

The Great Commission according to Peter

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 May 2015

Preacher: Alan Purser

[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now and to our reading for this morning, and we're going to be in the book of Acts. We're studying Luke's Gospel together.

Well, this is part two of Luke's Gospel, written by Luke, but telling the story a little bit later on. And we're going to be in Acts chapter 10.

And if you have one of the church Bibles, I think that's page 919. Page 919. And we're going to begin reading at Acts 10, verse 34.

A scene taking place at the house of Cornelius, where Peter has been invited to come and speak. So Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly, I understand that God shows no partiality.

But in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all.

[1 : 1 0] You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee, after the baptism that John proclaimed. How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. But God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

[2 : 2 1] And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

And Peter declared, can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

And then they asked him to remain for some days. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Amen.

Amen. Well, it's a great delight to be here. Acts 10, as Willie has said, is where we are going to be now this morning.

We're really going to focus on just two verses, verses 42 and 43. But we're going to try and put it in the context of the extraordinary story and events of Acts 10.

- [3 : 27] And then see what we can learn from it. So let me pray. And then we will turn to our business. Dear God, thank you for the privilege of an open Bible.
- Give us, please we pray, eyes to see and ears to hear, minds to understand and hearts to respond to you and your word.
- For Jesus' name's sake we pray. Amen. Amen. This time last Sunday, I had the privilege of preaching in a church in downtown Johannesburg, a place called Hillbrow, a notoriously rough and dangerous part of that great city, where a brother has been leading a church for the past year.
- And we had a church of gathering of some 200 people. There were only two white faces amongst it. And I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that that gathering and our gathering here this morning would have raised significant eyebrows amongst the New Testament apostles.
- First of all, they'd have been very surprised that two millennia later, there might be a church down on the very southern tip of Africa, a church here in one of those distant islands of which Isaiah spoke, those distant islands that had not heard of his fame or known of his glory.
- [5 : 22] But not only would the location have caused them to raise their eyebrows, the fact that we, neither here this morning nor the brethren I was with last Sunday morning, were largely or entirely Jewish, would have raised their eyebrows.
- Now, of course, for you and me, it all seems obvious and natural and straightforward. But this event in Acts 10 is the seminal event that leads to everything that we take for granted today.
- Namely, that Christ's church is for all people and for all places until he comes. Peter says, verses 42 and 43, speaking of the Lord Jesus, he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.
- To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.
- Our title this morning is The Great Commission according to Peter. If you've been around Christian things for a while, you'll be familiar with The Great Commission according to Matthew or The Great Commission according to Luke.
- [6 : 54] Well, here is The Great Commission according to the Apostle Peter. I want to begin by putting that text, those two verses, in the context of the chapter that we might understand what is going on at this point of the book of Acts.
- And then we get a focus on those two verses and try to get to grips with the program that they contain. So, to begin with, the story of the chapter.
- What happens here in Acts chapter 10 is of such significance in the mind of Luke who is writing this second volume, having completed his gospel, that he actually recounts it on three occasions.
- Here in chapter 10, he tells about the incident. In chapter 11, he recounts how Peter reports the incident to the church.
- And in chapter 15, there is that extraordinarily important gathering called the Council of Jerusalem when the whole question of the Gentile inclusion in the church was settled.
- [8 : 11] And again, it's this incident that is referred to. If you just turn over a page to chapter 11 and verse 18, here is the big conclusion that Peter drew and that later on the Council of Jerusalem endorsed.
- When they heard these things, that is what happened with Cornelius, they fell silent and they glorified God saying, then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Incidentally, that's a lovely way to talk about the gospel, isn't it? What's the gospel message? It is a message of repentance that leads to life. It's a slightly unusual summary of the gospel, that isn't it?

But rather a good one. But you'll notice that the big truth here is that God has granted that not only to Jews, but to Gentiles.

to you and me here this morning, who are not Jewish by birth, to the brethren in Johannesburg last Sunday, almost entirely black South Africans, included in this wonderful grace of God who grants repentance that leads to life.

[9 : 43] Well, the question then is what happened? What is this extraordinary event all about? And the two central characters are the Apostle Peter, well known to you from your recent studies in Luke's gospel, of course, and one Cornelius.

Luke begins chapter 10 by speaking of this chap Cornelius. He was a Roman officer, a soldier in what's known as the Italian cohort, and a man who commanded a hundred soldiers.

That's why he's called a centurion. It's not an allusion to cricket. It means that he's in charge of a hundred men. Here then is a Roman officer, a man schooled and trained and respected with authority and power within the Roman occupation forces.

For the Roman Empire, as you will know, maintained discipline across a vast area geographically by deploying its army.

And Palestine and all of that area within which the Book of Acts takes part is under Roman rule.

[11 : 01] The Pax Romana, the peace of the Roman Empire, was maintained by force. Make no mistake. It was by force, the iron fist.

And it was the Roman army that maintained it. So here then is a somewhat unlikely character in view.

A man named Cornelius. The other character then is the Apostle Peter. This is the fisherman who became one of the inner group of Jesus' disciples.

The one who was there on the Mount of Transfiguration. The one who tragically denied the Lord Jesus at his arrest, but who was wonderfully restored, you remember, after the resurrection.

Peter, whose privilege it was to preach on the day of Pentecost that now the great promise of Joel had been fulfilled and all who call on the name of the Lord would now be saved.

[12 : 08] Peter, who had come through a great persecution of the church, in Jerusalem. And the respite from that persecution enabled him to undertake an itinerant ministry.

If you cast your eye back toward the end of chapter 9, have a look at verses 31 and 32. Verse 31. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.

And walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. That is, it was growing fast. Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda.

And so we pick up with the apostle Peter. Peter is staying with a man called Simon who was a leather worker, Simon the Tanner, in the town of Joppa.

So we have Cornelius in Caesarea and Peter in Joppa.

[13 : 24] And what Luke does is to tell us what happens to each of those men in these different places and then he brings them together for this very significant meeting.

Well, let's come back to Cornelius. Cornelius is there in Caesarea.

And we're told that Cornelius was a man who feared God. You wouldn't find Cornelius blaspheming when something went wrong with his hundred soldiers.

He was a devout man who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously and who was a man of prayer.

He prayed to God. And what Luke tells us is of a vision that Cornelius had one day.

[14 : 26] What he saw was an angel, a messenger of God. And the messenger addressed him and said, by name, Cornelius. And Cornelius behaves to the angel in the way he would expect a soldier to behave to him.

That is to immediately say, yes, what is it? Lord? And the angel says, Cornelius, you have been heard on high.

Your prayers have been heard by God. Now, Cornelius, what you're to do is this. Send a delegation to Joppa and bring back to you a man called Peter.

This is the apostle Peter. He's told that Peter's staying with this Tanner, Simon. And as soon as the angel departs, Cornelius does as he's commanded.

He calls two of his servants and a soldier and tells them the story and dispatches them to Joppa. All right? You've got the picture in your mind. Here's Cornelius in Caesarea, vision of the angel.

[15 : 41] He sends the delegation. Meanwhile, back in Joppa, Peter, well, Peter is wandering around on his housetop.

Houses typically had flat roofs and it's about the sixth hour. That is about noon and Peter's waiting for his lunch to be prepared. Presumably, Mrs. Peter is downstairs in the kitchen getting it all ready and he's meant to be praying.

But what happens is that he, well, I don't know, Luke says he falls into a trance. The effect is that Peter too has a vision.

Not this time of an angel speaking to him, but of a great sheet descending, a great piece of cloth descending from heaven let down by four corners.

And as he looks into it, he sees something that fills him with horror. For this sheet contains animals and reptiles and birds of the air.

[16 : 53] Now, Peter has been raised as a Jewish man to obey the Jewish law including the food laws. He's hungry.

Mrs. Peter hasn't produced lunch yet and he sees this vision and then he hears these words. Come on, Peter, get up, kill and eat. And Peter says, gosh, no, or something like that.

Look what he says in verse 14. Now, you wouldn't expect Peter perhaps to speak to God like that, would you? By no means, Lord. you cannot be serious.

I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. But that's not the end of the matter because the voice comes again and says, what God has made clean don't you call common, Peter.

Well, Peter's not persuaded so it all happens a second time and he's still not persuaded so it all happens a third time. This happened three times and each time the thing was taken up to heaven.

[18 : 10] Now, I don't know whether you always get things first time round, do you? Do you always get it straight away? Or sometimes do you find you need to be told things two times, three times?

I think we all do, don't we? Particularly when it's something that is, well, it's jarring. It's something that doesn't fit with what we've always thought.

Isn't that right? That's what's happening here with Peter. It takes God three times in order to beat this new idea into the apostle Peter's thick head.

So, be encouraged. If it takes you a while to grasp things, you're in good company. What has happened? Look at verse 17. Peter was inwardly perplexed. Well, of course he was.

Something he had always believed, he's always adhered to, he's always stuck with, he's now been shaken up. He can't deny the source of the shaking, but he's seriously disconfabulated, isn't he?

[19 : 17] He is inwardly perplexed. And he's trying to work out what exactly all this means when knock, knock, knock on the door arrives the delegation from Caesarea.

Now, at this point, I think lunch gets ignored and we're not told anything more about it. Because what happens is that the spirit says to Peter, Peter, three men are looking for you.

Go downstairs, open the door and go with them. Go with them without hesitation. Why should he hesitate? Because they are Gentile men.

One of them is a Roman soldier. Peter goes down to the men, verse 21, and says, I'm the one you're looking for. What is the reason for you coming?

And what they do is they tell Peter about the vision that Cornelius has had. So, they're invited in to be his guests.

[20 : 27] Presumably at that point, Mrs. Peter produces even more lunch, and they stay overnight, and the next day, they all head down to Joppa. Well, they arrive, Cornelius meets him and welcomes him.

He falls down at his feet in respect. Peter lifts him up and says, don't bow down to me. I, too, am a man like you. And then Peter says this, you know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate or to visit anyone of another nation.

In other words, you know that my being here is actually breaking the law. But, I'm here because God has told me that I shouldn't call any person common or unclean.

You see what's happened? Peter's got the point. He's grasped that this is much more than about what he eats for lunch. This is God teaching him the way he is to look at and deal with other people.

So he says, verse 29, when I was sent for, I came without objection. So, now tell me, why have you sent for me? Cornelius relates the story of the vision that he has had and then Peter stands up to speak.

[21 : 56] And what he does is to give the most wonderful summary of the gospel message. It's all about Jesus, it's all about his life, his words, his works, his death, his resurrection, and then we get to our text this morning, verses 42 and 43.

The result for Cornelius is, as we read from verse 44 onwards, repentance and faith and baptism and therefore inclusion into the church.

and what we get is a mini repeat of the great events of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 without differentiation. So, just what happened to the Jews in Jerusalem happens now to the Gentiles here in Cornelius' house.

Can you see what a big deal this is? Well, that's the big story. It is a wonderful story. Let's focus on our text, which is verses 42 and 43.

What Luke is doing in Acts is portraying the way in which the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

[23 : 22] That's the big program that we discover in Acts chapter 1. And in that program, the conversion of Cornelius represents a hugely significant step.

It establishes the legitimacy of the Gentile mission, including non-Jews in the church, and it simultaneously deals with the question of the law, even though it took Peter some while altogether to work through the implications of that.

Now, I want us to notice that there are two aspects of the text, verses 42 and 43. Verse 42 speaks of the apostolic testimony.

Speaking of Jesus, Peter says, and he commanded us, that is the apostles, to preach to the people, and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

So what was the message of the apostles? Well, it was all about Jesus. Verse 34 to 43 makes that very clear.

[24 : 46] But isn't that an interesting emphasis? Do you notice that again? what is the big thing that Peter's telling them that the apostles are preaching? What's the big truth about Jesus?

What is the relevance of Jesus to the hearers? He commanded us to preach and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge.

Judge of every person. Judge of all those who are alive and all those who have died. The big New Testament message about Jesus is that Jesus will be our judge.

Now, as you read on in Acts, you discover that it's not only Peter who preaches that. It's bog-standard apostolic preaching. It's what Paul makes clear, for example, in the Athenian Areopagus.

Jesus. But just keep that in mind for a moment, because it is a very interesting summary, isn't it? What's the summary of the New Testament gospel?

[25 : 57] Jesus will be judge. Would you have put it like that? If we asked you to write it on a piece of paper? Summarize the New Testament gospel message. Jesus will be judge.

Okay, just keep that in mind for a minute. Now, notice verse 43. In verse 43, what Peter does is to summarize the message of the Old Testament prophets.

To him, Jesus, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Edward Lobb and I had the privilege of doing an Old Testament course at the same college some considerable time ago. I don't remember this being altogether the heart of that Old Testament syllabus.

I don't know whether Edward does. Here's Peter's summary of the Old Testament message. First of all, sin is the big issue. Secondly, forgiveness is available.

[27 : 10] Thirdly, belief is the vital condition. Fourthly, everyone is the scope of this message. And fifthly, Jesus is the Savior.

Now, that's an interesting summary of the Old Testament, isn't it? If I asked you to write on a postcard, what is the summary of the Old Testament, would you have put that down?

Peter says what the Old Testament teaches is that Jesus is the Savior of everyone who believes.

Interesting? Now, if you add those two together, what you've got is the core message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is this, that God has sent Jesus into the world to be Savior, and that this Jesus who died on the cross and rose again will be our judge.

Now, it's a great summary text, isn't it? Imagine this week at work or at college, somebody says to you, look, you're a Christian, you go to that funny church in Bath Street, don't you?

[28 : 35] What is this Christian bit all about? Yes? What's the message of the Bible? Come on, the Bible's a very long book, isn't it? I haven't got time to read the Bible. What's the message of the Bible all about?

Well, here's a great verse to turn them to, isn't it? Is this not a great summary? What is the Bible all about? Well, it is telling us that everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior will find the forgiveness of their sins, and that everyone needs to do that because Jesus will be their judge.

It's a great summary text. The Bible has a number of great summary texts, doesn't it? the great commission texts of Matthew 28 or Luke 24, something like John 3 16, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.

Don't be afraid to use these summary texts. It's what they're given for so that we might be able to summarize the message. I know there's a lot more there, but they are wonderful summary texts to know.

if this one hasn't been included in your little memory bank of summary texts, may I propose that it deserves to stand alongside those others.

[30 : 03] But there are three very important, I think, distinctive truths that emerge out of this text.

So before we finish this morning, I want us to focus our thoughts on those. Now the first one we've alluded to already, but it's something like this.

Notice the striking characterization of the message of the Old Testament and the message of the New Testament. The Old Testament, according to Peter, speaks of Jesus as Savior.

And the New Testament, according to Peter, declares Jesus to be judge. And I ask you, before you came in here this morning, would you have put it that way around?

Or would you have been tempted to think and to say, actually the Old Testament is about judgment and the New Testament about salvation? It's interesting, isn't it, the way Peter puts it.

[31 : 12] it's actually very important because it shows the relevance of Jesus to all people.

Now, perhaps some here, as I have had, have had the experience of attempting to explain to teenagers the relevance of school exams.

Have you ever tried to do that? It's an interesting exercise. the relevance of a school exam is that the young person is going to have to sit it.

Isn't it? That's the relevance of the exam. Therefore, when you exhort somebody to take schoolwork seriously, it is because of the relevance of the exam, namely that they're going to have to sit it.

So, why should that neighbour of yours take Jesus seriously? Why should that member of your family take Jesus seriously?

[32 : 17] Why should that colleague at work take Jesus seriously? Because one day, Jesus will be their judge. You don't have to make Jesus relevant to them.

I mean, that is relevant, isn't it? If one day, each of us is going to have to front up to Jesus as judge, that's the relevance, and that's why I need to take him seriously.

I don't therefore have to make the gospel relevant, what I have to do is to speak the gospel the way the apostles spoke it. I have to speak of Jesus as judge.

That's the big message of the New Testament. What is it that the resurrection proves that Jesus will be my judge, says the apostle Paul. Now, how does that work?

Well, because he is the firstborn from the dead. He is the one around whom God is creating the coming kingdom. He is the big man.

[33 : 27] He is the second Adam. He is that big, that important, that significant. That's what the resurrection shows. And so the big message of the New Testament is, Jesus will be my judge.

But that is striking, isn't it? Equally striking is the understanding that the Old Testament is full of God's gracious provision of Jesus as Savior.

Well, of course it is, from beginning to end. The promise, right in the beginning, that a child of the woman will be the Savior.

The promise that through Abraham all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The coming of the suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks, who will take upon himself the judgment and punishment that we deserve.

Yes, the Old Testament speaks of Jesus as Savior. Well, that's the first big lesson. Here's the second one. did you notice the insistence on proclamation ministry?

[34 : 41] What is the big thing that Jesus commanded the apostles to do? Well, have a look at verse 42. He commanded us to preach and to testify.

Now, of course, that responsibility extends beyond the apostles. That's what those Great Commission texts teach us, isn't it? William Carey was right when he wrote about the obligation of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen, that great influential 18th century book that triggered the great mission movement.

But the important point here is the centrality of proclamation ministry. He commanded us to preach and to testify.

That is the importance of preaching a message about both what we need to be saved from as well as what we need to be saved for.

The save word is a rescue word, isn't it? God's God's condemnation and hell as well as what we are to be saved for, the coming kingdom and heaven.

[36 : 12] But whatever your preferred definition of mission is, according to Peter, the verbal proclamation of the gospel is absolutely necessary.

In other words, I cannot proclaim this gospel without speaking of Jesus as savior and judge.

marriage. Some while ago, a serving Crosslink's mission partner came into my office in London.

They'd just come back from a country where they can't operate openly as a Christian mission partner. They are working in a very important respect, dealing with very needy children.

the country is in the Middle East. And this Crosslink's mission partner told me of something that happened just recently when a Muslim leader came to see her and said, we know why you're here.

[37 : 22] And this sister looked slightly sort of shocked and said, oh, really? And this guy said, yeah, yeah, no, we know why you're here. We know why you're doing what you're doing.

You believe in God, don't you? Yeah, yes, I do. She owned up. And you believe in a God who will judge. And she agreed that she did.

And you believe that this life is not all there is. She agreed that they did. So he said, we've realized why you're here. You're here to do good in order to make sure that you go to heaven.

heaven. And this friend of mine suddenly realized the danger that that project was in doing good without an explicit proclamation of the gospel of Christ and him crucified.

In other words, I simply cannot teach the gospel by good works. It's a very good thing to do, good works. Don't misunderstand me.

[38 : 33] But actually all that will do is teach the opposite of the gospel. It'll teach that I think that I will go to heaven by doing good. Peter says he commanded us to preach and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge and to speak of his death on the tree that all who believe in him receive the forgiveness of sins.

That's why Crosslinks has as its strapline God's word to God's world. And we speak about the absolute necessity of the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

Well, that's the second striking truth here. Here's my third and last one. The affirmation of the gospel, that the gospel is for everyone.

that is Gentiles and Jews, yes, even a serving army officer in the Italian cohort.

That led Peter not only to go to the house of Cornelius, but to speak the gospel to Cornelius. And as Cornelius put his faith and trust in Christ, to baptize Cornelius, to include him and his household within the family of the church.

[39 : 58] And why is it that Peter did that? Look back to verse 34. It's all because of something he had now understood about God.

Peter opened his mouth and said, truly I understand. he couldn't have said that before that experience thrice repeated in Joppa. Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.

Now that was an eye-opener for Peter. It was a revolution in his thinking. The idea that God would have people of every people and nation and language drawn into his church as he spells out in verse 35 was a novelty for Peter.

But now Peter understands that an essential element of godliness is being like God in this respect. that is of being those who show no partiality.

Now of course godliness in the New Testament is often spoken of in terms of ethical obedience to God's commands and in our own day and society it is very often in the area of sexual ethics that we find a great challenge to godliness and Willie has alluded to that already this morning within the Church of Scotland and indeed the same is true as you will be aware within the Church of England at the moment.

[41 : 57] But here is a challenge for us. Let's be very careful that we don't narrow godliness simply to those issues. You understand that I am not saying that I don't think they are important.

Yes? Of course they're important. But let's not narrow godliness just to those issues because godliness means being like God.

Like God in our attitudes. Like God in our attitudes to other people. It would not have been a godly thing for Peter to decline to go to Caesarea.

To decline to go with that Gentile delegation. To decline to go into the house of the Roman soldier Cornelius. Because God is a God of mission.

God is a God who accepts men and women from every background and every nation and every culture and every language and God shows no favoritism.

[43 : 07] He shows no partiality. I said to you that last weekend I was in Johannesburg. South Africa is a country I know well.

My wife and I lived there some years ago. Maybe we have some South African brethren here this morning. It is a country that I love and I have a deep concern for. But it is a country that still bears the scars of a political and social experiment that you will know was called apartheid that was floated in the name of the Christian God.

And so why was it that the church I was preaching at was entirely a black South African church? Well because of all of that baggage.

I was there on the 21st anniversary of the first one man one person vote. And we thank God for it. But it is a profound thought isn't it?

That there was a society that proclaimed itself to be godly and yet showed institutional partiality. These verses are extremely important verses.

[44 : 35] They are a great commission text that deserve to stand alongside Matthew 28 and Luke 24. It is Peter's great commission text.

And if we brethren are going to be committed and involved and engaged in God's mission today, we need to be those who are taught by these verses.

That we take on board this striking characterization of the message of the Bible. Jesus as judge, Jesus as savior.

That we understand the centrality of proclamation ministry and that we keep on affirming in practice as well as in principle that the gospel is for everyone.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our Father, we thank you for your servant Peter.

[45 : 51] We thank you for his example and for his courage. And we ask for ourselves this morning that these words may go deep into our own hearts and minds.

Thank you that your gospel is for everyone. Pray for anyone here this morning who may have thought that the gospel wasn't for them and ask that this may be a word of great encouragement and hope.

And for each of us, Lord, as we go out into our various parts of society this week, please put this great message on our lips of Jesus as judge and Jesus as savior and grant that in our attitudes to others, we may be godly.

We ask for your great namesake amen. Amen.