

Words and Deeds: Mysterious Ways
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 143:10; Mark 1:2-11; Acts 10:44-11:18

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 10:44-11:18. May the Word of God speak to us today and dwell richly in us this week. “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 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. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord 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?” When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.””

The other night, Cameron and Catha and I were watching the Netflix remake of the old television series *Lost In Space*. A couple of episodes in, after the characters do in fact get lost in space, the mother and father are trapped under a gigantic satellite dish. They haven’t been getting along and haven’t gotten along well for a long time. What surprised us was that this wasn’t an opportunity for them to bond; they came out in the same state they went in.

We’ve all watched enough TV to know that two characters who are forced by their circumstances into a small space for a long period always wind up talking, becoming friends, patching up differences, getting back together, you get the picture. We’re surprised when the hero doesn’t get the girl at the end of the movie. We’re shocked when the lead character dies. We watch television to be entertained, and often times entertained means soothed, comforted, relieved. We want there to be patterns, order, no big change. Predictability.

Sometimes we wish God was the same way. But one thing we learn from Scripture is that God is always and ever consistent, but not predictable. His attributes never change – He is always loving, always just, always faithful, always merciful, always and above all holy. But His ways are mysterious. We see that in today’s passage as something brand new occurs, something completely unexpected.

For the last two weeks, we’ve seen how God gave visions to Peter and Cornelius, and how Cornelius brought his whole household and all his friends together to hear the message Peter was going to bring to them. We heard Cornelius’ vision twice to show just how important it was, and today we hear Peter’s vision a second time too. When you remember that Scripture was studied orally throughout most of history, you can see why the repetition made a difference.

Cornelius was a faithful man; he had a good reputation as a God-fearer among the Gentiles. Peter comes to Joppa and tells Cornelius’ guests all about the gospel – all about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Then suddenly, as Peter is about to finish his presentation, the Holy Spirit comes upon everyone there – everyone. They all start speaking in tongues, they start praising God – they’ve received the Holy Spirit!

The Jewish believers, called the circumcised here, are flabbergasted. The Holy Spirit is for the Gentiles too? This shows how deep their biases against non-Jewish people were. They expected that only those who officially became a part of the Jewish community – who pledged themselves to God, went through ritual purification, were circumcised, and received into God’s covenant people – could possibly be believers. But no! Here they are, uncircumcised Gentiles, still eating unclean animals, still living in pagan neighborhoods, and God has chosen them too!

And Peter’s like, um, so, I guess we baptize them with water now, since they’ve already received the Holy Spirit. God has included them in His Kingdom, so who is Peter to say otherwise? Peter later says that refusing them water baptism after seeing the Spirit come down on them would be to oppose God. So he has them baptized in the name of Jesus, and word of it gets to the apostles and throughout Judea.

There are two ways this event affects how we understand God operates. The first is the “why did it happen question.” Why did the Holy Spirit fall on the Gentile believers before they were baptized? Here’s why: *God proves the inclusion of non-Jewish peoples in the church is not from man but from Him.* Nobody said, “Hey, we’ve got to expand our churches, we need more money, so let’s open the doors to everybody.” No one was bugging the apostles asking, “So when can we bring our Roman friends to Bible study?” Because of the animosity the Jews had towards everyone else, they weren’t thinking about the Gentiles at all.

But God was. The Holy Spirit comes down and *then* there’s a water baptism because God shows everyone that this is His decision, His movement, His choice to bring the nations into His Kingdom, just as His Scripture promises over and over. Peter is clueless what to do, but God isn’t. This is God’s choice, and sending the Spirit on the Gentiles proves they are included.

Here's another important thought, one that explains why we are a part of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition: *it's God's choice through and through who is in the Kingdom*. The Spirit falls on everyone at the gathering. Everyone praises and worships and speaks in tongues. Now I've never known any group where everyone is on the same page, especially not with faith. The Scripture doesn't say, "They believed Peter and then the Holy Spirit came." Peter wasn't even done! Yet every last one of them receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I don't want to discount the part we play, the command we're given, to turn away from sin and to believe Jesus in faith and obedience. But God gives faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit to those He chooses. We don't earn it; God doesn't give salvation based on our choices. He saves us by His good pleasure through the work of Jesus. We can't explain it, but on this day in history, everyone who heard received the Spirit and trusted Jesus in faith. That's what God does. He makes a way into His Kingdom for people who were far outside by His good grace.

The Jewish believers have a hard time accepting that the Gentiles are now a part of the group. Their first thought is to accuse Peter of sin – "you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." They so can't get their heads around the fact that God might do this that they want to blame the messenger. When Peter explains everything fully, the text literally says, "They became silent." What else could they do? Eventually, questions about how Gentile believers should live come up. But the Jewish believers accept it and praise God. Since God has done this, there's no debating it. The Gentiles have faith, they have turned from sin, and they have the Holy Spirit. They are brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God.

For the rest of the time we have this morning, I want to answer a question you might not have asked and follow that up with an observation about our expectations of God. Here's the question: *is the unusual way the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile believers something we should expect: a second blessing of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, or something else? No.*

We have to deal with that question because a lot of faithful Christians have tried to explain why the Holy Spirit sometimes seems to be given to believers in the early church different ways at different times. One way parts of the church have tried to explain it is an explanation called the "second blessing." The idea is that while every believer receives the Spirit, most of us live in a state of small growth for decades as we make super-slow progress towards living more like what God wants. But a few people seeking after God receive a "second blessing" of the Holy Spirit, where they become "on fire" for God and don't knowingly sin any more. They are the "truly spiritual" among us. When the Holy Spirit comes in an unexpected way like He does in this passage, they see that as evidence of a different gift of the Holy Spirit.

The problem is, you can't make it happen, you can ask for it and not receive it, and precious few people actually do get it. I attended Asbury Theological Seminary, which is rooted in the Wesleyan Methodist movement that taught the "second blessing" idea. Out of all my professors there and hundreds of students, only one professor told me they had received the second blessing and were now living a sin-free life. And my thought was, God never mentions a special blessing for a privileged few in Scripture.

Ultimately, the “second blessing” idea is wishful thinking. Some day we will be free from sin and we will obey completely, but not in this life. The “second blessing” idea is really escapism. It’s the idea that we can escape the difficult and painful work of the Spirit molding us day by day, and day by day giving up our desires to do the desires of our Father in heaven.

In a similar way, the Pentecostal and Charismatic wings of the church have tried to be faithful to Jesus just like the Wesleyans and Methodists, but they too look at this pattern in Scripture and say “to really have the fullness of the Spirit, you have to speak in tongues.” You’ll know when you’re really in when you can pray in a language you don’t know. Some will go so far as to say that if you haven’t spoken in tongues, you aren’t saved at all.

But it simply doesn’t work that way. In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit. He asks, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all healers? Do all speak in tongues?” The way the Greek is constructed includes the answer “no.” Paul encourages everyone to ask for spiritual gifts, but he says that no one has all of them and no one spiritual gift is the norm for everybody. Everyone’s gifts are important to the church, no matter what form they take.

And this leads us into our observation of God for the morning: *God will not be confined or controlled by our desire for easy answers, predictable patterns, and familiar formulas.* God threw away the pattern that the early church expected when He brought the Gentiles into the Kingdom. They expected the Holy Spirit at water baptism; God said, “Not so fast.” They thought Paul was their enemy as he persecuted the early church; God said, “Not so fast.” They thought the Gentiles were beyond redemption; God said, “Not so fast.”

We want patterns so that we can box God in and make Him conform to our expectations. I’m going to pick on a few traditions, including ours, so hold tight. Roman Catholicism theology says your status with God is determined by your participation in the sacraments. In the Lutheran church, water baptism brings salvation; no water baptism, no salvation. Baptist churches believe that infant baptism isn’t sufficient because a baby can’t say, “I believe;” many say you must be baptized again as an adult or you’re out. The evangelical tradition has made a bad habit of saying, “If you pray this prayer once saying you’re sorry and you want to be forgiven, you’ll go to heaven.” The problem with all these formulas is that not one of them shows up in the Bible.

God is consistent. There are some things about which Scripture is totally absolute. God’s love for His people never changes. God’s moral expectations for us never change. God’s attributes never change. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus; there is no other way into the Kingdom of God. God is always trustworthy and reliable. He is always for eternity Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Anyone who remains faithful to Jesus until their death will be saved. We can count on those things.

But you aren’t going to back God into a corner and *force* Him to do anything. That’s why, when we baptize in our church, we say that baptism is a sign and a seal. Baptism is the external sign of God’s washing us inside and changing us. We are sealed to Christ just as a king would put his royal imprint on a document saying, “This is mine.” But it is God’s grace that saves us, not the physical act of baptism. We don’t believe that water baptism makes you saved. The only thing it absolutely makes you is wet!

If we are baptized as adults, we do it because it is our act of obedience – not to be saved through it, but to show our faith and our repentance through following the command of God that once we believe, we should be baptized. Children born to a member of the church are a part of God’s promise, and so we baptize them as well – not because God *must* save them, but because God has told us that His covenant, His promises, are for our families too. God can give His Holy Spirit to us before, at, or after water baptism as He so chooses.

There are certain things that are *typical*. It’s *typical* to see the Holy Spirit working in someone’s life at the time of their adult baptism or their confirmation as a teenager. But often, we see it earlier. Sometimes we don’t see it at all. Many people go through confirmation or get baptized because they want to please someone else or feel like they should, but not because they want to please the Lord and obey Him. And sometimes later in life, God will bring them around and the Holy Spirit becomes evident in their lives.

Why doesn’t God’s gift of the Holy Spirit fall neatly into a formula? Why is God unpredictable when it comes to how He heals or doesn’t, how He speaks or doesn’t speak to us in ways we easily understand? Why can one person pick up the Bible and it all makes sense and another can barely get through a chapter? The Bible doesn’t have an explicit answer for this, but we can find a good one in a repeated thought in Deuteronomy 8, Proverbs 3, and Hebrews 12 – the Lord disciplines those He loves. Add to that Romans 8:28 – God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God who are called according to His purpose.

God made us all very uniquely, very individually. If you have two kids, four kids, eight kids, you have two, four, eight different personalities. Identical children have distinctive personalities. Seven billion of us on the globe, no two exactly alike. Every experience, every memory, every thought perceived differently. So God molds everything to bring His people into His Kingdom in His timing. He will make it happen as He wills. Because nothing less would fit the unique universe He created.

Part of His discipline and His grace is showing us that we aren’t God. We don’t command Him. So He sends His Spirit to everyone gathered at Cornelius’ home, saves ‘em all. That’s His right. We pray for healing, and sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn’t. That’s His right. God sends His Spirit where He wills, when He wills, according to His purposes. That’s His right.

He is working things out according to His purpose to bring all His people to Himself healed and made whole to live with Him forever in His Kingdom. Once we know that, once we’ve digested that and realized that truth deep in our hearts, we will know this is the “why” behind all of God’s mysterious ways. We don’t know the “why” to each individual part. But we do know the overarching “why” – God is bringing His people home from all over the world, from every nation and tribe and people.

Is God unpredictable? Yes. Scary? Sometimes. Safe in the earthly sense? No. But good? Oh, yes, God is good. Remember that truth and know that in every circumstance, no matter how strange or mysterious, God is good and working out your good for an eternity with Him. Rejoice in His goodness in saving you and giving you His Holy Spirit this week.