

From Simon to Peter #32 - the Holy Spirit and a Man's Prejudice

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon explores how the Holy Spirit transforms Simon into Peter by addressing and overcoming his deep-seated prejudices.

Duration: 42:04

Scripture: Acts 10:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the transformation of Simon Peter and how God dealt with his prejudice. The preacher emphasizes that when a person is in Christ, they become a new creation, and old things pass away. The sermon highlights the ugliness of prejudice and how it goes against God's will. The preacher also mentions the example of Jesus, who faced prejudice in his own hometown because people thought they knew him and his background.

Transcript

Once again we take up the thread this morning, looking at the transformation of Simon into Peter, and our particular theme is the Holy Spirit and a man's prejudice. The Holy Spirit and a man's prejudice. The Apostle Paul insisted in writing to the Corinthians that if any man be in Christ Jesus, there is a new creature.

A new creature. And the whole of the biblical revelation assures us that there are simply no exceptions to that rule. As sure as a man is rightly related to God in Jesus Christ, that very moment he is born a second time, and he or she becomes a new creation.

Old things are passed away, and behold, everything begins to be new. Now, we have been looking at the life of the rugged fisherman Simon Peter, and it has been thrilling, at least I have found it so, to be examining the records again, and seeing what a great change God has wrought in the life of this man. I find myself constantly having to stop in my studies and say, praise be to God.

Here is one of the roughest and most rugged of human diamonds, so transformed that he is glistening with grace and with glory. The man is transformed out of all recognition from the man that he was when we first encountered him in the gospel records. Such is the grace of God.

He makes men new. Even so, there are still many hangovers from the old pre-Christian life. Still there, in the life of this man Simon Peter, as there will be in all our lives.

In Acts chapters 10 and 11, chapter 10 as a whole and the beginning of chapter 11, what we have is the record of how God steps into the life of Simon Peter in order to deal particularly with one of these hangovers from the old life. And that is the hangover of prejudice. Now, prejudice is an ugly word.

Well, it has to be because it represents an ugly phenomenon. Prejudice only appears attractive when we glamorize it in ourselves or excuse it. In ourselves.

But whenever we come to look at this wretched thing in sheer objectivity, it is one of the ugliest things in God's world. I would go further. It is one of the ugliest things in Satan's territory.

Even the devil cannot produce anything that is much uglier than prejudice. The dictionary defines it as a judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without thoughtful examination of the pertinent facts, issues or arguments, especially an unfavorable, irrational opinion. You see, it is a pre-judgment.

This is what prejudice is. It is a pre-judgment. The issue has been decided before we consider the matters concerned.

And because the issue has been decided before we've given due consideration to the matters involved, it is based on a bias. And a result based on a bias is essentially ugly because it is a lie. Even so, there are times when prejudice can appear in a fairly innocuous garb.

It doesn't appear to be quite as hurtful as it does at other times. For example, there are times when it arises from over-familiarity with someone or with something. A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.

Why does he not receive honor in his own country? Well, because everybody knows him, just as they knew Jesus. Do you remember what they said? He's the son of Joseph. Don't we know his brothers and his sisters? Are they not all with us? We know these people.

There can be nothing exceptional about him. We know his pedigree, we know his family, we know all the details about his upbringing. Prejudice.

Now, there was no necessary barb there. But it was prejudice, perhaps of the more innocuous kind, but prejudice. At other times, it is the product of a social or of another kind of pride.

Let's take another New Testament illustration. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Nazareth? Nazareth has never produced a prophet. Nazareth will certainly not produce the Messiah.

It's impossible. But the judgment, the assessment of the issue was entirely prejudicial. It was without due consideration to the Scriptures of God and ultimately to the facts of the case.

It was prejudice. The thing was prejudged. It was judged on the basis of a bias.

But yet again, prejudice can be the dagger point that expresses hatred, jealousy, envy, anger, and all the hideous things that Satan can produce in the heart of a sinner. It can be one of the most terrifying things which refuses to see truth where it is. Goodness when it's present.

It has determined beforehand there can be no truth there. There can be no goodness there. And because it has determined it beforehand, it's not prepared to see it.

Like Lord Nelson. There's a blind eye and it looks at the telescope with a blind eye and sees nothing. The Duchess of Dabrante once said in her quaint way, Prejudice squints when it looks and it lies when it talks.

It's a quaint way of putting it but you know it's exactly true. Prejudice squints when it looks. It doesn't see you straight in the eye.

It sees what it wants to see and it lies when it talks. Or as another perhaps not so polished writer has put it, Prejudices are like rats. Men's minds are like traps, rat traps.

Prejudice gets into the trap easily but rarely gets out. Have you a rat in the trap this morning? There is nothing so nauseating as a stinking rat in the trap. And Peter was still suffering from this.

He's a changed man. He's a new man. God has begun a good work in him.

He's not the man he was but still at this stage in his life there's a rat in the trap. And it is spiritually not only unwanted but condemned by God. Now let's look at the way that God deals with this and we're going to divide the whole of the narrative into two main threads, two main thoughts.

We're going to look in turn at Peter's lingering prejudice and at God's liberating power. How else could we divide it? Peter's lingering prejudice, God's liberating power. Peter's prejudice.

Despite Peter's understanding of the Scriptures, now I want to summarize this. Let me put it in summary form and each word could demand some exposition. Despite Peter's understanding of the Scriptures, we've considered this, it's profound.

Despite Peter's confession of the Christ, which was singular. Despite Peter's knowledge of the God of Abraham, which was almost unrivaled. Despite Peter's experience of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost and subsequently.

I say despite all that there was a rat in the trap, prejudice in the mind. At this stage it is not only normally nauseating to God but it threatens the whole purpose of God for evangelism and the outreach of the church. Because Peter is meant to open the kingdom of God to the Gentiles even as he's opened the kingdom of God to the Jews on the day of Pentecost.

And Peter has a prejudice against the Gentiles and therefore God has got to overcome his prejudice before he will willingly embrace men and women from every nation under the sun who come with repentance and faith to the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. And before God's purposes can be fulfilled Peter's prejudice has got to be expunged. I want to say a word here and it has only to be a word about national, Jewish national exclusiveness.

Because to be fair to Peter we have to say that he's inherited this. He was nursed on it. And it is all a by-product of the Jewish national exclusiveness that was so characteristic of the Jews of his day.

We all know, if we are familiar with the biblical record that the Jewish nation owed its origin and its continuance in history, past and present to the sovereign omnipotence of God. You can neither explain the origin of this people nor its continuance save in terms of an omnipotent God who in sheer grace chose an unworthy man, Abraham, when he was a worshipper of idols and sovereignly out of his own heart's

affection and love and grace decided to make of this man a people. Apart from the continuing care of God the nation would have languished a long time ago if not in Egypt then in the wilderness.

If not in the wilderness then in Canaan. God guarded this nation spiritually as well as otherwise sent not only a lawgiver to give the law but prophets to apply the law and the word of God as it related to every day. But now, all this is beyond reasonable doubt.

Yet, rather than see this as the action of God in order to prepare the nation for a mission beyond herself for a mission to the nations of the world for a mission to future generations the Jewish nation turned in upon herself and thought of herself not as a means to an end in the purposes of God but as the very end and the very terminus of God's doings and God's deeds. And the whole movement turned sour and the people turned sulky. Let me repeat.

The nation failed to see that God was preparing her to bring forth the Messiah in the fullness of the times and from that one seed to bring forth the fruit from every kindred and tribe and people and nation that should be washed in the blood of Messiah saved from a fallen world glorified into a holy heaven. They failed to see that God had a purpose beyond themselves and so they turned in upon themselves and they said, My, we're a wonderful people. We are the people of God.

We are the end and the terminus and the goal of all God's doings. Everybody is inferior to us. And so the Jew would gather his skirts around him as he went on the street in case he touched a Gentile.

Enclidah! Peter inherited this. I've been refreshing my mind and my memory again over this past week and preparing for this morning. And you know, it is sad.

It is sad to realize that there was such a bitterness and such a superiority complex, such arrogance, such prejudice in Jewish minds that they talked like this. And I quote, Midwives should not help a Gentile mother at childbirth however great the pain, however great the anguish because at best she'll only bring forth another Gentile dog. Such is the sheer prejudice that a Gentile was looked upon almost as an animal and less than a human despite everything that the word of God thunders from beginning to end, despite the word to Abram right at the beginning that God was blessing him in order that all the nations of the earth, all the families of the earth should be blessed through him.

They turned in upon themselves, saw themselves as the end and not the means and became arrogant and proud so that they did not need a Messiah and certainly would not welcome him. Peter was heir to that. Despite the prophetic forecasts of Messiah's mission to the Gentiles, read the latter half of Isaiah for example, despite our Lord Jesus Christ, albeit he said that he had come first and foremost to the tribes of Israel, he received a Syrophenician woman.

He welcomed and gave the water that was not in the well to a Samaritan outcast. Despite the fact that the spirit of Pentecost had come down upon Samaritans and an Ethiopian Chancellor of the Exchequer, dark pagan man, had been saved by the Messiah of the Old Testament, despite all this Peter had these prejudices in his mind. Now you see it coming out in a number of ways in Peter's personal life.

Can I just give one illustration to pass on? I can only refer to this. His attitude to other nations is reflected in his words to Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman, a Gentile, but a God-fearer.

I can't tell you because the Bible doesn't tell us how God met this man, how he revealed himself in some measure to him. But this dark pagan man somehow, somehow had come to the place where, even though

he didn't know all that the Jews knew about God, he feared him and he honored him and he prayed to him. And when Peter at last comes to Cornelius, Peter says this, he says this to Cornelius, you yourselves, Cornelius and his family, you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit one of another nation.

Chapter 10 and verse 28. With such words does Peter explain how difficult it had been for him to come to Cornelius' house. The invitation had been simple.

Cornelius had sent messengers to say, God has spoken to me and God has given me your temporary address and he's told me your name and he's told me to send for you. Now I'm sending for you. Come to me.

But Peter said, it's very difficult for a man who is a Jew to come to the house of another man. It's not the done thing because you're unclean. But I've come nevertheless.

He came carrying his prejudice in his soul. He came not unquestioningly. He came because of the compulsion of God upon him.

But the prejudice was still there. Now that observation must suffice to indicate the immense problem involved if Peter is to be the servant of God in welcoming the Gentiles into the fold of the Savior. His heart must be changed.

His prejudice must be dealt with. You see, it would be the same in this church. Assuming that the members of Knox, assuming that there was someone here this morning who said, Ah well, we like our friends so very much.

We don't want to see newcomers coming in here and sitting in our seats. Now you don't say that, bless you, and I'm not charging anyone. There's no veiled accusation here.

But assuming that you were to say that, we don't want to see outsiders coming in. We don't want to see people sitting in our pews that we don't know. We don't want strangers.

But you see, it would be useless preaching the gospel. You can tell the minister to quit. He might as well go.

Unless there is a heart of compassion. Unless there is a welcoming grace. Unless there is a knowledge that God is seeking the lost.

And every man and every woman, every boy and every girl he sends among us is sent for a purpose. They might as well quit shop. So with Peter, what's the use of preaching the name of Jesus and then not being prepared to welcome the Gentiles in? God's liberating power is the next part of our message.

We turn from Peter's lingering prejudice, though we've only scarcely touched upon it, to God's liberating power. Let's be sure, my friends, that God never begins a work but that he finishes it. I think this is one of the most comforting, one of the most precious truths in the Bible.

Our God never begins a work if it is not wise to finish it. Our God never begins a work but that he is able to finish it. And if his wisdom prescribes it as desirable, his power makes it possible.

When he started the creation, he will see it through. And not until this entire created universe and every galaxy has served its purpose will the end come. God will see it through.

Do you know the same is precisely the case with every Christian man. He who begun in you, Christian, a good work, will continue it until the day of Christ when it will be complete. You know, this is a great encouragement here.

The God who began a work in Simon Peter will not let him go. You know, Francis Thompson was right. We might not have chosen his words.

I would not. But when he speaks of the hound of heaven, you know he was right. God never gives up.

Christians may rebel and they may kick the pricks and they may sin and they may go their way and dishonor their Lord, but the hound of heaven will be after them and if necessary he will bite their heel to get them to their knees. Whom he loves he chastises, so here. God is determined to get Peter into the center of his purposes and it's the determination of grace that we are to look at.

Now, how does he do it? What a question. How do you deal with this kind of prejudice in the heart of a man? How does God do it? I have three things to say. In the first place, there is the challenge of coincidences.

The challenge of coincidences. God knows how to speak my language and he knows how to speak your language. What persuades one man does not necessarily persuade another.

Now, there was one thing that would be very telling to a man of Peter's upbringing and of Peter's understanding of providence and of God and that was such a series of almost unbelievable coincidences as we have here. Now, to start off with, have you noticed where Peter was when this vision came to him? This is unexplained in scripture but it's very important. Where was he? You know, he was lodging in the house of a tanner.

Have you ever thought that one through? Peter the Jew was lodging in the house of a tanner, if you please. You say, what's funny about that? Well, this, a tanner was a man who dealt with skins and made leather and because he dealt with dead bodies all the time, he was perpetually unclean to the Jews so that the last thing that a Jew would be expected to do would be to get near to a tanner. You know, a tanner had to build his house at least 50 cubits outside the city boundary because his work was dirty work, it was unclean.

Now, I don't know how it happened. You know, God's ways are remarkable. But when this incident of Cornelius sending his friends along to invite Peter to him happened, it happened when Peter was already involved in wrestling with some of his prejudices and he's already lodging in the house of a tanner.

But now look what happened. Look next at these two counterpart providences or these two complementary visions that we have here. One, the first took place in Caesarea.

That's 30 or 35 miles from Joppa. I don't know, somewhere in there somewhere, between 30 and 35. Caesarea.

Peter, Cornelius is there. That's where he is with his battalion. A Roman, a good man, but a Roman and a Gentile.

And when he's praying, he has a vision. Now forget the issue of visions for the moment. Just let's take this at its face value.

He has a vision and in the vision God comes to him and says, Look here, Cornelius, you've been a God-fearing man for a long time and all your prayers have suddenly come before me, as it were, for a memorial. I remember all your prayers. I'm taking stock of them, says God, and I realize that you've been really seeking after me and you've been honoring every speck of light that you have concerning me.

Now look, I'm going to honor you. You must find the full flooded light of the gospel. So, Cornelius, you send men to Joppa, 30 miles away, and you ask for a man named Simon, whose surname is Peter, and his temporary address is he's staying in the house of Simon Atamor, whose house is by the seaside.

You send for him, he'll tell you what to do in order to know the full gospel light of the grace of God and to come from the shadows in which you are into the light of the knowledge of God. Now that's in Caesarea. Cornelius gathers three men around him and he sends them and dispatches them to Joppa, where Peter was.

Whilst they are on the way, Peter gets hungry. Now we all get hungry from time to time, but may I suggest that there was more to this hunger than the normal. This was divinely arranged, this.

And Peter up on the housetop is praying, but before he prays he's hungry and he orders a meal from the people downstairs. And a little bit long bringing the meal, Peter goes on with his prayers on the roof of the house, where there was privacy, and suddenly Peter gets a vision. And in his vision what Peter sees is this.

He sees something like a massive sheet coming down by four corners let down from heaven. And in this sheet there were all kinds of reptiles and beasts and fishes. And Peter discerns the voice of God saying to him, Peter, you're hungry, are you? Well, just rise and kill and eat.

And true to Peter, you know, Peter said, not on your life, Lord, not me. You know my record, don't you? Not once in my life have I ever eaten anything that is unclean. But the Lord says, look, Peter, what I have cleansed, don't you call that unclean.

But three times Peter said, typical of him, three times he does so many things, three times over, three times he says, no, no, no, Lord, it's wrong. You're asking me to do something that's wrong, eating the unclean. It was because of a prejudiced understanding of Scripture, you see.

Now, when the battle's over, the Holy Spirit says to Peter, Peter, look, go downstairs, there are three men asking for you. And Peter goes downstairs and lo and behold at the gate there are three men. And Peter announces himself to them and he says, I'm the man you're looking for.

The Spirit has told me. Now, if you're not a Christian, you may be tempted to think that these things are too good to be true. If you are a Christian, you'll be predisposed to believing.

Because this is the kind of thing that our God does. To crown such complementary visions, just as the man below were asking for Peter, Peter says, I'm the man. Complementary visions, counterpart providences, can you not see them, how God fits the one cog into the other cog and makes the machinery of his sovereign grace work as a sovereign hand of the controls here.

This is not haphazard. Peter recognized that. That's the first thing.

But the next thing is on a deeper level. The next thing that God uses to deal with his prejudice is on a deeper level. It's the perception of truth.

Now we're right in the intellectual realm. Following upon all this and Peter's eventual journey to Cornelius' home in Caesarea, Peter tells Cornelius something which is very significant. Peter's gone now to Cornelius' house.

He's traveled 30 miles and he gets there. Then Cornelius tells him again what the messengers have told him, but he receives it now from Cornelius' own lips. And the marvel of it dawns upon Peter.

And suddenly he sees the significance of the vision he had on the housetop, unclean and clean, clean and unclean. What God has cleansed, don't you call unclean. And here before the very face of Cornelius the Gentile, Peter says this, 1034, truly he says, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.

Now you may say that doesn't mean hardly anything to me because I recognize that. I've recognized it from the time I was a tiny tot. But let me tell you to this prejudiced man it was something exceptionally big.

And let me tell you if Peter had not recognized this and grasped it you and I might not be here this morning as Gentiles worshiping the God of Abraham. I perceive. Now this word is a special word.

You remember how Paul once writing to the Philippians spoke of his conversion. He says, Oh he says that I might apprehend that for which I was apprehended. Apprehended.

The word is to grasp. If you are a criminal and the policeman comes up behind you, guard or someone comes up behind you and he puts his hand on your shoulder and he says, fella I got you. Now that's the word.

Grasp. Arrested. And what Peter says is this, I grasp it.

I've got it. I see the pieces fitting. I see the cogs in the machinery and the providences.

I see the Word of God. I see everything fitting together. And the truth makes sense.

God is no respecter of persons. He cleanses men in every nation and whom he cleanses fear God and do righteousness. You can't fear God and you can't do righteousness until you are cleansed.

Sin is impurity. Sin is impurity in the heart and the heart makes it impossible for us to fear God with a reverent fear. A fear of a child and the reverence of a child.

Sin makes it impossible. Sin makes it impossible for us to do righteousness manward. But when the heart is cleansed, we fear God, we honor men and respect them and do righteousness.

Now says Peter, I suddenly see it. God is prepared to cleanse men among every nation to make them God-fearers and do righteousness. Oh, that was a mighty lesson to grasp.

The counterpart providences, the comprehension of truth, and lastly, the confirmation of Peter's apprehension of God's will by the downpouring of the Spirit. Peter proceeded now to open his heart and to tell out all the gospel story to Cornelius and his people. What a wonderful congregation.

Do you remember how Cornelius greeted Peter? He said, Here we are. He said, We're all present before you to hear everything that God has given you to tell us. What a marvelous opportunity.

And Peter started. And my, I bet you that when Peter started, he had a long sermon in his soul to preach. But he didn't get very far.

You know what Peter says, describing it later on to the Jerusalem critics, in chapter 11 and verse 15, he said, As I began to speak, he's only just got into his sermon, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I had to stop. That's the implication.

He doesn't say that. That's the implication. In other words, what he's saying is this, As I was about to tell them all about the Lord Jesus Christ and His grace and His mercy and His cross and His resurrection and ascension and His glory and His capacity to save the lost, as I began to tell them about the Lord Jesus, I was only just getting into it when the mighty Spirit of Pentecost came right down upon these just as He did upon us at Pentecost.

Therefore, here you have a Gentile Pentecost that is a counterpart of the Jewish Pentecost recorded in Acts chapter 2. In other words, God makes it clear that these are not second-class citizens of the kingdom, but He's giving them His all just as He gave His all to the Jews who believed at Pentecost. Just as well Peter took six men with him from Joppa to witness these things. He didn't know what was going to happen.

Do you know, in Jewish law and in Egyptian law, if you can produce seven witnesses, you don't need any more. The case is proved. And here are six men with Simon Peter.

Six men and himself makes seven. A perfect number bearing the perfect witness. Here it is.

You can't deny it. They're speaking in tongues and the Spirit is evidently upon them and they believe in Jesus. So Peter says, If God gave them the same gift, not an inferior one, the same gift as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? No, no, says Peter.

I wasn't wrestling with flesh and blood now. I knew that God was marching down history claiming these Gentiles for His own. And when I saw that He was giving all the treasures of grace to these men just as He gave the treasures of grace to us on the first day of Pentecost, my mouth was shut.

I couldn't argue. And I won't argue, he says. On the contrary, I'm with Him.

I will move with the Almighty God in the ways of His providence and of His grace and I must be with Him. God welcomes Gentiles. Once or twice that wretched thing, that prejudice, tried to raise its head again.

But it had little success because its backbone had been broken. But it did try. Prejudice is a very hard plant to kill.

But it was slain here. My friend, that's Peter's prejudice. What's yours? What's mine? I don't know what's yours.

You'll be a strange phenomenon if you haven't got one. As we close this morning, one thing I want you to see is this. Just as God could not go on with His purposes until Peter's prejudice was dealt with, so too it may be this morning.

If you are to be involved in the fulfillment of the divine purpose, your prejudice has got to be dealt with. Got to be. And if it isn't, then there's only one thing for it.

If God is going on with His purposes of grace, He's got to put you on the sidelines and bypass you, put you on one side. Because with the poison of prejudice, He can have no truck. As I read the gospel narratives, I say to myself, my, isn't it wonderful that a man like Peter was prepared to have himself purged and cleansed.

What a loss to the church if this man had rebelled against the Word of God that day, against the providences of God, against the truth of God, against the significance of it all. What a tragedy. What a loss to the church.

Think of his epistles. Think of his ministry in the book of the Acts. Think what the church would have lost.

I don't know what your gifts may be, but they may well be lost to successive generations of Christians and non-Christians alike unless you can yield to the same Lord as the one to whom Peter yielded and let the cathartic processes of grace purge out the old leaven and renew a right spirit within us all for in the grace of our altogether gracious Lord we may be not only His servants, but His witnesses, God granted, for His namesake.

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