

Sermon 5-19-19
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the First Lesson for the Fifth Sunday of Easter Acts 11:1-8 and Acts 10.

The Sign Against Unbelief

Our first lesson this morning, from the 11th chapter of Acts, is an almost word for word rehashing of the very significant event that happened in chapter 10 of Acts. It's most rare that a chapter in either the Old or New Testament is repeated like this. But this event was so significant that the author of Acts, Dr. Luke, wrote the event twice from two different perspectives. The occasion was the conversion of the first gentile ever to Jesus Christ, a Roman centurion named, Cornelius – along with his household and friends.

Cornelius' conversion was significant for several reasons. It was the first fulfillment of a monumental then 600-year-old prophecy found in Isaiah 49. It was also the fulfillment of a prophecy of Jesus Himself. And it was the first breaking of the strict social barriers that God had established between Jew and gentile to keep His Jewish people from adopting gentile idolatry.

We read of Messiah in Isaiah 49:5-7, "5 And now the LORD says – he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength – 6 he says: 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.'" 7 This is what the LORD says – the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: 'Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'"

The person spoken about in this prophecy is Jesus and His fulfillment of it is the reason that gentiles are Christians today. It has been the will of the Lord written in prophecy from 600 years before Jesus. Cornelius and his family were the first ones to fulfill this ancient prophecy.

Now, Jesus Himself had said to the disciples in Acts 1:8, "... 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'" The ends of the earth means gentile territory. So, Cornelius was the beginning of the ends of the earth, fulfilling Jesus' prophecy.

First century rabbinic law declared that a Jew would ceremonially defile himself by entering the house of a gentile. No Jew would do so. Thus, Peter entering the house of Cornelius was a very significant thing. Notice. The social media crowd of 34A.D. immediately slammed him for it, as we read in Acts 11:2-3, "2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised [Jewish] believers criticized him 3 and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'"

Peter justified himself with three reasons. First, he told his critics of the vision he had had of the sheet coming down from heaven with clean and unclean animals in it. Second, he told of the Holy Spirit coming upon Cornelius and his household. Finally, he justified himself with the words of Jesus. Peter said in Acts 11:16-17, "16 'Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 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?'"

This is most significant. The first Christians were all Jewish. They believed in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. But as we have seen, Isaiah prophesied that Messiah would save all people. Nevertheless, because of centuries of Jewish-gentile estrangement, it was not clear to the Jewish believers that Jesus was also Messiah of the gentiles. It took a very clear sign for the Jewish people to believe. And that sign was the Holy Spirit coming upon the household of Cornelius.

Here's Peter's sermon to the household of Cornelius from Acts 10:34-35, "34 Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'" For a Jew to say this at the time was nothing short of cognitive dissonance! Yet, from ancient times there had always been gentiles attracted to the worship of the one true God, the Creator of everything that exists. Cornelius was one of those people.

Continuing, Peter said in Acts 10:36-37, "36 You 'know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.'"

These words indicate that Cornelius was familiar with the ministry of Jesus. Some have speculated that he's the centurion whose servant Jesus had healed.

Continuing, Peter said in Acts 10:39-43, "39 'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen –by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'"

Notice. Peter himself said that Jesus did not reveal Himself to all the people when He rose from the dead, just to a select group of eyewitnesses. That select group was about 600 people. It's only on the basis of their eyewitness testimony that we can have our lives justified before God. If they are telling the truth, then there is forgiveness of sins in Jesus' Name. There will be restoration to the perfect Image of God. There will be righteous life eternal with our holy and righteous Creator.

Continuing, we read in Acts 10:44-46, "44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 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. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.”

This last sentence is all-important. On the Day of Pentecost, months earlier, God had testified that His servant, Jesus, is Messiah by having the 120 Jewish disciples gathered in the upper room come down to the streets speaking in tongues. And Jews gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world for Pentecost 33A.D. miraculously heard in all their native languages these 120 praising God.

And now, in the house of Cornelius, Peter and the six Jewish Christians with him saw this very same sign given to the gentiles. In other words, God was demonstrating that it is His will that gentiles be converted to Messiah Jesus. How could Peter and the other Jewish Christians know for certain? By the same sign from God they themselves had received on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D.

After the Apostles died, the gift of tongues died down for centuries within the church. But at the very beginning of the 20th century it started to reappear again in earnest. I have a theory why. I believe it has to do with the re-paganization of the West that started to make real headway at the start of the 20th century – where first those in academia and then the general population began to deny or ignore the existence of Yahweh, the Creator God.

My reason for thinking this is a teaching that Paul gives in 1Corinthians 14:20-22, “20 Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. 21 In the Law it is written: ‘Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord. 22 Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers....”

The passage quoted by Paul is Isaiah 28:11-12, and here is the context for those verses written 600 years before Jesus. At that time Israel was still flip-flopping between the worship of Yahweh and the pagan worship of idols. Therefore, Yahweh was warning Israel, if you don’t listen to my prophet Isaiah speaking in your native language and repent of your idolatry, then I will punish you by sending foreigners speaking a strange language to conquer you and oppress you severely for years. But even then, you won’t listen to me.

We know that within Isaiah’s lifetime this prophecy came to pass. Babylon conquered Jerusalem, destroyed it and Yahweh’s temple, and marched most of the remaining Jews off to Babylon where they spent 70 years in exile forced to listen to the Babylonian language.

But Paul teaches that this sign against Israel’s impenitence takes a new form in the New Testament. It’s still a sign against unbelief – unbelief in Jesus. But in the New Testament, tongues is a sign of Yahweh’s mercy for unbelievers. The sign induces repentance. And did it ever. Having heard tongues, and the Word of the Lord, there were over three thousand that repented on the Day of Pentecost alone.

Now, in the situation we’re examining this morning, the tongues spoken by Cornelius and his household were a sign against the unbelief of Peter and the other Jews present. Until the sign appeared, Peter and the others could not believe that the gospel of repentance, faith and baptism in the Name of Jesus belonged to the gentiles just as much as it belonged to them. But then, astounded that Lord Holy

Spirit had given the sign of tongues to the gentiles, they could finally believe it to be the will of God.

And when Peter's testimony about the sign of tongues was brought to the whole Jewish Christian community, we read in the last sentence of this morning's first lesson, Acts 11:18, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'" See. Their objections to Peter visiting with Cornelius and their own unbelief concerning the gentiles disappeared because of the sign of tongues.

The Pentecostals of the early 20th century got it all wrong. The gift of tongues is not a sign that a person is a believing Christian. Rather, Paul says it's God's warning sign against unbelief. Most of all, it's a sign of God's compassion, inducing pagans to believe in the Creator God and inducing both Jew and gentile to believe in Yahweh's magnificent Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It's a sign declaring Yahweh's yearning that we all come to the suffering and victorious Messiah to have our lives justified by His grace through faith alone.

As for myself, I was lost in unbelief when I first encountered the sign of tongues. It's too long a story to tell here in its entirety. But sometime in this later part of May or early June – I never kept track of the exact date – it will be forty years since I first experienced the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues.

I was at no religious meeting when it happened. In fact, I was asleep. I only know because I woke my wife up speaking in a strange language in my sleep. She told me about it the next day.

But, this didn't happen by accident or out of the blue. It came through Holy Spirit given faith in the Word of God. For that evening I had listened to a thorough 45-minute teaching on the Holy Spirit by the late Episcopal Priest, Terry Fullam.

The part that got my attention was a very simple statement in 1 Corinthians 14:2, "For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit."

The person speaking in the spiritual gift of tongues has an audience of exactly one. For the language comes from Lord Holy Spirit and only God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, can understand it.

Now, what is the name of the activity that a human being engages in when speaking directly to God? What are you doing when you speak to God? It's prayer. It's that simple. Prayer. That's what tongues is: prayer.

So, what is spiritual about tongues? It's the fact that the one who speaks in tongues is fluently speaking a language that comes from beyond the speech center of the human brain.

Carol and I have grandchildren 2, 3 and 4 years of age. It's fun to watch them master speech. As many of you know, our 4-year-old granddaughter lives in Moscow, Russia. One day, her father clandestinely videoed her from behind as she was playing on the floor with some toys. It was clear she was having a pretend picnic. As she went through the motions of eating and drinking, she was talking to herself about it – only in Russian. I'd love to know what it's like being her, learning two languages. Two languages are being burned into the speech center of her brain simultaneously.

All languages consist of syllables – sounds strung out in a particular order. And when the syllables of a language have been burned into your speech center, it's effortless to speak it and understand it. But what gives tongues its supernatural dimension is that someone praying to God in a tongue is effortlessly speaking the syllables of a language they have never learned as if it were burned into the speech center of their brain – which it is not.

As for me, once I understood that tongues was prayer and that it was like a foreign language, I attempted to speak in tongues on the evening of the day that I listened to Father Fullam explain it. I haltingly attempted a few syllables before I went to bed. But I was fluent in my sleep. That gave me confidence, and within a short time I became fluent while awake.

Here's another thing about tongues. Like the gift of prophecy, it's completely under the control of the speaker. Here's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:32-33, "32 The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." This means, that you never have to worry about uncontrollable spiritual outbursts in public caused by the Holy Spirit – even in English. Lord Holy Spirit does not cause spiritual incontinence. Nor does He cause uncontrolled flapping of the jaw. No. Uncontrolled flapping of the jaw is caused by the owner of the jaw – even in spiritual matters.

Praying in a tongue does two things for a believer. First, it gently reminds us of the unbelief the Lord has graciously led us out of. Second, it gives us confidence that there is some situation in the world, unknown to us but known to Lord Holy Spirit, that requires prayer. It requires specific prayer that we just have no knowledge of at the moment in our native language. But Lord Holy Spirit knows. And that's all that matters. Feel free to speak to me about this gift any time you want.

In conclusion, then. On this fifth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate the gospel coming to the gentiles for the first time. It has never stopped nor will it stop until Jesus returns. Isaiah 49 will be fulfilled in its entirety. Therefore, O Lord Holy Spirit, grant us repentance and faith in the testimony of the eyewitnesses that Jesus truly is the forgiveness of our sins, our salvation and our life before you. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.