile. He is going to become the first Gentile convert in the church. His conversion will set off the Richter scale in the life of the church, the aftereffects of which we're still living today. What happens to him is, to a great measure, why we're in the church today. So it's not just ancient history. This has meaning for us now.

I would suggest to you that when God is doing a work in our lives and beginning to use us in a greater way in ministry, He doesn't do things all at once. Things are done incrementally. When

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George Paul graduated from high school—I think I may have used it in a message here in church or in his graduation speech—I hauled out the Shakespeare book, the complete works of William Shakespeare. When George Paul was born, I was associate pastor at Central Assembly in Springfield, Missouri. One of the associates on staff, as a baby gift, gave this to George Paul. There was a long period of time in George’s life when it was meaningless to him, but by the time he graduated from high school, he was starring in Shakespeare roles. He was ready for it. He had grown into it.

Can you imagine the trauma if the first day of a six-year-old’s life, when they’re in first grade for the first time, the teacher would walk into the room, slap a big copy of William Shakespeare down on the table and say, “I have been teaching first graders for thirty-five years and I am tired of teaching you little kids the alphabet and Dick and Jane. This year, we’re going to do something more exotic in this course. I’ve got a textbook on Shakespeare on every one of your desks and you’re going to learn to read it, whether you like it or not.” You’d traumatize kids if you did that, and you’d sure make non-readers out of them if you kept it up day after day. They couldn’t do it, because learning takes place incrementally.

When God begins to expand the borders of our life, He also does it incrementally. We see that in Peter. God is going to use Peter to reach a Gentile, but Peter’s not quite ready for the task. It takes him—first in Acts 8—going to Samaria. He’s sent out by the Jerusalem church as kind of an official apostolic investigator, to make sure that everything is right. He sees that the Spirit is poured out through his praying for the Samaritans. Indeed, they’ve been properly saved, properly baptized, they’ve properly received the Spirit, properly been a part of the church. He’s quite willing now to embrace these cultural, ethnic, and theological half-breeds who were just hair off of true Judaism. He’s now willing to receive them. Now in Acts 9:32, for the first time, he is

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going off on his own. Evidently not sent by the church officially, but it has awakened in him a desire for ministry beyond the borders of Jerusalem. Things have settled down in the church in Jerusalem as a result of the persecution, so he didn't need to stay with the hurting flock anymore. It was time he could pull out. So he travels west, to Lydda, and he finds a paralytic who has been bedridden for eight years.

What is unique about this miracle, as compared to all the other healings of paralysis in the New Testament, is that this is the only one healed in either the Gospels or Acts whose name we have: Aeneas. All the others are unnamed. When there is an individual that is named, it generally signifies, by way of retrospection, that this person who was healed did something with his healing and became a vital part of the Christian community. Therefore, his name is of sufficient significance that when his healing is told it should be related. It also should be noted that, like the other miracles, this healing has a ripple effect. It brings people to the Lord, both in Lydda and the valley of Sharon.

So Peter's traveling out. He's seeing God still working in his life. That miracle excites the interest over in the seacoast city of Joppa, where there is a woman named Tabitha. In the Aramaic, that means "gazelle." And her name in the Greek is "Dorcas," which also means "gazelle," a beautiful deer-like animal that is very fleet—a fitting word to describe Dorcas, whose acts of service to the saints were of rapid availability. She dies. She had always been doing good and helping the poor. But at that time, she became sick and died. So the widows are grieving over her. Luke, being a doctor, notes for us the common burial practice. Her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. That, by the way, would only last for a day, because burials occurred in one day. There are other widows standing around crying and showing Peter the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

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I want to note that, already in this formative day of the Christian church, there was a respect for God's calling and gifts. The church was wise enough to recognize that the ministry of a person like Dorcas, who was doing good things, was a valid ministry. People didn't put her down for doing something less "spiritual." If I were to put Dorcas within the context of a modern text, I would know what she would face. There would be people who would come to her and say, "Dorcas, you're so busy doing that sewing all the time, and making things for the poor and the needy and the widows, that you're neglecting the nightly Bible study we've got going...you should be spending more time in Bible study." There would be others who would come to her and say, "Dorcas, it's ok that you function on that level of service. But God's highest calling is a life of intercessory prayer. And Dorcas, you need to be spending the hours that you're spending on clothing traveling in prayer before the Lord." There would be others who would come to her and say, "Dorcas, the real ministry is being a Bible teacher in the women's Wednesday night Bible study. That's what you need to be doing." We have all these ideas—of gifts being competitive with one another—that can circulate in the contemporary church. Not realizing and appreciating—as we ought to—that God's callings in His Body are meant to be complementary and there's room for Dorcas, and there's room for the four daughters of Phillip who are prophetesses, and there's room for Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, who had a teaching ministry. There's room for all those gifts. We do violence to people when we try to force them into a ministry and a calling that they don't have, that their heart is not in. If the body of Jesus Christ can do anything for people, it ought to set them free and say, "The Lord has appointed all the gifts that He needs for this church to function properly in this body." Let's encourage every single one. Let's honor and recognize that some are called to this ministry of helps and service

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that Dorcas was called to. And not demand anything more of her or think she is less spiritual for spending her time making things.

Peter goes in. This is the only time that we read that Peter raised anyone from the dead. It's especially fitting that it should happen here in the text of Acts, because we have seen deaths occurring in Acts already. We have seen Ananias and Sapphira stricken dead. We have seen Stephen martyred. It would seem only right and proper that, on a scale of human values, if anybody's going to be raised from the dead, Peter would have been sent to Stephen and would have raised up Stephen. Wow! What a witness in Jerusalem. They just get done dropping boulders on the guy. He's smashed. His skull is cracked, fractured. And all of a sudden, he gets up and looks at them—after the priest has pronounced him dead—and says, "I'm alive! And He's alive, and you can't kill me!" Man, what a testimony! But instead, in the sovereignty of God, he's not the "key player." It's Dorcas who's risen.

There appears, in her raising, a unique operation of the gift of faith. I'd direct your attention to the close of Mark 5, where Jesus is doing a miracle of resurrection from the dead Himself.

There's a twelve-year-old girl named Talitha who has died. Talitha is not her given name, but in Aramaic, it means "little girl." When Jesus comes into that house and that room, everybody is sobbing their hearts out. Not a single one of them really believes that He can do anything about this situation. So He chases everybody out of the room, except Peter, James, and John, the inner three. And He goes over to this little girl and says to her in Aramaic, "*Talitha koum!*" which means "Little girl, rise." And Peter, with James and John, watched in wonder as this little girl was raised from the dead.

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That event evidently triggers Peter's faith here. It's sort of a *déjà vu*. I think sometimes faith operates in this dimension. We get ourselves in a situation that is exactly similar to something in the past where we saw God work in our life we have special faith, pinpoint faith, for that.

I use this in the area of building a church building. I have million-dollar faith. I do. I could go to any church that is getting ready to go into a building program and I think I could impart to them a gift of faith to believe God to build a building that requires them to raise a million dollars. God has allowed me to have that experience. I have that level of faith. I don't have five-million dollar faith yet. I'm working on that, but a million-dollar faith.

Peter had a very specialized sense of faith. He had been in a situation before where Jesus had raised a little girl and He had kicked everybody out of the room. That flashback is coming to Peter here. Notice what he says. Jesus had said, "*Talitha koum!*" in the Aramaic. Peter only changes one letter. Instead of "Talitha" it's "Tabitha." And having discharged everybody from the room, he goes over to her, kneels down, and prays. And she is raised.

Special operation of the gift of faith. The miracles that are occurring do not appear to be the kind of variety in which someone just turns on their willpower and says, "Everybody I pray for is raised." There is a special unique operation of the Holy Spirit imparting faith. It's a sovereign act of God in cooperation with human faith. And Peter here had a special operation that became known all over Joppa, and many more people believed in the Lord. The church is expanding down now out of Jerusalem to the coastlines. Joppa.

Then we find this significant phrase at the end of chapter 9, "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon" (Acts 9:43, NIV). That is a powerful phrase. Peter is going to be called upon to do something that he never dreamed he would do. That is, to go to a Gentile's house, render himself ritually unclean, and participate in table-fellowship with a Gentile—eating

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foods that were non-kosher, in violation of Mosaic legislation. Eating things like snakes, reptiles. That was his vision, although he probably didn't do that at Cornelius' house. That was the idea. "Peter, you've got to be ready to eat anything. If you're going to go to the world of the Gentiles and effectively minister the gospel to them you can't say, 'I don't want to go to a Gentile house, because I'm going to get contaminated.' How effective is it going to be if you're trying to witness to somebody and you say, 'I'd sure like to witness to you, but I can't go into your house. I'd get contaminated. I can't eat your food,' when you decline an invitation to dinner?" There's a sense that you have to be very gracious about it. You could insult your host. Table fellowship is very important.

How is Peter going to get ready to go to Cornelius? He is going to spend some time at Simon the tanner's house, which again is part of this incremental work of the Lord in his life. He was a Jew, but by holding the trade of a tanner he was required to live outside the city and he was in a state of perpetual uncleanness. Why was he in a state of perpetual uncleanness? Because all day long he was in contact with death. And whoever was in contact with death was in a state of ritual impurity. Which meant that you defiled other people who came in contact with you, and it meant it isolated you from temple worship, unless you went through a period of ritual purification marked by baptism. If a woman married a tanner and the tanner had kept from her the fact that he was a tanner, she had right—under Jewish law—for an annulment of the marriage, it never happened. What woman would want to live with a man who was in a state of continual ritual impurity, which implied that they had to live a kind of separated, lonely, isolated life?

Peter is out there, staying at Simon the tanner's house. And from Simon the tanner, he'll make the cultural break, all the way, and get to Cornelius. Cornelius lives 30 miles up the road. It was just a short pace then, as it is today. But it was light years away. How in the world could the

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Early Church—although they heard the words of Jesus “Go into all the world”—go? It was an easy thing to go geographically. But it was quite another thing to go culturally, to go religiously, because of all the barriers of isolation that had been built up.

It’s sort of like the experience I had when I went to Fuller Seminary. I grew up in an all Assemblies of God background. I never knew anything but the Assemblies of God. I had all kinds of ideas in my mind about what people who went to other churches were like. Most all of my ideas were false. Baptists were kind of cold and intellectual in their faith and once-saved always-saved—that’s what I’d always been told. Methodists were kind of backslidden.

Presbyterians had churches that were located next door to the bank, or the ice-house. Catholics, of course, weren’t even in the book. They were beyond hope. I go to seminary and I wind up learning that I’m going to have a Presbyterian roommate. I’m praying, “Lord, help me not to get contaminated. I want to keep the fire of my Pentecostal roots. I don’t want to just get intellectual with my faith and get cerebral with God.” What a delightful surprise to learn that my roommate was far more godly and Christlike than I ever thought of being. He had a devotional life that put me to absolute shame and blew all my stereotypes straight out of the water!

But it’s hard to make that step from cultural isolation. And by the way, one of the things we’re going to be getting into as we go through Acts is—I have a view and it’s not just a theory, I believe it’s substantiated by Acts—that one of the reasons why the church of Jesus Christ at any given locality may not grow may have nothing to do with the level of spirituality of the church.

The spiritual level may be strong and high and powerful. But it may not grow because it’s missed the cultural connection with the community in which it lives.

We’re going to see that very plainly next week. Peter has not been culturally ready for Cornelius. Cornelius is one of those up-and-outers who’s sort of written off by the church. In fact, it’s

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interesting that he lives at Caesarea. If you go to Caesarea today, there are two things that are of interest: one is the ruins of Caesarea, the other thing of interest is that Caesarea is sort of like Newport Beach in terms of Israel. That's where the wealthy people live. In the beautiful subdivision of Caesarea. And Caesarea owns the only golf course in the whole country today. It's still a country club environment. And it was for Cornelius. He had a house big enough to hold a lot of people when Peter showed up. He is described as a centurion, which meant that he was in charge of a hundred soldiers, a good job in the Roman army. It's known as the Italian regiment. He's described, with his family, as being devout and God-fearing, as giving generously to those in need and praying to God regularly.

All of those phrases have specific meaning. For example, he is the third centurion named in the Scripture. The first centurion had built a synagogue for the Jewish people and Jesus had raised his servant. The second centurion pronounces Christ's innocence at the cross. This is the third centurion in Scripture. Every time centurions are named in Scripture, they come off looking good. They're all seen as men of reputation and good standing, and they're all open to the gospel. Why is that? Two reasons. One, the Early Church never took at the view that just because someone served in the military it made them a bad guy. There are Christians today who believe this, that if you serve in the military you can't ever get right with God. The second thing is that Luke is writing to show the Roman government that Christians are not anti-government. How better to illustrate that than to show centurion after centurion who had been open to the gospel. He's not only that but he is devout. Which means he is following the way of Judaism. "Devout" doesn't simply mean "pious." But it means "fitting into the religious devotion that is practiced in the Jewish community." And he's described as God-fearing, which means more than that he simply stayed in awe of God. It's a technical term in the first century that describes a Gentile

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person who was extremely attracted to Judaism who had become a part of the synagogue, albeit sat in a separate section—usually in the back—and who had done everything toward becoming a Jew except being circumcised and baptized and keeping kosher and other regulations ceremonially of the Mosaic code. But in his heart, he had already become a Jew, just that, ceremonially, he had not yet completed the conversion. He was a God-fearer.

It'll be these God-fearers, Cornelius being the first, who become the bulwark of the Early Church that Paul found on the missionary journeys; because every one of those God-fearers had had the Word of God pumped into them and were ready to become the leaders of the Gentile churches that would be founded.

And he also, of course, was a generous person. He prayed to God regularly. It doesn't mean that he prayed everyday, but he prayed at the set times of devout Jews, which generally would be around nine in the morning and three in the afternoon, because a pious Jew prayed at the time when the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice in the temple were being offered. So we find Cornelius, for example, praying at three in the afternoon. That would square with the time of sacrifice in Jerusalem. He was praying regularly. He kept those prayer times like Daniel of old. The question sometimes arises: does God see and care about religious people who don't know the full truth of Jesus Christ? Will He attempt to save them? Do they need to be saved at all? In Cornelius we have answers. Yes, they need to be saved. Cornelius' life is incomplete, simply being devout and praying regularly. He needs the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Will God do all within His power to link up? Yes, He certainly will. He won't send an angel to preach to Cornelius but He will send a vision through an angel and tell him to do something so he can get somebody with him to preach the gospel.

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I think one of the things we need to recognize that's going on in the world today is that that pattern of Cornelius' conversion is certainly being repeated in cultures and areas where it is simply impossible—like in the Muslim world, or the communist world—to link up with people. God is working in strange and spectacular and uncommon ways to draw people to Himself. He has this vision and the angel says, “Cornelius...your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God” (Acts 10:3-4, NIV). That's the language of sacrifice. The smoke of the sacrifice has come up as a remembrance. Cornelius, you've been praying. God is remembering what you're doing.

I was thinking yesterday: How can God keep track of everybody? I get so frustrated that, as pastor, I don't know everyone in this church. I just feel that as a pastor I live with a lot of guilt. Some of it is false and some of it is true. But the false guilt just drives me crazy. I have an obligation to know everyone, so I can be a better minister. I was so frustrated. I thought, “Lord, I can't keep track of a couple thousand people. How in the world can You keep track of millions of people through the centuries?” Of course, the answer is God's infinite and all-knowing. The fact that He's aware of where we are on a personal level is seen so graphically in this wonderful little phrase, “What you've done is remembered.”

So instruction is given to Cornelius to go to Simon the tanner's house (Acts 10:5–6). That place had to smell! It was located by the sea. You needed the sea breezes to clear the place out. Part of the authenticity of the scriptural text is looking at details in the text that indicate it's authentic. Somebody wouldn't have thought of bringing that fact in. Who would think, “I've got to make up this story, so let's talk about a tanner.” They may have failed to put him by the sea, chances are.

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Peter, the next day, at about noon, is praying. That traces back to Acts 6, where the church had set him free from ministry duties and told him to spend more time praying and teaching God's Word. So he'd gone about doing that, and now he's keeping his time of prayer. I sometimes wonder if the church would have been totally different if Peter hadn't kept his date with God in prayer. I wonder how many times our lives are different because we prayed. Or maybe how many times we missed something special from God because we didn't pray—in which God desperately wanted to communicate with us but we weren't available to Him.

Peter is making himself available. The church has said, "We're going to give you a salary and we're going to set you loose and you're going to spend time in the Word and prayer. And Peter said, "Ok." So, there he is, praying at noon. He gets intense in his prayer. He falls into what's called "a trance." The literal word here in English is "ecstasy." It means "out of being." There are only a few times that that's ever described as happening to a Christian. And by the way, it never describes a person receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But it can describe a person who is in a special moment of revelation from God, in which they don't really know if they're on earth or somewhere else. He is out of being. He gets this vision. Peter is like many of us. We need to see the thing more than once. So down comes this large sheet with all these animals in it. Peter is told, "Get up...Kill and eat" (Acts 10:13, NIV). We would protest this on gourmet grounds. We'd say, "It's not my thing to eat snakes."

Peter's protest, however, is not on gourmet grounds. It's on religious grounds. Notice what a good Jew he was. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (verse 14, NIV). He made this statement in spite of the fact that several years earlier, in Mark 7, Jesus had taught explicitly that all foods are clean. Your habits die hard. Your traditions die hard. Sometimes, those of us who are Pentecostal have been accused of shaping our theology by our experience. Maybe at

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times that's been a valid criticism. Here is a person, however, who had not let his experience be shaped by the Lord's Word. And still years after the Lord said it, he's kept kosher. Peter determined, after he'd seen the thing three times, that it meant that all things were clean. So just at that moment, propitiously, the Lord's sense of timing is marvelous, these three men sent by Cornelius arrive and then Peter is told by the Holy Spirit, "Go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (Acts 10:20, NIV). So they introduce themselves and why they've come. Peter, the next day, starts out, then the following day he arrives at Cornelius' house.

Notice Cornelius' sense of deference: He fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter says, "Stand up...I am only a man myself" (Acts 10:25–26, NIV). Those in the body of Christ who are asserting that somehow we're little "gods" don't have the foggiest idea of what they're talking about biblically. It's anathema. I can't imagine an apostle ever advancing that doctrine. Peter says, "I'm only a man." If there's anything the apostles didn't like, it was people fawning over them. They're just servants. They had learned from the Lord that the big thing about ministry was to take a towel and serve people and not try to lord it over them and not try to be big shots. Peter is very honest. In fact, he almost does a put-off. "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him" (Acts 10:28, NIV). That's nice! Cornelius has gathered all these people, and right away, Peter very bluntly and plainspoken says, "I'm not supposed to be here. So may I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius recounts his vision and then, in verse 33, says a phrase that we ought to use every time we gather for worship, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (Acts 10:33, NIV). When we have an attitude like that toward God's Word, things are going to happen.

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So Peter opened his mouth. Some have called verses 34 through 43 the “Small Gospel.” In fact, if you look at those verses, you’ll find that is Mark’s Gospel in a nutshell, because Mark concentrates on the life of Jesus from John’s baptism until His resurrection. He begins suddenly with Christ’s ministry. His emphasis is upon action rather than upon Jesus’ teaching. When He culminates in the resurrection, it’s like, “Bang!” He tells it and it’s over. Peter does the exact same thing. That’s probably another indication that behind Mark’s Gospel is the preaching of Peter. Mark writes the way Peter preaches. He tells it. He gets to the point. There’s already kind of a common knowledge about Jesus, because he talks about the fact “you know what has happened in Judea.” Caesarea was the home of the Roman governor, where Pilate lived. This had happened in the last few years. Everybody knew what had happened to that Jew in Jerusalem on the cross and the reputed story of the resurrection.

Notice, by the way, that Peter has already preached on four occasions in the Book of Acts, in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5. Every time he preached, he had extensively quoted the Old Testament Scripture. Here there are no quotes hardly from the Old Testament Scripture, because he is speaking to an audience that by and large wouldn’t know what he was talking about if he quoted the Scriptures. So he went straight to history, straight to the Gospels. He told the good news about Jesus, about how he came to forgive our sins. On the point of saying “forgiveness of sins,” the Holy Spirit fell. The NIV waters it down and says “came,” but the word is a very dramatic word. “Fell.” The Holy Spirit fell on those who believed. Peter didn’t get a chance for a response or an altar call. And that, again, was in the sovereignty of God because Peter would not have known what to do when he came to the end of his sermon. He wouldn’t know if he should tell these Gentiles they could be saved or what. So the Holy Spirit just took care of that for them and sovereignly interrupted.

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“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” (Acts 10:45-46, NIV). This is, of course, one of the key texts in the Book of Acts that relates to tongues being assigned to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, because they know that they have received because they speak in tongues as did we. Later on, in Acts 11—when this incident is recounted—they (the members of the circumcised party) will say, “God gave them the same gift as he gave us” (Acts 11:17).

When we look at that “same gift,” we have to remember that the people that said “they received the same gift as us” were Jewish Christians. And not all of those Jewish Jerusalem Christians had been in the Upper Room of the community of a hundred and twenty. Yet they’re saying of Cornelius, “They received the same gift as us,” which lets us then draw a broader inference that it was the common thing, it was the normal thing for everyone coming into life in Christ in the Jerusalem church to have the baptism in the Spirit and to speak in tongues, because when they see it happening somewhere else, they do not say, “They received the same gift as did the hundred and twenty,” but “They received the same gift as did us.” That is, “we,” the Jewish community of the church. It’s that breakthrough charismatically in language of worship and praise to God that also gives one the boldness and confidence in God to witness. So Peter is confronted with a work done by God. People are saved and filled with the Spirit and it’s not even noted sequentially. There’s kind of a cluster of initial things that happen: salvation, baptism, and baptism of the Holy Spirit. And they don’t always happen in the same order.

So he says, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?” (Acts 10:47, NIV).

So they’re baptized. There will always be people in the body of Christ who do not have as expansive view as the Lord’s ministry as others do, and who are wrapped up in tradition and

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legalism. So, sure enough, when Peter gets back to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him. “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3, NIV). Peter here does not get self-defensive. I think, again, when you’re in a dialogue with a person over a problem and somebody’s criticizing, you can blow things right out of the water by answering back in self-defense and saying, “You have no business questioning an apostle. If you don’t like this church, this church has a back door and a front door. You can leave either way.” He doesn’t say to them, “I’m spiritual. Christ made me the rock that He was going to build the church on and you can forget it!” He relates his experience. And back to the theme that sometimes, as Pentecostals...like at seminary they said, “You Pentecostals always base things on experience.” That’s ok if you can justify your experience out of Scripture. It’s ok to develop doctrine out of experience if your experience is validated in the Scripture. Peter didn’t have the doctrine, “Go preach to the Gentiles and see them converted.” That was not his operating doctrinal principle. But God gives him an experience and, as he has that experience, he then has to go back into the data of Scripture and say, “Is there anything in Scripture to justify the experience I just had?” And if there is nothing in Scripture to justify the experience, he’s got to toss the experience aside. That’s where a lot of charismatics and Pentecostals have gotten in danger because they had an experience and they didn’t have one shred of evidence in Scripture, but they said, “This feels so good, I’ve got to keep it.” They erred and fell into grave error for doing that. But here, Peter remembers the word of the Lord and how He 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?” (Acts 11:16–17, NIV). He justifies his experience with the Scripture.

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Peter did one other smart thing here. He knew he was going to get criticized. If you know you're going to get criticized, have some human defenses. What did he do? He took six believers with him when he went to Cornelius' house. There were three people that came to invite him, and Peter said, "I'm not going up there alone." He had a sneaking suspicion that God was about to do something special in Cornelius' house. His statement to Cornelius "May I ask why you sent for me?" (Acts 10:29, NIV)—he must have an idea why he had been sent for, because he's got six people with him to witness everything, to get him off the hook when he gets back to Jerusalem. By the way, everybody has to report for their actions. Isn't it refreshing to know that in the Early Church Peter was not a Lone Ranger? He answered to somebody. He had to answer to Jerusalem. Some of us have to answer to Springfield. It's good to answer to somebody. That's part of accountability in the body of Christ.

The Lord pours out His Spirit and the church grows. "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God" (Acts 11:18, NIV). "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Breaking into the new dimension. The church has still got a long way to go. But before God begins a movement, He works in a heart. And before everybody gets caught up in the next thing the Holy Spirit is doing, He works out that thing which He is doing in small ways and incremental ways. Within the next several decades in the life of the church, thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of Gentiles are going to come to faith. None of them would have been able to come to faith if there had not been this breakthrough, first on the test-pilot level.

As I look at our efforts as an individual and local church, I'm saying in my heart, "Lord, there are people in this community like Cornelius. There are people like the Ethiopian eunuch. They

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are desperately hungry for the gospel. Help us to get to them. Help us, Lord, not to neglect the time in prayer when we'll hear from You and say to us, without an angel or a vision, 'Go next door.' Or maybe You'll work in dramatic ways that we hadn't expected. Maybe picking up a phone and dialing a number that the Holy Spirit reveals to us to do His work." I just want to see us break out into whatever dimension God would be pleased with. I have sensed anew that this year of 1988 could be such a year for us. If we continue to wait upon the Lord and seek Him, He is committed to help His church in that to breakout to the people in this area that desperately are looking for God in their reality.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord Jesus, we come to You tonight, all of us at various stages of our life and development. We read in the record of Scripture about Your leadership in peoples' lives. You lead them through their life experience and their background. You lead them through their training and their theological discipline. You lead them through their traditions and their friends. You lead them through angels and visions. You lead them by the inward work of the Holy Spirit. But the bottom line is, You lead Your people and You lead when we make ourselves available to You. When we leave our comfort zones like Peter did—in getting out of Jerusalem he began to step outside and say, "Lord, I'm getting now on territory where I've never been before. It's scary. I haven't done this before. But, Lord, give me courage and direct my steps. Lead me to my Aeneas. Lead me to my Dorcas. Lead me to my Cornelius." Help me, Lord, not to have a short circuit of my faith so that my faith simply reaches out like an electrical cord and plugs back into myself. Help me, Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to plug into others in this world and let this church have a breakout year. A year in which we see You work in sovereign and powerful ways in our midst. We ask this in Your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.