

## I. Introduction

Good morning! Let's begin with a question. How many people like stories? Lots of people like stories! Some people like to read books, other people like to watch movies, but the common element is the fun and excitement of a story, filled with joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, and lots of surprises. When we read or watch a story, we identify with the characters and we become absorbed in the events. We are delighted when new things happen and our enjoyment grows as the author surprises us with interesting events.



There are many stories, but the most exciting story of all is God's Story. All of history, past and future, is really God's Story, since He is the Creator of the universe and Lord over all. But in a narrower sense, the Bible is God's Story, and the central theme of the Bible is God's plan to bring salvation to the nations through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. There are some books that you read once and throw away. But the Bible is not like that. Every time we read the Bible we learn more about God's love, wisdom, and glory, and we find new and amazing things that we missed before.



God's Story contains many surprises. The full plan of God is beyond human wisdom and imagination. No human author would have imagined providing salvation by sending the Savior to die on a cross, but God did. God does new and amazing things all the time, and sometimes He even announces it in advance. For example, in **Isaiah 43:19**, God says, **"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."** God opens a road where there was no road before, and He brings streams of blessing where there was only dry desert. But do we perceive it? Do we notice when God is doing a new thing? We need to be alert, or we will fail to see the new things that God is doing, perhaps even things that He is doing right here at OIC.

In today's Scripture reading, we will see God do a new thing. Peter and the other disciples will be amazed, but they will learn to accept that this new thing as part of God's plan to touch all people with His love. Let's read Acts 10:23b-48.

## II. Scripture Reading Acts 10:23b-48, (NIV, 1984)

23b The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. 24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. 26 But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." 27 Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

30 Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me 31 and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. 32 Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

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. 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.

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."

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. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." 48 So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

### III. Teaching

In this passage, God did something new and amazing. Did you notice it? **Acts 10:44-45, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 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."** The author makes a point of telling us that the believers who had come with Peter were circumcised. In other words, they were Jews. We don't know whether they were born Jewish or not, they might have been converts to Judaism, but they were Jews. When a gentile received circumcision, they became a Jew and were no longer a gentile. Since the time of Moses, gentiles who wanted to join the Jewish faith had to accept the Law of Moses, including receiving circumcision.

But God loves to do new things. And, here, God does a new thing. He pours out His Spirit on the uncircumcised gentiles. He even gives them the same spiritual gifts and signs that were given in Acts 2, when the disciples first received the Holy Spirit. Peter and the believers with him were astonished that God would do this. But they really shouldn't have been surprised. God had said many times throughout the Old Testament that He would bring salvation to the nations. Peter had even quoted the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28) in **Acts 2:17**, saying, **"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."** The prophecy says, **"I will pour out my Spirit on all people,"** meaning the nations and not just Israel, but Peter was still amazed to see Cornelius and his family and friends filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues.

Why was Peter so surprised? Peter had already received a vision about this in the first half of Acts 10, and today in **Acts 10:34-35**, we read, **"Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'"** Peter understood in part, but he didn't fully understand. Peter had come to understand that God loved all people without regard to their nation or race, but Peter probably still thought that these new believers would need to obey the Law of Moses and be circumcised.

But, now God is showing Peter that the church is not to be bound by the Law of Moses. Gentiles who come into the church do not need to follow the Law or adopt a Jewish lifestyle; God fully accepts them just as they are. Peter was amazed by this, but he saw the proof right before his eyes. God had poured out His Holy Spirit on the gentiles. So Peter surrendered to God's heart and said in **Acts 10:47**, **"Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."** And so, Cornelius and his family and friends were baptized in the Name of Jesus and added to the church.

Can you imagine how joyful Cornelius must have been? He had worshipped the One True God for some time, but for the first time he knew for sure that God had completely accepted him and his loved ones. With the gift of the Spirit and baptism, he knew that he was fully part of the new Christian community, the church. And he knew that his people, the people of Italy, along with all of the nations, would also have the opportunity to be saved through the Name of Jesus Christ.



In his comments, Peter shows that Cornelius had already heard about Jesus. But, even so, Peter made sure to include the core gospel truths in his message. Peter spoke of the cross and the resurrection. And, Peter proclaimed the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, that Jesus is Lord over all, and that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins. We should always remember that we cannot proclaim the Good News of Jesus without speaking of the cross and the resurrection. It is the death of Jesus on the cross that proves how much God loves us and that provides for forgiveness of sins. As **Romans 5:8**, says, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**



The Bible is God’s Story, the story of His love for us. It covers all of history in outline and it tells in detail the story of God’s love for the men and women He has created. The Old Testament tells of God’s promises to send a Savior to provide for salvation from sin and death. The Gospels record the life, death, and resurrection of the Savior, who is God come in the person of Jesus Christ. And the rest of the New Testament proclaims the Good News of the gospel and the prophecy of how Jesus will come again on the last day.

Cornelius and Peter each had a place in God’s Story and in His plan. And, you know what? You and I also have a place in God’s Story. God loves each and every person very much. But apart from Him, there is no salvation from sin and death. That is why He wants us to come to Him and receive salvation. Consider the invitation that God gives in **Isaiah 45:20-22**. **“Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. Declare what is to be, present it-- let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”**

God speaks the truth, but He speaks it in love. He loves us so much, but He is holy and our sins separate us from Him. Sinful man cannot come into the presence of Holy God. But despite all of our sins, God did not abandon us; instead He came in the person of Jesus Christ and gave His life as a ransom for ours. In Christ, God the Son took upon Himself the death penalty that we deserve for our sins. **1 Peter 2:24-25** expresses it with these words, **“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”** We all went astray, like lost sheep, but on the cross the Great Shepherd has opened a road for us so that we return home, into right relationship with God.

As the story of Cornelius makes very clear, the way of salvation is open to all. (**Romans 10:12-13**), **“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved; it is the grace of God, received by faith. If you have not yet made the decision to place your faith in Jesus, then I want to encourage you to make the decision today, if you are able. Our Lord is waiting for you to make the decision, just as Cornelius made it nearly two thousand years ago.

All it takes is a simple prayer, the exact words do not matter; it is the condition of the heart that is important. If your heart is ready to believe, then just pray in your heart to God and confess your sins, ask for forgiveness in the Name of Jesus, and invite God to come into your life. You have a place in God’s Story. God loves you and His grace and mercy are available to you, even at this very moment. Do you need something new in your life? Have you come to a dry and hard place in your life where there is no road and

no water? God did a new thing for Cornelius and his loved ones. God can do a new thing for you and your loved ones also. The words of **Isaiah 43:19** can come true in your life and home. God says, **“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”**

We are going to talk about one or two more things before we close for today, but first let’s take a minute for silent prayer right now. If you need a new thing in your life, just cry out to God in your heart and He will hear you. Let’s have one minute of silent prayer so that we can each speak to God right now. Let’s pray (one minute of silence).

*Dear Lord, thank you for hearing our prayers. Thank You for Your great love. You have heard the cries of our hearts. Please meet the needs of Your people according to Your wonderful love and grace. In the Name of Jesus, we pray, amen.*

If you asked God for forgiveness of sins and a new life, then you have received it. You may notice the change immediately, or it may take a little time before the change becomes noticeable. But God hears our prayers and answers; that is certain. And especially He has promised forgiveness of sins and new life to everyone who asks in the Name of Jesus. As Jesus said in **Luke 11:10**, **“For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”**



The Lord delights to do new things, especially when we call on Him and ask for His grace and love to be poured out. Each of us has a place in His Story; the story of salvation. Our church also has a place in His Story of salvation. Next month we will celebrate OIC’s 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For 38 years, OIC has been a place where the Name of Jesus is spoken and the Good News of salvation is proclaimed. During these years, God has blessed this church and many have come to faith in Jesus and been saved. OIC is already part of God’s Story of bring salvation to Japan and to the nations.

But earlier this year, I felt that the Lord was leading me to bring a challenge to all of us. A challenge for OIC to be part of God’s Story in a new way, stepping out a little further in faith, and speaking the Name of Jesus a little more boldly to the people around us. It has been more than a month since we talked about it, but do you remember the challenge? What is our challenge for this year?

That’s right. Our challenge is, *“Let’s Fill the Hall for the GLORY of GOD!”* God has given us this wonderful hall with 300 seats, but we have never filled it. Of course we cannot do this just by our own efforts; we need to make it a prayer since it is God’s work. *“My specific prayer is for us to grow in love and outreach so that at 10:00 am on Easter Sunday, March 31st, 2013, this hall will be full of people giving thanks and praising God for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.”*

I am convinced that we can see this happen if we are willing to trust God and stretch a little bit. We just need: *A little more time in prayer. A little more loving one another. A little more courage to share Jesus with others.* It is God’s work and He is the One who brings the harvest, but He allows us to participate in His work. God could have reached Cornelius without using Peter, but God chose to use Peter. This gave Peter a chance to grow in his faith as he served the Lord. We need to grow as well. And we want to see some new things.

Of course, one of the realities of Christian ministry is that whenever we try to do something new for God’s glory, we can expect opposition. In Acts, we have already seen how the disciples faced opposition and persecution, and we will see a lot more of that in Acts 12 and beyond. In our case, instead of going up, OIC attendance has actually gone down a little since we took on this challenge in May. But we should not become discouraged; we should just trust in the Lord and continue to do our best to love one another and to reach others.

Are you ready for God to do something new at OIC? Then let’s continue together in faith. One specific suggestion, if you have not yet started using the prayer card that we provided, now is a good time to

start. Put some names on the card and start praying regularly for those people to be join us here at OIC. And, since we have the Enoch concerts next Saturday and Sunday, invite the people you are praying for to come and hear some beautiful piano music. If you need a new card, they are available on the information rack in the hall.

#### IV. Conclusion

Today we have seen how God did a new thing in the life of Cornelius and in Peter's heart as well. And we have invited God to do a new thing in our hearts and in our church. But our faith is not in our efforts or plans. Our faith is in Jesus and in Him alone. He is our Savior, our Blessed Hope, and our Deliverer. Let's close with **Hebrews 12:2**, "**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**"

Let's pray.

#### V. Prayer