

The Drama of Change

Acts 10:1-48

Introduction

As you can tell from the scenery around me, on this stage tonight, nearly one hundred children are going to present a stage production. Weeks of practicing, singing, staging, lighting, and making of costumes will all converge for an unforgettable children's musical. There will be a lot of sweaty palmed, nervous parents (I mean children), all hoping they remember their lines.

I find it interesting to compare what happens on a stage like this to what happens in life. It is quite a bit different.

- On this stage, the hope of everyone is that everything goes as planned. In life, you are never really sure what God has planned for you until it happens.
- On stage, you stay in character – whether it is happy, congenial, or sad. In life, you are required to change your character – and you never really master any one expression.
- On stage, you hope you never need the help of the prompter sitting off stage, who whispers what you are supposed to say or do. In the Christian life, the prompter does not hide in the shadows and whisper, but rather, He, the Holy Spirit, directs prominently. In fact, in life, every actor is to depend on the prompter – to look for Him; to wait for His cue.
- A play is predictable for those involved; you are supposed to stick to the script. In life, everything is unpredictable; the scripts are written only after you have lived through the scene. And then, suddenly the scene changes;

you have never seen one quite like it before, so you look for the prompter or better yet, you keep your eye on the Director.

The subtitle to the play of life could be called, “The Drama of Change”.

Paul wrote in II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 17,

... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things are passed [continually passing] away; behold, new things have [constantly] come.

In other words, the Christian's middle name is “Change”.

Nowhere is such a dramatic change about to occur than in Acts, chapter 10. We arrive at this chapter in our study, and we are about to discover a great drama unfolding before our very eyes. It is the drama of change that will eventually build a bridge between the Jewish and the Gentile nations.

It was dramatic to see news clippings of the Berlin wall toppling down – a wall that had stood for thirty years. In Acts, chapter 10, we will see the crumbling of a wall between two people groups that had lasted for thousands of years.

Chapter 10 must be observed as an entire unit, so we will actually read the entire chapter today. The drama that unfolds in this chapter can be divided into four scenes. I will interrupt periodically to provide some insight or commentary.

Scene I

The Home of a Gentile Seeker

1. The first scene is in the home of a Gentile seeker.

Turn to Acts, chapter 10, and look at verse 1.

Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort,

It is time for the first interruption. I thought you would find it interesting to learn a little aside about this character in our play. The name “Cornelius” is interesting because it was made famous by a very special event. Historical records describe that, around the year 82 BC, Cornelius Sulla liberated ten thousand slaves. All of the male slaves took their liberator’s name to begin their new life. It is likely that this centurion was a descendant of one of those freed slaves.

Continue to verse 2.

[Cornelius was] 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.

Now, you need to understand that Cornelius is not a Christian. He is still living under Old Testament truth as one who feared God. The expression, “one who feared God with all his household” referred to Gentiles who had embraced the Jewish religion. These Gentiles attended the synagogue services and observed the Sabbath. Cornelius, like many other Gentile God “fearers,” had stopped worshiping idols and prayed to the God of Israel only.

Cornelius still does not know about the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. He does not know that forgiveness of sins is by faith in Christ alone.

Look at verses 3 and 4.

About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, “Cornelius!” And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”

In other words, because Cornelius was a Gentile, he was barred from presenting an offering to God in the Jerusalem temple. However, in these verses, we read that God was acknowledging his prayers and acts of giving.

Continue to verses 5 through 7, which will bring us to our second scene.

“Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Scene II

The Rooftop With a Jew Named Peter

2. Now there is a shift away from Caesarea to Joppa. Scene number two takes place on the rooftop with a Jew named Peter.

Look at verses 9 through 12.

On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!”

Now remember, Jewish people did not eat non-kosher foods. They faithfully followed the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Peter had never eaten a pork chop, or sausage, or barbecue, as well as many other things. In fact, he, like the Jewish people around him, refused to buy their meat from a Gentile butcher. They never ate in a Gentile’s home. If they bought a kitchen utensil from a Gentile, they would boil it first before using it. It was Mosaic law.

Now, Peter is already flexing some because of where he is staying. Look back at chapter 9, verse 43.

And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.

The orthodox Jew was not permitted to have dealings with anyone who worked with dead animals. In fact, tanners were required to live a specified number of yards outside a village. But this tanner was a believer; a member of the church in Joppa, and

he has invited Peter to stay in his home; to eat with his family; to eat at their table – with Gentile utensils. And Peter does.

It is clear in this that God is preparing Peter for a bigger challenge. It comes in the form of a vision – with all kinds of clean and unclean animals on it. You can imagine a fat pink pig right in the middle of the sheet . . . and the command comes, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!”

Continue to verse 14.

But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.”

Do you resemble that response?

The command is, “Peter, set aside everything you’ve ever learned about eating; set aside the teachings of Moses. There’s something new about the Christian life – you can have some bacon.”

Peter said, “By no means, Lord . . .”

In our vernacular, that is, “No way, Lord, not me . . . never!”

By the way, did you realize that Peter used contradicting terminology. Notice verse 14a again.

But Peter said, “By no means, Lord . . .”

What is the middle word in that phrase? “No!” Has it ever occurred to you that you cannot say “No” and “Lord” in the same sentence? It is either “No” and He is not Lord, or “Lord” and you never say “No.”

Now, I want to give you an assignment to do at home. That area in which God is challenging you to change, or obey, or repent, or submit . . . I want you to take your pencil when you get alone and go to this verse and cross out one of these expressions. You may cross out the words “By no means,” or cross out the word, “Lord.”

Look at verses 15 and 16.

Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” This happened three times, . . .

(Peter is like us, he is a slow learner. He needed the demonstration to be repeated three times.),

. . . and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

Scene III

The Living Room of Simon the Tanner

3. Now scene number three unfolds in the living room of Simon the Tanner.

Look at verses 17 through 23a.

Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon’s house, appeared at the gate;

and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there.

While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.

“But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself.”

Peter went down to the men and said, “Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?”

They said, “Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.”

So he invited them in and gave them lodging. . . .

This is another step in the right direction for Peter. He invites these Gentiles into the home, thus Peter sets aside the Jewish restrictions on associating with Gentiles. They sit at the table that evening and eat together and, undoubtedly talk about the vision and what it might mean. We know what it means – the gospel is about to be formally introduced to the Gentile nation; the Gentiles are about to be invited as equals into the body of Christ.

Scene IV

The Estate of a Roman Centurion

4. Now, the final scene takes place in the estate of a Roman Centurion.

Look at verses 23b through 43.

. . . *And on the next day he [Peter] got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.*

On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him.

But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man."

As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled.

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.

"That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."

Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments,

"and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.

"Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.'

"So I sent to you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality,

"but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.

"The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) –

"you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed.

"You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

"We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross.

"God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He should become visible,

"not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.

"And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

Verse 43 gives us the new message that Peter delivers to the representative of the Gentile nation, as it were, Cornelius. There is no more sacrifice; no more priestly caste; no more ritual or religion; no more Jew or Gentile. This is a message of redemption that comes from a personal faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins.

At some point between verses 43 and 44, everyone in that home invited Christ to forgive their sins; they placed their faith in His name and everything that His name represented – as verse 36 says, "Jesus Christ," or "Yeshua," Savior, Anointed One, Messiah, God come in the flesh. Continue to verses 44 through 48.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.

All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,

“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”

And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

A Church Movement Among the Gentiles

Now, a church movement began among the Gentiles in Caesarea. Let me give several reasons why.

Peter was willing to change

1. First, Peter was willing to change.

Take careful note of the key differences between several things in this change.

- Note the difference in needed change versus fleshly compromise.

Do not use the phrase, “Oh, that’s just some old way of living,” to justify personal compromise of integrity and purity.

- Understand the difference between traditions versus traditionalism.

Traditions are not necessarily bad. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, in II Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 15,

. . . stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught . . .

These traditions “tie us to the mast of truth when storms of uncertainty come.” Godly traditions are biblical and moral absolutes.

Traditionalism is simply hanging on to the past for the sake of our comfort zone or due to our lack of desire for change in thinking patterns and methods.

- Critically evaluate the difference between biblical conviction versus personal prejudice.

“The difference between a conviction and a prejudice is that you can explain a conviction without becoming angry.”

In this chapter, Peter was willing to change something ancient for something new.

Peter was willing to embrace someone different

2. The second reason a church movement began among the Gentiles in Caesarea is because Peter was willing to embrace someone different.

You can almost hear the timidity in Peter’s voice as he explains in verse 28,

. . . “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him . . .”

In other words, “I’m really not supposed to be doing this and if my friends back in Jerusalem could see me now, they’d have a ‘kosher konnition’.”

Why did Peter do it? Because God explained to him that, in effect, the death of Christ and the gospel of redemption was for Jew and Gentile.

Someone wrote, “The only thing that can destroy an old prejudice is a new love.”

Peter was willing to defend something new

3. Thirdly, Peter was willing to defend something new.

I have arranged these three thoughts in order of their progression: Peter first became willing to change something ancient, then he was willing to embrace someone different, and then he was willing to defend something new.

Skip ahead and look at verses 2 and 3 of chapter 11.

And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

The rest of that paragraph reveals Peter, a man once known for his distance from Gentile pagans, was now the primary defender of their nation.

Peter was a changed man!

Are you prepared for change?

One author, by the name of Chuck Swindoll, wrote,

Has God been allowed to change your attitude toward someone – has He been able to change an area of stubbornness in your life – or a deep-seated habit that has hurt your home and hindered your relationship with others for a long, long time . . . or a pattern

of discourtesy in your driving . . . or a profane tongue . . . or cheating . . . or laziness? The flesh dies a slow, bitter, bloody death – kicking and struggling all the way down. “Putting off” the clothes of the old man – the old, habitual lifestyle, will not be complete until you are determined to “put on” the garment of the new man – the new, fresh, Christian lifestyle. And the tailor’s name is change. He is a master at fitting your frame. But the process will be painful . . . and costly. The tailor’s real name is the Holy Spirit. You can count on Him to dispose of your old threadbare wardrobe as quickly as He outfits you with the new. By the way, He’s also on call twenty four hours a day when you have the urge to slip into the old duds “just one more time.” If you ask Him, He’ll help you remember what you looked like on the day your first walked into His shop. He has a mirror with memories – it’s called the Bible. God did not give us His Word to satisfy our curiosity: He gave it to us in order to change our lives.

Exactly what changes do you have on your personal drawing board? What are the changes you are asking the Lord to alter and adjust in your life?

In other words, how many of you today, are not sitting passively on the stage with your head in your hands waiting for the curtain to fall, or for some scene change to come along that you prefer? How many of

you are actively involved in the drama of the Christian life?

By the way, as the book of Revelation comes to a close, you can read in chapter 21, verse 5, where the Lord triumphant says,

. . . **“Behold, I am making all things new.”** . . .

Think of that! Even after the rapture, the tribulation, the millennial kingdom – the time you and I might think we have a handle on things – the Lord is telling us that He will even then, create a fresh new series of changes!

The best way to prepare for new things then, is to embrace them now by:

- putting off the old man and putting on the new man – a change of lifestyle;
- being transformed by the renewing of your mind – a change in thinking;
- developing the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – a change in personality.
- developing a heart that worships God – a change of heart.

Get involved in the Drama of the Christian life – *a drama called change!* Who knows, maybe if you are willing to change, He may use you to begin a movement of the Spirit in a household, a business, or perhaps even a nation!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/11/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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