

*Words and Deeds: Visions*  
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*Joel 2:23-32; Luke 2:8-14; Acts 10:1-20*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 10:1-20. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy and precious Word. “At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."”

If you're in business, you've heard of a vision statement. Vision statements are supposed to tell everyone what your business is about and what it's going be, where it's going, and who it will serve. Last year, Forbes published an article called: “Corporate Mission Statements Don't Really Matter Unless You Want To Become A Great Leader.” We've become convinced that a company's vision is going to determine whether it's a success or a failure.

The church has bought into it. We were encouraged when we started CrossWay to have a vision statement. You can read it on the front page of every one of our bulletins. Now our vision is pretty simple. When the Session and I created it, we thought it was simply God's description of what every church was supposed to do...not just CrossWay, but every faithful church.

But we're told that visionary leadership is crucial to a great and growing movement, business, church. Think how Martin Luther King's “I Have A Dream” speech helped create another way to think about relationships between people of different races. Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg: names associated with huge companies with “vision.” Megachurches like Willow Creek in Chicago and Saddleback in southern California attribute their success to visionary leadership, to someone who thought God had an extraordinary idea for their church.

Problem is, visionary leadership fails. The world's worst wars were fought because somebody had a vision of a future for their country that involved destroying other peoples. The wrong vision kills companies – just ask Sears, Kmart, JCPenney's, Toys R Us. The megachurch idea of vision is not the same as what a vision is in the Bible. Bill Hybels was the founder of Willow Creek Church and the creator of the “seeker sensitive” service, which introduced the idea of a show that would entice larger audiences replacing worship. He admitted his vision hadn't grown the church spiritually at all – not long before he resigned in disgrace for moral failings.

What is biblical vision? How is it different from what we think of as vision in our world today? It's important to understand what God does in visions and how they are nothing like our world's idea of long-term planning. What we're going to see in today's passage is that biblical visions are God's revelation of Himself and His plans – and God's call is not that we be visionary ourselves, but that we obey His revelations and take our lead from what He tells us.

So the passage starts with Cornelius. What do we know about him? He lived in Caesarea, a port city for Israel not very far from Joppa and Lydda that we learned about last week. It was where Rome and Israel met. Herod the Great built public works there that made Romans feel welcome – despite being in Israel, there were pagan temples for the emperor there, and it hosted sports competitions and theater that would appeal to Romans. Cornelius was stationed there.

Cornelius and his family were devout and God-fearing. That term has a specific meaning. To the Jewish people, a “god-fearer” was someone who worshipped YHWH, the one true God, but did not convert to Judaism. Being a soldier in the Roman army would have made that impossible. But that didn't mean that you couldn't honor God. Cornelius and his family regularly helped the poor and prayed to God; they put their faith in action and stood against popular Roman culture that thought helping the weak made you weak. And Cornelius would have been well known in Caesarea because he was a military leader, commanding a hundred men.

One day Cornelius has a vision of an angel calling out to him. Of course, Cornelius is terrified, but the angel has a very specific message for him. God is going to honor him in some way for his faithfulness, and so he is to send men to Joppa to retrieve Peter. The angel is really specific too – it's the Simon Peter staying with Simon the tanner out by the sea. And Cornelius obeys the vision, sending servants and a fellow believer soldier to make sure this happened.

One thing we learn about God's visions from this is that they do not come to the people we expect. From a god-fearing perspective, Cornelius makes sense...and yet he doesn't. Cornelius' position as a commander in the Roman army would put him at odds with those who believe that Christians are called to be pacifists. Paul's letters tell us that governing authorities are placed there by God to bring about justice. Should we be peacemakers? Absolutely. But positions of authority with the power of law behind them, whether that be military or police or government, are OK roles for Christians.

This also means that we can't judge whether someone has had a vision from God based on our preconceived notions. God might give a vision to a pastor, but just as likely it might be to a layperson. It might come to a learned person or someone without education. When God speaks to us, He is no respecter of persons. He speaks so that His will would be accomplished.

Another thing we learn is that visions from God only tell us *what* we need to know *when* we need to know it. We really have no idea what God is up to from this passage alone; we'll learn more as the story continues. Just like Cornelius and Peter, we're only getting part of the story this week; we'll get more of it next week. But visions from God tell us what we need to know now and show us enough to obey in the present. I can't think of a time in the Bible when someone was shown, beginning to end, in a vision how everything was going to work out.

At Christmastime, we hear the song, "Mary, Did You Know?" It's about all these things that Jesus would do, that He would walk on water, that He would heal, and that He eventually die and rise again to save us from sin. It's the question, Mary, did you have any idea? And the reality is, no, she didn't. The angel told her what she needed to know – that she would be the mother of the Messiah, that she would give Him the name Jesus, that He would save His people from their sins, and that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her so that she would remain a virgin. But Mary had no clue all the things that were to come. God isn't that interested in providing us visions of the far future so much as He wants obedience in the present.

Moving on to Peter's vision...I want us to see it from his point of view. He's gone up on the roof of the home to pray – not unusual. Especially by the sea, it's cool up there at noon time. He's hungry, and while it's noon, they normally had breakfast and dinner but not lunch as we think of it. So maybe he's drowsy like we get when we haven't eaten. He's praying and he falls into an unusual state – it's translated "trance," but it's an ecstatic vision, a place where he is sleeping but not, fully aware of what he's seeing. Maybe it uses this word because what Peter sees would be, for him, similar to a nightmare.

He sees something like a sheet with four corners coming down from heaven. In this gigantic sheet are animals of every kind – birds, reptiles, all sorts of things. And with it comes a command – "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." We can't know exactly how this sounded to Peter, but it had to have been terrible. There are plenty of foods we won't eat, right? Some things just taste bad to us. Some animals we won't eat because we keep them as pets. We won't eat endangered animals. We're grossed out by creepy crawly things and animals we associate with disease.

But imagine being taught from birth that some animals make you unclean before God. Not only that, but it's written right there in the holy Scriptures – that for you, certain animals are completely off-limits. Contact with their dead bodies makes you ritually unclean. Intentionally eating them will get you banished from the community. Most of us know about pigs, but also camels, rabbits, lobster, crab, shrimp, most birds, the list is pretty extensive. Observant Jews avoid all these things even today.

Now imagine having a vision from God in prayer, you're already hungry, so hungry you've kind of zoned out, and you're commanded, "Eat anything here." Of course Peter says no! His response is emphatic - "surely not!" "No way!" No proper Jewish man would say any less. This goes against everything he's ever been taught...except by Jesus.

Jesus did not remove the kosher food laws directly, but he explained very clearly in Mark 7 that eating particular foods doesn't make anyone unclean. What comes out of a person makes them unclean – their wicked thoughts, actions, and perversions. Mark adds that by saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. Yet even then, it would be very hard for any Jewish person to eat things they had been taught were repulsive and wrong – literally, “abominations.”

Yet the voice tells Peter each time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” What a message! How that still resonates with us. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” We are going to study the ramifications of this vision over the next few weeks because the discussion takes a while in Scripture. It's not only going to apply to food but to the Gentiles who were outside the church. Peter doesn't have it figured out yet, and just as he's thinking about it, Cornelius' men arrive to talk with him. So we're not going to get it all figured out today, but we will over the next couple of weeks.

So for our remaining discussion time this morning, I want to explore two things. The first is the one we just heard: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” How different would our lives be if we lived by that phrase? Yes, it's about food, yes, it's about letting non-Jewish people into the church of Jesus. But it's also about us, about believers in the here and now. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

I think it first applies to how we look at ourselves. Now on the one hand, we're still very human. We could be believers for decades and have a whole lot of garbage still in our lives that needs to be taken out. Still struggles with lust, greed, pride, unrighteousness. Scripture calls the heart desperately wicked. We must die to that old self every day. We've got to take out the trash every day. We fight because until we reach Jesus' side, the curse of Adam lingers on us.

But you know what you can be grateful for? Do you know why you can smile every day in the midst of your struggles? God has made you clean. The part of you that God has forged for Himself that is going to live forever? It's been washed. When you look in your Bibles in passages like 1 Corinthians 6 and Hebrews 10, you find that you were sanctified – it's already done as far as God is concerned. The process is ongoing but the result is already confirmed.

When you have one of those days where you fall and fall hard, when you yell at your wife, when you snap at a child, when you browse the wrong Internet site, when you take something that doesn't belong to you, when your greed overwhelms you, you are responsible. You are guilty. But that guilt doesn't define who you are or who you are going to be. You have done an impure thing, but you are not defiled forever. You have been washed.

You ever cook with Teflon? The really good stuff. You can bake on nasty stuff and you know what? Just a little water and it washes away. Nothing sticks to it. It's so good they use the stuff in paint, in clothing, carpets. But even Teflon has its limits. God doesn't. The blood of Jesus is far more effective at getting rid of sin than water on Teflon. And you know what? If you think of yourself as impure, as stained, as permanently broken, you'll keep sinning because you've defined yourself that way. Don't do that. If God has made you clean, you are clean; you can stay clean; you're meant for that. And then apply it to other people too. If they are believers, they will fail and fall too. Don't hold it against them forever. They're washed just like you.

The second thing I want to explore together is why we should question modern-day visions and church “visionaries.” Now I believe some people today have legitimate visions from the Lord. A well-researched book called *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening The Muslim World?* documents how throughout Arab lands, Jesus has appeared to people in remarkably similar dreams telling them to expect to hear the truth about Him soon, and then being presented soon after with the gospel. These visions fit the pattern we see with Cornelius – that God doesn't reveal the truth in a dream, but awakens them to the truth that will be coming to them.

But much of what we hear as “vision” today is business marketing dressed up with Bible verses, and sometimes it leads astray even well-meaning evangelicals we have a lot in common with. The leader of Bethel Church, Bill Johnson, is connected to the popular music group Jesus Culture. He said he has a vision from the Lord that every sickness is to be cured right now by supernatural means, and that we're to do it and bring revival. It sounds great, but God's not healing folks like the vision said. And you know what? God brings about revival, not us.

Bill Johnson has also said that “our present understanding of Scripture can only take us so far” with Jesus. Now nobody has a relationship with God just by reading the Bible, but we encounter God there and know who He is like. His Word is His self-revelation. Do we need to pray and talk to God and involve Him in our daily lives? Sure. But when someone tells you that you must go beyond the Bible to know God, that God will give visions of Himself beyond Scripture or even contradictory to Scripture, they've become untrustworthy.

We might ask: did Peter receive a revelation that contradicted Scripture? Why can't that happen today? Well, first off, Peter's vision did not contradict Jesus, who had declared during His ministry that food didn't make you unclean. Peter's vision gave deeper weight and meaning to Jesus' teaching; it didn't contradict it. And Peter was the pre-eminent disciple, the leader of the early church, able to share a message that would go out to the world's believers. No one today can have a vision that will change church teaching because the whole church can't receive it.

I've got a “vision” for CrossWay. I would love to see a network of small churches that reaches people that big churches can't, that instead of growing a huge congregation, creating smaller ones. I've prayed about that and I know it isn't my idea. We have a plan we're trying right now sending mail to people who move into Chesterfield inviting them to try out CrossWay.

But you know what? It's not a vision like Cornelius and Peter. I think that a network of small churches is something that can work and is biblical, but I don't even know if God will bring it at all, and whether He'd bring it about through CrossWay or another ministry. God has blessed us, but I don't know where CrossWay will be in five years. Only God does. We trust that God has a plan and vision for us far beyond what we can see or what He will even show us.

Next week, we'll talk more about what happens when Peter and Cornelius meet as a result of these amazing visions. We'll see more about what God meant by giving them. In the meantime, though, remember – you have been cleaned by God, so live as a new creation washed in the blood of Jesus rather than as someone who hasn't been redeemed. And be discerning when someone tells you what they believe is God's vision for them or their church – check it by Scripture, and make sure you stay on God's straight and narrow path of obedience He has for us.