

May 9, 2021

## A Soldier's Story

Texts: **Acts 10: 1-29; Acts 10: 30-48**; No contemporary

I am a Toronto Blue Jays fan. I like the Indians all right, but if it comes right down to it, I'm cheering for the Blue Jays, even in Cleveland. That doesn't make me popular down at the ballpark!

One time the Toronto Blue Jays baseball club was stuck sitting for three hours on the tarmac at the airport. And the Blue Jays, like most major league ball players, are used to being coddled. They don't like it when they have to wait. One of the players started to complain. Then Blue Jays manager Cito Gaston took him aside and said to him, "Look at it this way: this is where you are supposed to be right now." And that worked. It calmed him down. Waiting was where he was supposed to be.

And back in 1984 when I was in Thailand, waiting is where I was supposed to be. I was going to central Thailand to see a mission hospital on the eleven o'clock bus. Except that the 11 o'clock bus wasn't leaving until three. I had four hours to wait. I had brought along a book to read from Bangkok Bible College where I was helping to teach English. Just a few minutes before the four hours were up and I could finally get on the bus, a young man came up to me as I was reading. He stared at me for a minute, which I found vaguely annoying. I wanted him to go away. In halting English, he said to me, "What you reading?" Now it happened that I was reading a book about the power of Jesus to overcome demons, a topic I had become interested in because everyone in Thailand believes that demons are everywhere, and are very powerful and control much of what goes on. So I told him it was a book about the power of Jesus to control demons. Then the young man said, "I have read the Bible. I believe it's true." So I asked, "you're a Christian, then?" And he replied, "No, I'm not. I'm worried about what my parents will say."

This was his last barrier to faith, the final wall that he had to get over. What his parents would say. He'd already gotten over a lot of walls just to be where he was. Someone had had to give him a Bible. He had to read it. The Holy Spirit had to work in his heart so he believed what he was reading. He had to be brought to Bangkok for some reason, as he lived in the far north east of Thailand, a place with almost no Christians. He had to have the courage to approach a stranger reading in a bus stop. He'd already come a long way to be there.

So had I. I had to become interested in going on a summer mission trip. I had to fly 12,000 miles, and be offered a chance to sit on a bus for half a day, to go see a hospital for people with leprosy. I had to be made aware of the Thai beliefs about demons, and get interested enough to choose that book, of all the books in the library, to have with me to read. And I had to be stuck in that bus station for an extra four hours, so I wouldn't miss the guy. Plus, I had to overcome my annoyance and reluctance to talk to someone just a few minutes before the bus came. I really didn't want to miss that bus and have to wait for the next one. Before our conversation even started, God had definitely been at work.

I said to the young man, "You should become a Christian, and then we'll pray for the Holy Spirit to come and convince your parents to believe in Jesus too." And, to my astonishment, he agreed! You see, he had been reading his Bible. And he didn't think that I just happened to be sitting in that bus stop. He thought that God had brought me 12 thousand miles to be sitting in that bus stop so that I could talk to him. He thought that my bus had been delayed so that I would still be there when he

came by. He thought that I was reading the book on Jesus' power over demons as a sign to him to come to faith. He thought my invitation to pray to become a Christian right there was God's invitation, written out personally to him.

And I think he was right. So we prayed. He became a Christian in that bus stop; he went from death to life in front of my eyes, and perhaps his parents did, too. It was one of the greatest moments of my life. And then the bus came. I grabbed his address to hand over to the missionaries later, for follow-up. I got on the bus and it left almost immediately. The encounter was over almost before it began. But God had been at work orchestrating that moment when we would come together for 10 minutes and that man would gain eternal life, and his family with him.

But that's God's way, isn't it? It's been God's way for a long time. We heard about another situation where God orchestrated a meeting in our two texts from Acts today. Peter the apostle meets Cornelius the centurion. But both of them had walls to get over. Both of them had to come a long way for that meeting. Peter was Jewish, and Jews were not supposed to have anything to do with Gentiles. The rabbis taught that the dwelling places of Gentiles were unclean ('Ohalot 18:7), and Jews were forbidden from entering them.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Jews who were purified were not even supposed to mix with Gentiles or they would be made impure. More than that, Jews and Gentiles could not even share a meal together, because of the Jewish food laws. Jews treasured the food laws as a mark of national identity that kept them from being assimilated into the surrounding culture, kept them from losing their heritage as God's people following God's law. Eat a little pork, have some shellfish, and what was next? A little incense to Caesar? Whoosh, there goes faithfulness to God, the one God of all the earth. It wasn't worth it.

And then there's Cornelius. He's a Roman and so, a gentile. As a good Jew, Peter shouldn't enter his house or have anything to do with him. Worse yet, Cornelius is a centurion, so part of Rome's brutal occupation force oppressing Israel. Right away there are problems. Jews and Gentiles got along worse than Blue Jays and Indians fans. There are barriers both national and cultural that will have to be broken down. But the text tells us that Cornelius was God-fearing, that he and his family were devout, and that he prayed regularly to God. So God has already started to break down the wall from Cornelius' side. He has become interested in the Jewish religion that surrounded him while he was stationed in Joppa, and he has found out about God. His station wasn't a bus station, but it was a station and there was a lot of waiting around. God was putting that time to good use to draw Cornelius in. But Cornelius and his family still knew nothing about the Savior, nothing about Jesus. How were they to come to faith if no one would come to their house or have anything to do with them?

Barriers and walls had to be broken down. God gives Cornelius a vision to send for Peter in Caesarea. And Cornelius does it. But God has other work to do before Cornelius' men arrive. Peter is not ready. He's not prepared to go to a gentile, a centurion, and have anything to do with him. Not yet anyway. Peter must be prepared for the encounter. As it happens, he's up on the roof praying and he sees a vision: a sheet is being lowered containing all kinds of food, both clean and unclean. And Peter is told by a heavenly voice to eat this food, the clean and the unclean. Well, that is like getting an invitation from the President to come to the White House lawn for a flag burning. It doesn't make any sense. It seems un-Jewish in the way that flag burning seems un-American. Peter is confused. He's as baffled as any good Jew would be. He thinks it must be a test of his faithfulness, as if he's being punked on a hidden camera reality show and Ashton Kutcher is about to step out for the big reveal. So he refuses to eat, to prove his holiness. But the heavenly voice says to him, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Well, this has to happen three times before Peter is even ready to believe what he is seeing and hearing. He won't even consider it before that. After the

third time, the vision disappears and Peter sits down to think about what it might all mean. But as he is considering it, Cornelius' men arrive and invite Peter to come along. Before the vision, Peter wouldn't have countenanced accepting the invitation, but now he thinks about it overnight, and by the next day he's ready. Peter sets out with the men to go to see the gentile centurion Cornelius, probably like a man going to have his wisdom teeth extracted.

Now, Joppa is about 30 miles from Caesarea, which doesn't sound like much to us, but it's about a 10 hour trip if you're making it on foot just as the crow flies, and even longer if you have to follow the coastal road. It takes two days to get there. So, Peter has to go a long way to get to Cornelius, and the 30-mile walk is probably the shortest part of the journey. He needed a vision from God before he could even take the first step. A lot of obstacles had to be overcome before these two men could end up in the same place at the same time.

Cornelius and his household are ready to listen to Peter because they believe that God has worked hard to bring Peter to stand in their house. And Peter shows how far he has come in following his vision from God by going into Cornelius' house, which a good Jew was never supposed to do, and by making a stunning confession of a previous failure: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Before, Peter couldn't even imagine that God would be interested in those people. Now Peter realizes his huge mistake. Peter is indeed miles from where he started, both literally and metaphorically.

Peter shares the story of Jesus with Cornelius: how he went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, how he was crucified and how God raised him from the dead, and how he will come in judgment on the living and the dead, but that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. It's a great speech, but Peter never gets to finish it, because God sends the Holy Spirit on everybody there while Peter is still speaking, and Peter realizes that the message of Jesus is not just for the Jews, but for the gentiles also. (There are two kinds of baptism, baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit. Normally they come together, with the Spirit coming after the water, but here, the Spirit comes first.) Seeing that the spiritual reality has already come, Peter sees no reason why the physical symbol shouldn't be administered as well, so he baptizes Cornelius and his household. And that's the story of how the good news about Jesus spread from the Jewish people to the rest of the world. Big barriers had to be broken down.

But it's also a story about how salvation came to one man and his family through an extraordinary encounter with a Christian. That's the way God works to spread faith in Jesus: God breaks down barriers to telling the good news, and God makes hearts ready to hear it. Cornelius had to be made ready to listen to the conquered and generally disdained Jew, and Peter had to be made ready to speak to the unclean and generally despised Gentile.

Now what's interesting about the story is that barriers had to be broken down on both sides before the good news about Jesus could be shared, but mostly on the side of the Christian! We always think that the barriers are on the side of those who don't want to listen, but if you think about your own witnessing, or lack of witnessing, you will realize that there are a lot of barriers for you to overcome before you can even open your mouth. In fact, in today's lesson, the big problem isn't with Cornelius, it's with Peter!

It often happens that the Holy Spirit has prepared the hearts of those who long to hear long before he manages to loosen the tongues of those who fear to speak. And just as in the story, humility is needed. Peter began with a confession of his own failure to see the wideness of God's love and mercy. That put Peter in the frame of mind to tell the story of Jesus not as a superior master of the truth demanding to be believed, but as a humble servant of the Lord passing on a good secret.

People hate to be witnessed to as an object to be converted, but they generally don't mind being told about someone who has been a great blessing in your life.

So now I ask you to consider: What are the barriers in your life that keep you from sharing the gospel? What is it that is holding you back from speaking about Jesus to the people who may be longing to hear, to whom God may already have given a vision of faith, who are longing to hear and understand? Let God break those barriers down, whatever they are, and you may find that they are as inconsequential as being a Blue Jays or Indians fan. And look for opportunities to share the gospel so that the next time you are held up, delayed, waiting, frustrated, and annoyed at where you are, you can ask yourself if maybe, just maybe, this is where you are supposed to be right now. If perhaps God has orchestrated the situation to bring you to this time and this place, among these people for a reason.

I promise you, if you break down the barriers that hold you back, and you ask God for a chance to tell someone the story of Jesus in your life, God will soon put you in the right place at the right time to do it. You might just get to see the moment when salvation comes to somebody's house, and it will be one of the greatest moments of your life.

Amen