

NBC Devotional
October 6, 2021
“Living Outside the Box”

“Are YOU in a box?” Do you live inside a box? Actually, we humans love to put everything and everyone in boxes.

We have our “work” box and our “play” box. We have a “church” box and a “ministry” box. We have a box with our friends and family and us inside, and everybody else is “outside” our box. We like to be “insiders.” We prefer not to even think about “outsiders.” We like to compartmentalize. We like separation. We say that we’re being independent, but really, it is an attempt to protect ourselves from things and people that we think would harm us!

And we even try to put God into our boxes. But God says, “No! I cannot fit in there! Your box is too small for Me!” God cannot and will not fit into my little box. He will not fit into YOUR little box either.

In Acts, Chapters 10 and 11, we see Simon Peter, the #1 disciple, trying to deal with God and what God wants to do through Peter. God really wants to do something *inconceivable* with Peter and the Early Church. For some context and background, all you need to know is that Peter and the Church thought that it was all a matter of “Jews vs. Gentiles.” It was very simple: Gentiles were everyone in the entire world who wasn’t a Jew. The Jews thought in terms of “Us vs. Them” - the “Insiders vs. the Outsiders” - the “Good Guys (Jews) vs. the Bad Guys (Gentiles)” - the “People Who Look Like Me vs. Everyone Else.”

And inside Peter’s box was God, Peter, and his friends – all Jews like himself – simple and clear.

Acts Chapter 10, beginning in verse 1: “*At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.*” Caesarea was the headquarters for the Roman government for the entire Eastern Mediterranean Region. This would certainly mean to Peter that this was a *bad* place filled with *bad* people. The man named Cornelius was a Roman centurion – a Roman military commander – a Gentile, and certainly a bad person.

2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

6 He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. 8 He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER send an angel to a “bad guy!”

9 About noon the following day as the three men sent by Cornelius were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and

wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER ask a Jew to eat non-Kosher food! That would be against the Torah. This would never happen!

15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

17 While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. 18 They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. 20 So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

21 Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

22 The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." 23 Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER send a Jew to visit a Gentile city or go into the house of a Gentile! And Peter knew this. He was trying to understand what he had seen, what the Holy Spirit said to him, and what he was supposed to do!

23 The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers 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."

I love that Cornelius was full of faith. He expected Peter to come, and he invited his relatives and close friends to come, too.

27 While 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 or visit a Gentile.** But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. **May I ask why you sent for me?**"

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile." – That's not a very nice way to start talking to people! Peter was unhappy. This was CRAZY.

Peter's thinking, "I'm not supposed to be here!" And Peter bluntly asks, "So, here I am. What do YOU want with me?" God was about to explode Peter's box!

30 Cornelius answered: "Three 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."

Again, we clearly see that Cornelius was full of faith. He expected Peter to come, he invited his relatives and close friends to come, and he politely but urgently says to Peter, "Thank you so much for coming! Here we are! Tell us EVERYTHING the LORD has commanded YOU to tell us!" ---That is amazing faith! and from a "bad guy!"

At this point, Peter begins to tell the story of Jesus. But he first says:

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Here Peter catches just a glimpse of his box starting to expand at the edges! Then Peter tells of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, adding that he and the other disciples were eyewitnesses to it all. He says that they were commanded to tell about Jesus.

42 He (Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he (Jesus) is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him (Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

This message was all that Cornelius and his family and friends needed to hear! They immediately believed Peter's message:

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 Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 47 "Surely no one can stand in the way of their 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.

For Peter and his Jewish-Christian friends, the most unexpected, the most unlikely, the most "I can't believe my eyes" thing happened: God's Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles – "the bad guys" – and He came exactly like He did for Peter and the others in the Upper Room at Pentecost!!! Verse 45 says that the Jews who had come with Peter were ASTONISHED. They must have been shocked... stunned! "What is going on here??!! There's NO WAY that this is happening!!!"

But it happened. GOD had just come upon the Gentiles and HE completely demolished the box – He had smashed it to smithereens! There was no box that could contain God! God offered salvation through Jesus to EVERYONE: Gentiles or Jews, insiders or outsiders, "us," or "them," – **there was NO box**, ALL could be saved!!!

Inconceivable! Impossible! CRAZY! The very next thing that happened in the book of Acts was that Peter was called back to Jerusalem. Chapter 11, verses 1-3, show that Peter was bitterly criticized by the Jewish-Christians for even GOING to a Gentile's house:

*1 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, **the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."***

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER send an angel to a "bad guy!"

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER ask a Jew to eat non-Kosher food!

This was CRAZY. God would NEVER send a Jew to go to a Gentile city or go to a Gentile's house!

And above all else, God would NEVER forgive and SAVE anyone *who's not like us!!!!*

But the truth was that God accepts men and women from every nation (Peter said it: 10:35). God not only *accepts* them and *saves* them by their faith, He gives them His Holy Spirit (10:44)

Are YOU living in a box? Is that box just for you, your family, and all of your friends?
Does **everyone** in **your** box **look exactly like you**?

COULD YOU EVER IMAGINE INVITING OUTSIDERS INTO YOUR BOX? How about letting God knock down all of the walls of your box completely?

Someday, in Heaven, we are all going to be together: saints "*from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*" (Rev. 7:9) We will NOT be standing next to people who look just like us! There will be no boxes or walls of separation or exclusive places; it's going to be a spectacularly beautiful mosaic of every people from every region of the world.

But we already can see that here, *if we look outside of our boxes*, because the mission field has come to the United States. Every nation, tribe, people and language group are here among us.

May God change our hearts! May we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with every person!

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