

"I Had a Dream"
Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit*
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(Acts 11:1-18)

Introduction.

Have you ever had a dream that really made you scratch your head? Or did you ever have a recurring dream which caused you to wonder what it was all about? Many people have a fascination with dreams, and they often wonder what they mean.

Some of you know that Lorie calls me "Barney" on occasion, and you may wonder where I got this pet name of hers. Many years ago during our second year of marriage, I woke up one morning and related to Lorie a dream I had the night before. In my dream I was a race car driver, and I drove a yellow race car around the track with the number 5 painted on the hood. Over the loud speaker the announcer said, "Barney Barnes number 5, Barney Barnes number 5!" From then on the name stuck.

Sigmund Freud was the first modern psychiatrist to reflect in depth on the subject of the meaning of dreams, and he wrote a book on the subject. There he quotes Aristotle who said that the best interpreter of dreams is the one who can best grasp similarities, because dream-pictures, like pictures in water, are disfigured by motion. The person who hits the target best is the one who is able to recognize the true picture in the distorted one.

The apostle Peter would have agreed. And he would have gone on to add that the best interpreter of the meaning of a dream, or in his case a vision, is the Holy Spirit of God. This morning we read of the account Peter gave to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem of the events that followed his amazing dream and how the Lord opened a way for Gentiles to be included in God's family of grace.

I. The Criticism of Peter.

You'll recall from our previous study last week that Peter had a vision of a sheet that came down from heaven which contained all manner of animals, reptiles, and birds of prey. Some of the animals in the sheet were considered kosher, or "clean," by Jewish people, and others weren't. On three occasions Peter heard the Lord said, "Take up, kill and eat." And three times the apostle refused.

From this vision the Lord impressed upon Peter that all things made by God are good, and that nothing in creation, including people, should ever be considered unclean or unacceptable. It was a whole new way of thinking for the apostle who

was a devout Jew. Up to this point in his life, Peter was of the opinion that God looked with special favor upon the Jewish people, and that all other people and other races of the world were inferior to the chosen people of God. However, as a result of this dream Peter's entire perspective began to change. It was a complete reversal. Or, to use today's terminology, it was a total paradigm shift.

All of us have a tendency to think that God is on *our* side, and that He is in favor of us. And if God is on our side, then those who aren't like us aren't looked upon by God with the same favor as we are. It makes our negative feelings toward those people more justified, and it allows us to excuse our prejudice and bias. So to learn that there is no distinction between people, especially when it comes to salvation, was a hard lesson for Peter to learn. But learn it he did, there in Cornelius' house.

News about what happened in Caesarea with the conversion of the Roman centurion began to spread throughout the early church in Judea. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, a number of believers who thought that a person had to conform to the Jewish law in order to be a Christian criticized him. Their chief concern was not that Gentiles had come to faith in Christ but that the apostle had broken kosher. They said, "You went into the home of a Gentile, and you ate with them!" That was what bothered them the most. And the reason it bothered them was because if it was okay for Peter to go into the home of a Gentile, then obviously Gentiles had the right to come into their homes and into their church as equals with the Jews. That's where their prejudice lay.

It's easy for us to think we don't have this kind of problem in the church today, but is that true? We're glad to have people join our church as long as they're willing to become like us. We don't mind diversity as long as that diversity accommodates our approach and style and doesn't push us too far out of our comfort zone.

For example, we may be glad to have Pentecostals worship with us as long as they don't raise their hands too high or speak in tongues too loudly! We may welcome people of other races and backgrounds to our fellowship as long as they try to fit in with the way we do things and don't act too differently. We don't mind if people seek Christ among us who are rough around the edges, with piercings and tattoos, just as long as they clean up a little bit.

Prejudice in the church wasn't just a problem in the 1st century in Jerusalem; it's a problem in just about every church today. Each of us needs to make a close examination of our own hearts to study the ways we are affected by prejudice and a critical spirit. We should repent of our bias and correct our prejudice so we can develop as inclusive a fellowship as we possibly can. And that means we need to make room at the table for folks who are different from us.

There was once a Sunday School teacher who taught her class about the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. She explained that the Pharisee was proud and thought he was better than the other man, and he thanked God he wasn't like him. But the tax collector was humble. He couldn't even raise his head in worship because he was so ashamed, and he asked God to forgive him. And Jesus criticized the Pharisee because he was full of pride and looked down on people he thought weren't as good as he was.

When the teacher finished the lesson, she invited the students to bow their heads and pray. And she said, "Dear Lord, we thank you that we're not like that Pharisee...." She missed the point of the lesson she was teaching!

In what ways do you look down on other people, even the people who look down on people? How are you threatened by folks from different backgrounds? In what ways does God want you to grow in this area, too?

II. The Explanation of Peter.

Peter could have responded to the criticism defensively by saying, "Hey, I'm an apostle. God speaks to me, and He speaks through me. And God told me to go to the house of Cornelius. So, if you don't like it, you can leave my church!" That's how some Christian leaders react to criticism and controversy. But Peter didn't. He didn't flaunt his authority. Instead he offered a humble and detailed account of exactly what happened, and the text says he explained everything precisely as it occurred.

There are several aspects of Peter's explanation I think are worth noting. **First, the apostle made it clear he hadn't acted alone, and there were others with him in making this decision.** Six companions joined Peter on the visit to Cornelius' house, and those same six men were also with him in Jerusalem. The Bible says there is wisdom in the counsel of many, and the best decisions are made in community, not in isolation.

Second, Peter also made it clear **this wasn't something he set out to do on his own. Rather, it was something he felt led by God to do.** The vision came to Peter when he was praying, and it was a vision that was repeated three times for emphasis. At first he reacted negatively to God's invitation. But gradually he came to see that kosher restrictions were a thing of the past in the kingdom of God, and the Lord was more interested in purifying people's hearts rather than their diets. He learned God has no favorites, and we shouldn't make distinctions between people.

The **third** thing Peter did was **he appealed to circumstances** which he interpreted as a divine appointment. The apostle said that while he was praying and immediately after he received the vision, men from Cornelius came to where

he was staying. Timing like that could not have been accidental, and Peter saw the hand of God in the circumstances.

Next the apostle said **he witnessed a divine action** when the Holy Spirit came upon the people gathered in Cornelius' home. The Spirit of God came on them just as it had on the early believers on the day of Pentecost. The extraordinary similarity of the two events had an impact on him, so that he concluded this must be of God.

Finally, the apostle ended with the words of Jesus, and he said when this happened he remembered what the Lord said about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Peter appealed to the authority of God's Word in Jesus Christ to justify his actions of the previous days.

From time to time people ask me, "How can I know God's will for my life? How can I discern the mind of God in a particular situation?" This passage gives us great insight into these questions. It reminds us that decisions are best made in community. Prayer is a foundational activity if we want to know what God wants us to do. Circumstances play a part in understanding the plan of God for our lives, and sometimes He closes a door but opens a window. And Scripture should inform whatever decision we need to make.

What decision are you facing today, and how can this passage help you discern God's will? Are you praying about it? Are you seeking the counsel of others? Are you reading your Bible and searching God's Word for answers? And how is God using your circumstances to direct your path?

III. The Diversity of the Church.

The result of Peter's speech was that the criticism ceased, and the worship began. The people praised God for this amazing miracle, and they rejoiced that salvation had come even to the Gentiles. However, even though everyone was convinced by Peter's presentation that day, this support only lasted for a while. Everyone praised God, but not for long.

A short time after this, a faction in the church began to develop in Jerusalem that eventually rejected this initial enthusiasm. Later these legalists would argue that to be a Christian you could not ignore the law of Moses in the Old Testament. These questions had to be addressed again later on, and the apostle Paul, not just Peter, would also be at the center of the debate. Many of his letters tried to deal with the problem of what came to be called the "Judaizers," and the apostles had to fight for the gospel of grace and rescue it from those who would seek to co-opt it to their own narrow way of thinking.

This reminds us that prejudice dies hard, and we need to learn these lessons of inclusion over and over again. Even when we make progress and come to a new way of thinking and living, old ways tend to creep in and we find ourselves

slipping back into prejudice. Old patterns die hard, and all of us need to work at rooting out the weed of discrimination in our hearts.

The sin of prejudice continues to raise its ugly head in the church of Jesus Christ. Whether it's racism (which is prejudice based on color), nationalism (my country, right or wrong), tribalism in Africa, casteism in India, classism in America, or sexism in discriminating against women, all such prejudice is wrong because God has no favorites. And neither should we. The church should be the most inclusive place on the planet, because of all the people in the world we have a basis for unity. Our unity is based on the fact that we've been saved by Jesus Christ, and through His sacrifice Jesus has made us a part of His eternal family and we are also part of His spiritual body on earth.

In his book *Life Sentence* the late Chuck Colson tells the moving story about a dinner gathering that included Harold Hughes, a former senator, Tommy Tarrant, a white racist, Eldridge Cleaver, a militant black activist, and Colson himself, a former counsel to President Nixon who did time in prison for his involvement in Watergate. He recounts the events of that evening and writes: "What a strange collection of people: the one-time Nixon loyalist, a recovered alcoholic and liberal Democratic senator from Iowa, a member of the Black Panther party and an avowed Marxist revolutionary out on bail, and an ex-Ku Klux Klan terrorist doing 35 years in prison. Here were men who represented opposite poles culturally, politically, and socially; it would be unthinkable in the world's eyes that they could come together for any purpose. Yet on this night they prayed together, wept together, and embraced - joined together by the power of the Holy Spirit in a fraternity that transcends all together."¹

This is the manifold beauty of the body of Christ. We are all sinners saved by grace who long to find a home in a healing community. And the thing that unites us is that none of us deserves to be here. It's only because of the forgiveness which Jesus provides that any of us are ever invited to the party at all.

Conclusion.

The title of my sermon today about the speech Peter gave to the council at Jerusalem is "I Had a Dream!" It reminds me of another speech made back in 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. As you know, his famous speech then was "I *Have* a Dream!"

Dr. King dreamed of a colorblind society in which a person was judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. He dreamed of a day when black children and white children, the ancestors of slaves and slave owners, would play together in the red clay hills of Georgia. It is a dream that has been realized to some degree in this country. But, as the events of the last year in

Ferguson, North Charleston, and Baltimore have shown us, we've still got a long way to go in this area as a nation, and progress still needs to be made.

At the Michael, Jr. event a few weeks ago I shared the story that several years ago a friend of mine was watching a documentary on TV with his father, who was now in his 70s. The film detailed the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and it included Dr. King's speech. However, it also showed footage of the police dogs attacking peaceful demonstrators and the water cannons officers used to break up marches. There were photographs of lynchings and other forms of violence against black people. It was a very sobering film. When the program was over, the father of my friend turned off the television, and he said rhetorically to his son in a mournful voice, "Where was I?" All this was going on, and he had buried his head in the sand, looked the other way, and didn't want to know. "Where was I?"

I don't want to get to the end of my life and ask the same question. I want to make sure that at the end of my days I will be found faithful to have done what I could to stand against prejudice, injustice, and hate. What about you?

What would it take for our church to be known for breaking down the barriers of prejudice? What would it take for us to be in the forefront of building bridges of healing and understanding? How can I be a part of the solution and not the problem? And how can I take a step closer to a person who is different from me in the coming week? May God give us insight and courage pray about this and to do something about it ourselves. May we live into this dream of Jesus Christ. It's a dream that is still worth having today. Amen.

¹Charles Colson, *Life Sentence*, p. 173.