

Openings  
Acts 10:1-23  
West Valley Presbyterian Church  
August 13, 2023



1. How do we know if God wants us to do something? The short answer is, we don't know, so we have to act in faith and hope that God will work things out. The long answer is, that though we don't know for sure, there often are indications of what God is already doing in our midst. And if we can discern what God is already doing, then we can join in with what he is already doing. We can work together with him, which is a huge blessing.

2. Over the past couple of months, we've studied about how God worked in the very early days of the church, from the outpouring at Pentecost, to the miraculous healings, to the role of prayer, to the necessity of telling the truth, to the choosing of deacons, to the scattering of the church members through Judea and Samaria, to the not-so-chance baptism of an Ethiopian. The Holy Spirit formed the church, got it going, and began its spread throughout the region. Now, today, we're going to see what God specifically does to open doors which had once been closed. That might help us to figure out what God might be doing now, in our midst, here today.

Hear now the reading from Acts 10:1-23a.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. <sup>2</sup>He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. <sup>3</sup>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!"

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup>He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup>About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup>He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup>He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup>It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup>Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

<sup>14</sup>"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

<sup>15</sup>The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

<sup>16</sup>This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

<sup>19</sup>While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three<sup>[a]</sup> men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup>So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

<sup>21</sup>Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

<sup>22</sup>The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." <sup>23</sup>Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

3. Throughout this story we see God at work to open things up which had once been closed. Specifically, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Throughout the first 5 books of the Bible, God makes it very clear that his people are to be different from the other peoples around them. They are to orient every aspect of their lives around God. That means they worship differently; work and speak differently; and build their families differently than the other people around them. After more than a thousand years, the differences had solidified into barriers. Walls. Jews and Gentiles did not eat with one another; did not go into one another's homes; did not work on the same weekly schedule; and usually did not worship together in the synagogues, let alone in the Temple. And yet, geographically, Jewish towns and Gentile towns were right next to each other.

Now the church is starting. Jesus died for everyone. Salvation is available for everyone. But what about those barriers? Is there going to be one church, for everyone? Or are there going to be two churches – one for Jews and one for Gentiles?

That's why this passage is so important. Here we see God opening doors on both sides of the barrier, so that his mercy and grace can be poured out equally onto everyone. One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

4. First, God opens the door for Cornelius, who we're told is a centurion (equivalent to an Army captain) based in Italy. But instead of looking down on the Jewish people where he is stationed, in Caesarea, he helps them and gives money to those in need. He is a God-fearer, meaning that though he remains a pagan, he follows the ethical teachings in Scripture; he prays at the regular Jewish times of prayer; he probably also attends worship at the synagogue at least occasionally. God has already been preparing Cornelius to go through the door once it opens. So Cornelius is able to hear and obey. When the angel appears and calls out to him, he answers, "What is it, Lord?" even though he is scared. He doesn't shriek and run away. He stays there, he listens to the angel's instructions, and he obeys immediately. He's a soldier, and he's used to following orders. So he immediately calls in two servants, and a soldier to protect them, tells all three of them what has just happened, and sends them off to Joppa to go and fetch Simon Peter, just as the angel had told him to do.

5. Opening the door for Peter was not quite so easy. Peter, as Pastor Morgan pointed out, often argued with Jesus when he lived on earth. So Peter might have refused to obey a mere angel, since he'd been taught all his life, from Scripture, to avoid those unclean Gentiles. So instead, God sends a vision, of clean and unclean animals all jumbled together in a sheet, telling Peter to get up, kill, and eat. Which Peter would never have done, no matter how hungry he was; in his understanding, uncleanness is contagious. God has to send that vision three times, for extra emphasis. And three times God tells him directly, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." 'Has made clean' by the blood of Jesus. I can't even imagine the impact that the vision and God's direct speech must have had on Peter. I'm not surprised that Peter was still thinking about the vision when the Holy Spirit told him to go with the three men who were looking for him.

6. I think what touches me most about this passage is Peter's response to the three Gentile men. They've just explained why they are looking for him. And Peter's response is to invite them into the house as his guests. That's HUGE. Before God opened Peter's soul, he would never have allowed any Gentile to even set foot in any house where he was staying, let alone share food with them and allow them to spend the night. God opened a door within Peter, and neither he nor the church were ever the same again. God set up this whole visit to open the church to everyone, old or young, male or female, Jew or Gentile.

7. I think God is still very much involved in opening doors right now, this very day.

A. Perhaps God is opening doors within your own heart.

1. For example: is there someone you just plain don't like? And they don't seem to like you much either? And yet your paths keep crossing? What might that be about?

2. Maybe that's the Holy Spirit giving you a spiritual growth opportunity. Maybe you could try praying for the person you don't like, instead of grumbling about him or her.

3. Over the years, I have learned that praying for someone I don't like is one of the ways God works in me to open the doors of my own heart. Peter learned that that God can and does open doors within us. I've found that I need to learn that too; and God is glad to teach any of us if we will listen.

B. Or perhaps God is opening doors to new ministry opportunities you might not have considered before.

1. Perhaps you're worried about how our church contributions will be handled, now that the Campbells have moved to Southern California. Maybe that worry is God opening a new ministry door for you.

2. Or perhaps you've heard that the Sunday School is looking for once-a-month helpers. Again, maybe your concern is God opening a new ministry door for you. After all, Peter responded to a ministry opportunity that he never expected to have. And we Gentiles here today are better off because Peter said yes. Maybe someone else will be better off if we also say yes to an opportunity.

3. Or perhaps you know that the Boy Scouts, and now a new troop of female Scouts, are eager to connect with us and do things together.

4. Or perhaps you know that the Kakehashi Choir is singing two classical pieces of sacred music as part of worship, and some of our singers will join in with them. We have been rehearsing jointly for a couple of weeks and getting to know one another.

5. I am really excited to see God opening doors for us with possibilities for ministry and connection.

9. Let's expand our vision a bit further: to the church planters. They feel God calling them to reach out to one of the most difficult groups in the country: the Millennials of Silicon Valley. The Pew Research Foundation says that about 70% of Boomers consider themselves to have a Christian background, though they may not attend church. But less than 50% of Millennials consider themselves Christian in any sense, which is the biggest generational drop in more than 100 years. And Millennials of Silicon Valley are even less likely than other Millennials to have any sort of Christian background. Plus they are SUPER busy, with both parents working in demanding professions. Sunday morning is one of the few downtimes they have; they don't want to go to church. It's a big risk for the church planters to come here. But as we saw with Peter and Cornelius, God can open the most unlikely doors imaginable. We need to support the planters both financially and in prayer; and we can rejoice with the planters in what God will do.

10. God dramatically opened doors so that both Jew and Gentile could come to Jesus and find salvation. God opens doors right now today within us as individuals so that we can bring the peace of Christ to others and reach out to them. God opens doors right now today within our congregation, so that we can build friendships with the rest of the community. And we trust that God will open doors also through the work of the church planters. If Peter could welcome three Gentiles to stay in his home and eat with him, then anything can happen! Who knows that God will do to open doors to our community? I can hardly wait to see! Amen.