

Grace Fellowship Church

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Series: Acts

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Who Gets In?

Acts 9-10

If you're here this morning and you don't have a Bible with you, slip up your hand. I want to put a Bible in your hand. It may take them a moment or so to get to you, and when you get that Bible, open it to Acts 9 and Acts 10. If you don't have a handout sheet, you're going to want that also because there are a bunch of references on that particular sheet.

We looked a little bit last week at chapter 9, but right here in the middle of the book of Acts, which if you'll remember and if you've been with us in this, it's the praxis, it's the kingdom praxis. This is what the kingdom is supposed to be looking like, and in the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John, Jesus announces the in breaking of the kingdom, the kingdom that has been anticipated, this messianic kingdom. There is this excitement, and there is this expectation, and Jesus announces the inauguration, the in breaking of the kingdom to this nation of Israel that has anticipated it for so long.

Then in chapter 8, there's something in Acts that goes all the way back to the kingdom promises God makes to Abraham: "Through you all the nations of the world are going to be blessed."

What is happening in Acts 8 and 9 and 10 is the out breaking of the kingdom. Now I'm using that word *kingdom*, and if you haven't been in church a lot or you haven't heard that term, it's just the rule and the reign of God. It is that something all of us hunger for. Do you know what I mean by that? It's that reality we haven't actually tasted, but we've glimpsed at times. We know things in this world are not right. They're not as they should be, and we hunger for that world to be put right, and Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. He lived out the *shalom* of God. He is deity. He is God in human flesh, but we see the glimpse, we see the kingdom in person there.

Now in Acts, you see this starting to break outside of Jerusalem, and what does that really look like? It's kind of strange, but it looks like a God who loves someone. Well if you look at chapter 9:1, this is where we were looking at last week. "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way..." (Acts 9:1-2)

Now I'm not going to go into this this morning, but if you look at these verses on your sheet, Exodus 13, Isaiah 40, Mark 1, Matthew 17, Mark 9, it gives you some understanding of what Paul is really going against, and it's the early church did not walk up to somebody and say, "I'm a Christian. Would you like to be one too?" They didn't use that word *Christian*. That word was imposed on them that they then accepted that happened a little later in Antioch. There were numbers of phrases though of which they did use, and several of them are actually found in this chapter 9.

They're called the *disciples*. This is rhetorical, so don't answer the question, but if somebody walked up to you and said, "Are you a disciple?" I think most of you would go, "Yes, I'm a disciple." If somebody invaded the US and invaded Atlanta and said, "We're going to put everybody on trial who are disciples," and in order to be convicted there has to be evidence that this person really is a disciple, I'm wondering how many people would be convicted. I really wonder.

I know a lot of people would say, "Yep, I'm a disciple," but is there actually adequate evidence that you are truly a disciple? Because the nature of a disciple is they make disciples, so do you have people who are your disciples, who are following you because you have actually followed Jesus? What if they said, "Well we're going to give everybody at least one mulligan on this, so you need more than one"? I'm wondering how many people would actually be convicted of being disciple makers and being disciples. The early church called themselves the disciples.

The early church was referred to as the *saints* (now that doesn't mean the football team), those who were set apart. They were the saints. This phrase they used here is people who were of *the Way*, and this is a phrase that goes all the way back to the book of Exodus, the people who were part of the exodus. So he's persecuting them. In verse 3, it says, "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven." (Acts 9:3) I don't have time to get into this this morning, but you might even jot down the reference Isaiah 9. This is literally that prophecy coming to happen.

"Then he fell to the ground..." (Acts 9:4) Do you notice he falls to the ground and there's nothing here about a horse or a donkey? Almost everybody thinks he fell off a horse or a donkey, and it's because some of the Renaissance paintings how they put it, but there's actually no donkey in there. It doesn't have anything to do with the Bible. If you believe that, it doesn't make you a heretic; you're just wrong.

"Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?'" (Acts 9:4-5) So you find here in the middle of this out breaking of the kingdom God is reaching out and setting His gaze of grace upon this Ethiopian eunuch, these people of Samaria, this Hebrew terrorist.

Look over to chapter 10. There's the whole cast of characters here. They're just not the usual suspects. In verse 1, it says, "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius..." now look at this, "...a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment..." (Acts 10:1) Now think about who this guy was. There would have been about six of his rank in all of Palestine. Israel at that time was a hotbed. It was a place where revolution was just brewing, so they had a high concentration of Roman soldiers there.

A man who was a centurion was someone who was in charge of probably somewhere between a hundred soldiers to sometimes even as much as 600 soldiers. A centurion was essentially...I don't want to be harsher than is reality...but he was a mercenary. He was a hired assassin. For this centurion named Cornelius, it's an interesting thing because he is different than Saul. Saul's motivation, the thing that drove Saul, was religion and passion. He was deeply passionate about

it. He actually *wanted* to kill these people of the Way. For this mercenary, this for-hire professional killer, it's not personal at all. It's just professional. "That's just my job."

There would have been maybe six of his rank in all of that area. You see them mentioned in other places in Scripture. One of the most prominent places you see them mentioned is one of the centurions oversaw the crucifixion of Jesus. Now we have no reason to believe this was the same man, but there isn't any question at all that these men would've known each other, would have viewed each other as comrades. Their association would have gone back a long time.

When Jesus is crucified and the skies go dark, it is the centurion who is pictured as describing he beats his chest and he says, "Truly, this was an innocent Man. Truly, this was the Son of God." So obviously there's been some conversation that's been generating among this top echelon of soldiers who are there, but for them it's not something they take joy in enforcing. It was just their job to enforce the rule of Rome in that area.

No question about it, this man would have overseen other executions. He would have overseen the leadership of the suppression of rebel forces, but for him, it wasn't something he wanted to do. See, I don't know if you've ever worked with soldiers, but it's an interesting mix when someone has been a soldier. There's a certain kind of soldier who actually likes it, who actually likes the power. They like it. That's a hard situation, but most soldiers do what they do not because they like exercising power and domination over people. It's just they know there has to be the rule of order and law, and most soldiers look back at situations where things had to move to a level where people had to die, and they don't like it, and it haunts them, and they think about

it, and they rethink about it, and they wonder if there was any way they could've avoided that kind of bloodshed.

Now I'm going to tell you something; that's the kind of man this Cornelius is. It describes him as "...a devout man..." now we wouldn't know that if the Scriptures didn't tell us this, "...and one who feared God..." (Acts 10:2)

Now that's a phrase that is used specifically for people who have come to worship God, the Yahweh God, the God of Israel, but they haven't really come fully into being Jewish. They retain their cultural identity. They probably even have their foot back into whatever pagan world their world was. In that world, whoever you were as an identity and people, that was the kind, that was the religion of which you were associated, so he would've still had associations with the pantheon of gods in Rome, but he had come to fear God, this God of Israel, and respect, and there was this drawing that was going on in his household. That's that word *oikos*.

So this incomplete faith has penetrated and has moved all the way down through all the people over which he's responsible. Now it also says, "...who gave alms generously..." (Acts 10:2)

Now we don't use that word *alms*, but he was a man of generosity. He was a giver. He wasn't just a taker. He was somebody who was financially in, and he cared about the people he was around.

A lot of these centurions lived for money. The average guy who became a centurion would've served about 20 years, then he would've been given land by Rome, and he would've been allowed to keep his plundering. So he would've been a fairly rich man, but he gave out of that.

"...and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day..." (Acts 10:2-3) Now that's an important time because that time is the time of the day that down through history, all the way from the time of the institution of the tabernacle, two times a day, once in the morning and once at night, a lamb was slain. So he is praying simultaneously where for thousands of years now a lamb has been slain and there has been an anticipation of the Messiah and the Lamb of God.

At that hour he's praying. "...he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!' And when he observed him, he was afraid..." (Acts 10:3-4) Now you know my little talk on angels, right? Angels are not effeminate, little furry creatures. They are not these little things that sit upon the top of the Christmas tree and then a little bell rings. If there were a sound that accompanied angels, it would be more like *Ah! Ah! Ah!* A nuclear bomb has just hit. Not like *Twinkle, twinkle, little star*. That's not it at all. These guys are like extraterrestrial, Transformer, scary creatures. Every time somebody sees them in the Bible, the very first thing the angels say is, "Do not be afraid!"

Sometimes the next thing the angel says is, "Wake up!" When somebody says to me, "I think I saw an angel," I always say, "You will know it if you see one." You won't go, "I *think* I saw an angel." You will go, "I had a problem the other day. I saw this extraterrestrial." The angels are scary creatures. God did not make them to put on top of Christmas trees with white fur (good heavens), feathers. So he comes to Cornelius. This centurion, this man who has been a battle-scarred warrior, a man who is the top of the line... This is not some little gossamer. This is a warrior! "What is it, lord?" (Acts 10:4)

Now look at this. "So he said to him, 'Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.'" (Acts 10:4) Do you believe the Bible? Okay, let me ask you a question. *Do you believe God hears the prayers of lost people?* Well you're going to have to take your crayon and start messing with that passage if you don't believe that.

The angel says, "The God, the real God, the God in heaven, the God of the cosmos, the God who I serve has had His eye on you, and He has heard your prayers, He has seen your acts of mercy, and I have come to answer your prayers." Wow. I don't know what that does to you, but I don't actually know what to do with that.

Verse 5: "Now send men to Joppa..." (Acts 10:5) Now does anybody remember where you see Joppa in the Bible? Joppa. Think about it a minute. Joppa. What comes to your mind? Somebody said it. Jonah! Remember Jonah 1? Jonah is the reluctant evangelist. This guy could've used counseling. It's amazing to me what God does and who God chooses and uses. He says to Jonah, "I want you to go and share the gospel in..." Where? "...Nineveh." You know where Nineveh is? It's over in modern-day Iraq. It was the headquarters of the Assyrian government.

If you ever get through London and go into the British Museum, go into the Middle Eastern section, and you'll see these reliefs that were taken out of the headquarters of Nineveh. They were among the most gruesome, terrible, insane soldiers. They took delight in torturing people. They were known in the entire civilization as the most ruthless people. They fed people to animals. They tortured them. They skewered them. They spent time figuring out ways to just be

absolutely, insanely evil and mean. God says, "I want you to go up to their headquarters. I want you to go to their city, and I want you to prepare a message."

What does Jonah say? "I don't think so. That's not my sweet spot. They don't like me up there. I don't like them over there. You must be thinking of some other reluctant prophet." Just let me give you this for what it's worth. Sometimes God calls you to do jobs that are not in your sweet spot, and sometimes He calls you to places that are not your sweet spot, and sometimes He calls you not just for them, but for you because He wants to do not only a work in them, but He wants to do a work in you. Can you say, "Amen"? We all know that, right?

Now it's an interesting thing. Who's down at Joppa? Peter is down at Joppa, and if you read back over in chapter 9, Peter is down there with this guy named Simon, the tanner. Do you see it there? "Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.' 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. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa." (Acts 10:5-8)

Now this is a really interesting thing because when Jesus talks to Peter, Jesus makes a statement to Peter that I really don't want to be dogmatic on this because I haven't actually read this anywhere. I just have an idea. You know how dangerous that is? So this is not doctrine. This is just like an idea, and if any of you care to carry deeper research on it and correct me, I would love to get an email on it because I've been thinking about it a lot.

When Jesus calls Peter and He says, "Who do men say that I am?" (Remember that?), he goes, "Some people think You're like Elijah, and some people think You're like John the Baptist." Jesus says, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter says, "You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God," and Jesus says, "Flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you." Right? Remember this?

Then what does He do? He says to Peter, "Simon Bar-Jonah..." You know what that means? Son of Jonah. Now you do know Simon was not the son of Jonah. "Simon son of Jonah, upon this rock I'll build My church, and I'll give you the keys to the kingdom." You know what's happening here? Peter is unlocking the doors because what's happening here if you're looking at your notes there, the kingdom is not breaking in; the kingdom is breaking out. See, when Jesus announces the in breaking of the kingdom, it's the kingdom that's breaking in to Israel, and now what is happening is the kingdom is breaking out and strange things are happening here.

Look at verse 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." (Acts 10:9) That's in the middle of the day.

"Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 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. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.'" (Acts 10:9-14)

So tell me, what's the worst thing you ever ate? The strangest thing you've ever eaten? What? Gophers? Gophers! Really? Who ate the gophers? Let me see. Give me your hand. I'm curious. What do gophers taste like? Don't say, "Chicken." Locusts? Okay. What else we have here? Oh, sick, sick, sick. Cockroaches. They eat them over there in the Philippines, and they're not the little ones. They're not those little German ones that slip under stuff. They have saddles, and they pop the head right off. The kids will do it. What else we have here? We have a... What? What is it? Arsenic? That was from Joe. You're a doctor; you can't eat arsenic. Horsemeat. That is those French. They eat that, don't they?

This dream actually sounds like it's a French dream, doesn't it? I mean, they eat the strangest things around. Although who are Southerners? What can we say? We eat stuff you shouldn't eat too. So his response is, "Not so, Lord." Now you know you can't say those together. That's an oxymoron. He's either Lord, or not so. You can't go, "Not so, Lord." You can't! It's either yes or no, but he is freaking ever loving out. He's down there. He's already in this place that he's not comfortable in a kind of his religious structure. He's a good kosher boy.

Now he's down there with Simon, the tanner, and according to the Levitical commandments if you touch a carcass, you're unclean, so here is a man who habitually lives unclean because he's always dealing with dead things, and he's staying in a guy's house that probably has a bunch of dead things hanging around, and so he's probably like, *Okay, I think I'm just going to go up on the roof where maybe there's nothing dead, but I'm really hungry.*

You know if you've ever been around where they butcher and they clean stuff and they tan it, it stinks! So he's smelling blood and dried stuff, and he's hungry, and he's probably at the same time not hungry. He goes up there, and he's on the roof, and it's very common in that day, and still if you go to the Middle East you'll see these roofs, and often there is like a sail across there, and he kind of lays down, and he has a semi-dream, semi-awake thing, and this whole sheet sail of stuff comes down, and it looks like a zoo, and God says, "You eat it," and Peter goes, "No, no, God. No, no, no, no, no, no, no God. I'm not going to do that."

So he got to see the dream again. You know what that means? That means if God is trying to teach you something and knows the answer, number one, you get to go through it again. You get to repeat the grade. You get to go through it again. *Oh, I got the answer wrong the first time.* "Well you want to see the dream again?" Three times.

"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. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.'

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?' 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.' Then he invited them in and lodged them.

On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him." (Acts 10:17-25) Does anybody have a problem here? Yeah, you don't worship men. Notice what Peter does. Peter does not say, "I'm glad you recognize I'm the first pope." I'm sorry for you Catholics who are here. God bless you. I know, forgive me. Send me the email.

"But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. 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.'" (Acts 10:26-28) Look at this. ""But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28) This is really good news. This is really good news for you and me because this is where we got in. This is where we got in. This is our spiritual roots.

Now some of you may be Jewish, but very few of you are Jewish. You who are Jewish, God bless you, but let me tell you something; right here God says, "I'm going to throw the door open," and right now the conversion is not just a conversion of Cornelius; it is a conversion of Peter. Peter comes to this moment where he recognizes the way he was looking was wrong. He has to come to this place. "Where I am right now, the way I've thought, the way I've been raised,

the way I've had my mind made up, the way I've been pushing forward, the way I looked at people, the way I looked at me, the way I'm looking at things, I have been wrong, and right now I'm going to make this announcement that I've recognized God is doing something new here."

Now this is where I want us to chew on just for a minute here, and we often ask the question...

Did Cornelius worship God? Well here's the reality: If he did, and he was called a God-fearer, he certainly worshiped Him inadequately and inaccurately, and his worship at best was incomplete, amen? I mean, there is no question. This is the reason God sends Peter there because there is a defective worship going on there.

I really want us to struggle with the question not did *Cornelius* worship God rightly and well, but do *we* worship God rightly and well? Do we worship the God who loves Cornelius? Do we worship the God who loves Saul? Do we worship the God who cares deeply, compassionately, seeking out and speaking to those?

I was reading an article...somebody forwarded it to me...last month about the Son of Sam killer. Do you remember him? His parole came up last month, and he sent a letter to the parole company officers, overseers, that he wanted to withdraw his request to be paroled, and he wanted it not to be ever considered again. He had found freedom, and it was inside of this prison, and it was in Jesus Christ. Yeah.

Now, you know what? My brain goes, *Oh he's just writing that and five years from now he'll want out again.* If you read anything about that murder spree that took place, there's no question

if you read anything at all about that, this man was demon possessed and delighted in the slaughter and the taunt of the police officers, and would have kept on killing unless somebody had caught him. Do we believe God can save somebody like that? Wow! That's insane. Not only save them reluctantly, like, "Well I guess," but, "No, I'll go to the cross for you."

A couple of weeks ago downtown, our downtown campus has an outreach to a lot of street people, prostitutes, and one of the girls they were working with was shot and killed, and they organized a vigil outside of this brothel for this girl, and they organized a service, a memorial service to this girl who nobody really cared about. They killed her and threw her in an alley like she was trash.

Now it's easy for me to believe God cares about that girl, but does God love that girl's pimp? *No, no, no. That's not possible.* Here's where I want to push us to: I want us to realize that among people we think God is not at work, God may be at work. Among people who seem brazenly, boldly brave and without conscience, behind the scenes they may be down on their knees going, "God, please can You show me a way out of this?" God may lead you or me into a situation to speak boldly on behalf of Christ.

I know this sounds crazy, but He may even do it with a vision or a dream, amen? You think God still does that? Well I'm here to tell you He does. I can tell you for certain, without any question that He does. I've been around these situations before.

There is a young lady who was working in Afghanistan. Now I can't tell you a whole lot about this story, but she ended up getting arrested, but the reason she ended up arrested is because two girls had had this dream, and this man in white raiment says, "Listen, go down to this street, knock on this door behind this number, and they will tell you who Jesus is." They went down, and they knocked on the door, and they said, "We had this dream, and this man in white told us to come and knock on this door, and you would tell us who Jesus is." You know what? They did it to their own peril, and they ended up getting arrested.

Now God delivered them, but let me just tell you something; we need to be people who boldly, kindly, brazenly, but with grace, when God calls us into situations that are beyond imagination, the only word I know for it is *radical* grace. Radical, unimaginable, beyond the boundaries, beyond the pale, beyond everything you can possibly imagine. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

I put those references there out of Ezekiel. You know what those references in Ezekiel are? He writes to Ezekiel and He says, "Listen, do you think I have any delight in the death of the wicked? Do you think I have any delight in the death of the wicked? No! The only thing I desire is that the wicked should turn from their wickedness." Yeah! "That's My heart! You are a watchman on the wall, and you are to declare what is right and wrong, but My delight is that the wicked turn from their sins and live." Now here's the question...*Do we know that kind of God?*

Let's pray: Father, thank You so much for You. Lord, thank You for the fact that You love us and not just us, but You love the world, that You threw these gates of grace just wide open.