

“Breaking New Ground”

Acts 9:31 - 10:23

Series: Book of Acts [#12]

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Theme: **God Fashions Willing Believers To Break New Ground.**

Introduction

This morning we are thinking about *breaking new ground*. The phrase comes from farming where it refers to preparing uncultivated land for use. Before machinery, and even now in less developed places, hand tools, animals and *people power* have been used to break new ground.

We are thinking in spiritual terms, looking at the church breaking new ground, moving into an area that up to that point had not been worked by the main core of disciples.

God breaks new ground in people, in the church and in the world. Life with God is meant to be a growing, exciting and fulfilling adventure. Part of that is being empowered and used by God to break new ground.

Just as farmers use suitable equipment to break new ground, so God’s people need to be suitable and use the right approaches and tools. The key truth for us today is that *God fashions willing believers to break new ground*. Next week we will take a second look at the first part of chapter 10 from another perspective. Now let’s start by considering ...

The Challenge Of Breaking New Ground.

We begin with the task: extend the gospel to the Gentiles. The *gospel*. The good news of Jesus Christ. The good news of God’s love, forgiveness and everlasting life in and through Jesus.

God’s desire for all people everywhere to hear of His love and forgiveness was not something new. From childhood Jesus’ disciples would have been taught God’s purpose and design for Israel was ...

- to be a light to the nations of the world;
-) to, through their godly testimony, shine a spotlight on God, His truth, love and redemption.

And Jesus’ disciples heard Him say,

“For God so loved *the world* that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever* believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

And He also told them, “Go therefore and make disciples *of all the nations*...” (Matthew 28:19).

And, after those words, after Jesus' return to heaven, after the birth of the church on Pentecost, after the first persecution and scattering of the church some believers shared the gospel with Samaritans, and many of these people who, at best were half-Jewish, received Christ as their Savior. Peter and John had gone to Samaria to check on what was happening. They blessed the work and preached to Samaritans on the way back to Jerusalem.

But by and large, the church was still Jewish and the apostles were ministering to their own people. So God's challenge was to *break new ground, extend the gospel beyond Jews and Samaritans to the Gentiles, to everyone.*

God chose Peter to take the lead in this task. Paul became known as *the apostle to the Gentiles*, while Peter was known as *the apostle to the Jews*. But in breaking this new ground God began with Peter.

What kind of man did God choose?

- Peter was a common man. He was neither wealthy nor well-educated.
- He came from a traditional Jewish background, complete with all its prejudices against non-Jews.
- He was impulsive and stubborn.
- He was loyal and a man of action.

What does this tell us? One thing is that God does the calling. He chooses whomever He desires. God begins with a broad spectrum of raw material. And all of us should be glad He does, because that means we can have a part in this.

Sometimes God's choices might surprize and puzzle us. When you look at yourself and others, don't be quick to dismiss the possibility that God wants you, that God wants them to break some new ground. The question should be "Why not me?" rather than "Why me?"

God chooses, and then prepares, fashions people to be suitable for His work. So now we need to look at how God fashions us into suitable workers.

The Fashioning Of A Suitable Worker.

There are four aspects we see in Peter here. First, God fashions suitable workers through clarifying and confirming His call. At first glance the end of chapter 9 may not seem connected to chapter 10, but it *is*. Look at 9:32,

“Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda.” Peter was on a tour of the churches in this area.

Let's go to a map to place this. At the back of your Bible, check for a map of the time of Christ, the early church, or the apostles. At the back of the pew Bibles, look at Map 6, titled *Palestine in the Time of Christ*. While you find one of those, we have a map to project on the

screen.

Lydda was about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem and had a mostly Jewish population. It was a government administrative center with pottery and linen businesses and the production of figs and wine.

Some amazing things happen from verse 32 to the end of the chapter. First, in Lydda, Christ, through Peter, healed a man who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Luke's record shows no request to be healed from this man named Aeneas, nor does Luke tell us if he was or became a believer.

Luke records that "Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed.' Immediately he got up." As a result, many there believed in Jesus. This miracle brought physical healing to Aeneas and led to spiritual healing for many.

Then, there is the wonderful account in Joppa of Christ raising Tabitha, or Dorcas, back to life through Peter. Let's go to our maps. Joppa was on the coast about 12 miles northwest from Lydda.

God worked this miracle through Peter in private. There was no one else there, let alone great crowds. Peter prayed. Then said, "Tabitha, arise." As with Aeneas, this miracle was both instantaneous and complete. As a result, once again, many believed in Jesus.

These are two unusual and dramatic miracles. God did not work these miracles to inflate Peter's ego or reputation. To Peter they were a confirmation of God's unlimited power to accomplish anything and everything He asked Peter to do—even things Peter might doubt.

Here in Joppa God gave Peter a vision to graphically drive home the point that the gospel was for everyone on an equal basis—Jews and Gentiles (10:10-16). In the vision a voice said "Get up Peter, kill and eat!" animals which were both clean or acceptable and *unclean* or off-limits to the Jews.

Some of the laws the Jews followed, such as the dietary ones, were God's directions. Others were their own extensions or additions. Drop down to verse 28 to see another example, "And he [Peter] said to them, 'You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him...'"

In all of this God was making it crystal clear to Peter that new ground was to be broken. And, Peter was getting the message. Later in chapter 10, starting at verse 34, Peter said,

"...I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, but in *every nation* the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him."

In the same way God will clarify and confirm His call to us *to break new ground*, whether it be in our own lives or in ministry. Now, God seldom uses miracles to clarify and confirm His directions. They have always been rare. The point is that whatever it takes, when God wants you to move forward, He will *always* give you sufficient clarification and confirmation

to take the next step.

The second way God fashions us to be willing workers who break new ground is through prayer. Let's go back up to verse 9 in chapter 10.

“On the next day, as they [Cornelius' servants] were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour *to pray*.”

Peter was a man of prayer. It was around noon. Peter was hungry and waiting for the meal to be prepared when he went to pray. It was common practice for devout Jews to have three periods of prayer each day. This was not one of those regular times. What we see here from Peter is not a rigid regimen, but a *spiritual discipline*.

There are a number of truths here, but for now notice that it was in Peter's normal, routine fellowship of talking with God that God gave Him this vision and direction for specific actions to begin fulfilling the mission Jesus had given to reach all people with the gospel.

God fashions us to be suitable workers through prayer. God gives us a great deal of specific direction in the Bible. No matter how long you have been a Christian, there is always more to learn and to live. At the same time, God does not address in the Bible every specific decision, direction and situation you face.

Finding God's direction for your life will not come without prayer. God directs us through the Bible, through the counsel of other Christians, through His wisdom which He generously gives us, and through *prayer*.

Don't expect a blueprint to be let down from heaven. But God always gives enough light to take the next step, to step out in faith to trust Him as you take that next step. Sometimes it is scary. You may have heard of the Grand Canyon Skywalk. It is a glass horseshoe shaped walk that juts out 70 feet from the canyon edge, suspended 4,000 feet or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile above the canyon floor. How would you feel stepping out on to glass and looking down at your feet and also see the canyon floor 4,000 feet below? Henry & Freda recently were there, so you can ask them. *For now, look at a few pictures (on screen).*

God will give you the courage to step out, take that first, that next step of faith. Do you talk with God regularly, daily? Do you bring your celebrations as well as your disasters to Him? Do you talk with Him about the Scripture you have read, studied or heard? Do you ask Him to help you learn and live so to become more like Jesus?

Thirdly, God fashions us through His word. God spoke directly to Peter. The conversation begins in 10:13, “A voice came to him, ‘Get up, Peter, kill and eat!’” But Peter protests, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” God answers, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (15). And, Luke tells us, this was repeated three times (16).

Peter was a traditional but commonsense Jewish man. He would not eat any unclean

food, but at this time he was staying with Simon the tanner in Joppa. Because of their contact with dead animals and their skins, the Pharisees and other meticulously conscientious Jews considered tanners to be unclean.

Peter protested, was “greatly perplexed” (17), and then reflected on what God had told him in the vision (19). While he was reflecting, God spoke again, verse 19, “... the Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are looking for you. But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself.’” Yes, God spoke directly to Peter.

God also speaks to us, to you and me. You may quickly say, “Wait a minute! I haven’t had any visions! I haven’t heard God speak to me in an audible voice!” Remember, this experience was the *exception* for Peter, not the norm. Remember as well that we have the completed written word of God. Peter did not.

The unchanging bottom line is that God speaks to us through His word to change, to fashion us however He communicates it to us. In the vast majority of times in our lives it will be through God the Holy Spirit teaching, correcting, encouraging and prodding us through the Bible. When Paul wrote to Timothy, he reminded him in 2 Timothy 3:16,

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

Jesus has told us in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit will “guide [us] into all the truth.”

Finally, God fashions us into suitable workers through obedience. Peter did not immediately obey. Remember, in the vision God said, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” To which Peter fired back, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” When verse 16 tells us “this happened three times,” it may well mean Peter protested three times.

It’s almost a flashback to when Jesus was preparing the disciples for His death. Peter jumped in and protested there as well. Turn back to Matthew’s gospel, 16:21,

“From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.’” (21-22)

Jesus corrected Him, verse 23,

“But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for [because] you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.’”

As I said earlier, Peter was impulsive and stubborn, a man of action, but he also was loyal.

Note that in both Matthew 16 and here in Acts 10 Peter showed respect in his protests by addressing Christ as Lord.

Peter *did* obey. He reflected, which shows him taking initiative, and then the Holy Spirit guided him. As an extra confirmation, God told him the men who had just arrived at the front gate were there to see him and he was to go with them without any misgivings. Look at verse 21,

“Peter went down to the men and said, ‘Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?’ They said, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you.’ So he [Peter] invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.” (21-23)

Cornelius was not yet a believer. We get to that in the last half of chapter 10. But more than this, he was a Gentile. And not just any Gentile, but a commander in the Roman army which the Jews despised. This was a dramatic departure from what Peter had known, felt, believed and experienced, But he *obeyed* God.

God fashions you and me to break new ground as we obey Him. Never take lightly the prompting of God to do or not do something, to be or not be something. When God speaks we need to be those who both hear and do His word, otherwise we will build up spiritual callouses and will not be as sensitive to Him as we should be. Again, this takes courage and faith. At times we will feel like Peter, “God, I’ve *never* done this before! How can I? What will happen? What will others think?”

God fashions you and me to break new ground as we obey Him.

Conclusion.

God fashions willing believers to break new ground. Don’t dismiss yourself. Consider the great joy of being in the place of fellowship and ministry where God includes you in *breaking new ground.*

There are countless examples we can see of people, ordinary people whom God has used in a multitude of different ways to break new ground. Last Sunday I shared with you Howard Hendricks’ account of a woman in her eighties who was looking for new ideas, new ways to *break new ground* in the lives of junior high boys, and how at least 84 of them had moved to ministry.

I think of a veteran retired missionary who gave up the familiar and the expectation of having her own family to serve God. She worked in a difficult area. Those who preceded her worked faithfully for their entire time with hardly anyone coming to Christ. She, and others with her, worked many years before substantial results were seen. But God used them to

break new ground. Today there is a thriving church with tens of thousands of believers in that people group.

Some plant, some water, some harvest. Some seasons are for planting, others for watering and yet others for harvesting. Some see great numbers, others smaller numbers. But it is God who always it as work, *breaking new ground through the willing workers He has fashioned*.

As you spend a few quiet moments reflecting with God on this truth, thank Him for breaking new ground in your heart—for reaching out in love and bringing you to Himself, changing you forever. Determine to be sensitive and responsive to God where you are and where God leads you, to break new ground in your own life. Then also to have the heart, the vision, the dedication to live out His goodness, to share His grace and mercy, *to break new ground* in ministry with and for others.

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