

## Sneaky Grace – Acts 10

This morning I hope I caught your attention with the title of the message, “Sneaky Grace.” Now before we go any further I must explain that when I used the word “sneaky” it was not used in a bad sense like “underhanded” or “cheating someone.” Instead, think of a husband getting up before his wife so he can put flowers on the table, a birthday card and a gift out before she gets up. She gets up and is surprised by the gestures of love, and she says, “You are so sneaky.” It is a compliment, an expression of happy wonder at this display of love.

Think of the second description of “Sneaky” today as we talk about “Sneaky grace” or what Dr. Busic called “seeking grace” in his book, “Way, Truth, Life.” Others within the Wesleyan/Holiness camp would call it “prevenient grace” which simply means, “grace that comes before.”

“Before what?” you ask. Before you become a Christian, God is already at work in your life drawing you to Himself. In fact, from the day you were born God has been drawing you to himself. Time and time again He has intervened in your life, wishing that you would say “Yes” to his invitation to come follow him.

This is his sneaky grace – God’s love working in our lives without us really recognizing it.

I love to hear the testimonies of God’s children. You might remember the testimony of one of our members that was shared when he became a member of this congregation, and it started with a story of him out on a hike as a schoolboy. He told how his class went to see a beautiful waterfall, and like many young boys, he was not content to look at the falls, but climbed up the cliffs to the top of the falls.

While at the top of the falls, walking on the rocks in the water at the top of the falls he lost his balance and was about to fall over the falls when a gust of wind blew which helped him regain his balance. He said it felt like a hand on his shoulder. It was at that moment, he said, that he started to think about God, despite living in a country where such interests were frowned upon.

He told how he would walk by a building on his way to and from school, and many times he would pause outside to listen to the music. It was so happy and uplifting he really wanted to go inside, but he was afraid. His sister had become a Christian and encouraged him to go to church but he was too shy. He did not realize that is what that building was: a church.

Then one day a pretty girl knocked on his door and she invited him to come with her to a meeting. He found it hard to say no, so he agreed to go. At the arranged time they met and he followed her to the meeting. Much to his surprise the meeting was a church service in the very building he had stood outside of listening to the music. Now he would be inside and enjoy the music with his new friend.

As he attended services and started to read the Bible for himself he came to understand the wonderful message of salvation through faith in Jesus. As a young man he committed himself to following Jesus, a commitment he never turned his back on.

To talk with this man you knew he understood that God was working in his life long before he made his decision to follow Jesus. From the waterfall experience, to the attraction of the Christian music, to the invitation to come and see what Christianity was all about through the young lady from the church, God was at work drawing this man to himself.

That is what we call prevenient, or seeking grace, or if you wish, “sneaky grace.”

The journey of discipleship begins before a person makes a decision to follow Jesus, for God is already at work drawing that person to himself. This means that when we share our testimony to someone who is not a Christian, God has already started to work in his or her life. You might meet them when they are very close to a decision and you get the joy of helping them pray the prayer of confession and repentance as they as Jesus into their lives. For some people your witness might be the first time they recognize God is speaking to them, and they will not be ready to make a decision for Jesus – yet.

Think again of the man I told you about at the start. There was his sister encouraging him to get to know Jesus. There was the “pretty girl” who invited him to a meeting, which happened to be a church service. Again and again God uses his children to help people move closer to him. That is part of his seeking grace. God sneaks up to us, revealing himself over and over again, and finally He asks us, “Will you follow me?”

I read this wonderful thought I think you need to hear, especially those who are sometimes frustrated when they share their faith and it seems to fall on deaf ears. **The writer said, “We believe that Christians don’t take Jesus to unbelievers – Jesus is already there.”** If that is true, then our job is to help them see Him.

And this is the pattern we see in our passage today, Acts 10.

Let me take you to the end of the story in chapter 10 first. There we read the following:

**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. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.**

This is a wonderful conversion story! It is the story of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment. He certainly was not a Jew, yet here he is converted as a Christian. Almost all Christians in the early years of the church were of Jewish descent so this was a huge shift in the church’s understanding of who could be save. You maybe caught that even in these verses as the Jewish Christians who came with Peter to share the Gospel of Jesus were astonished that the Holy Spirit would be given to Gentiles.

Let's look through the chapter and see if we can see God's "sneaky grace" working in Cornelius' life.

### **Crossroads:**

The first thing we notice in Cornelius' life is what might be called the crossroad. He was situated in a unique place where he encountered the grace of God. For Cornelius this meant he lived in a town with a strong Jewish presence, a people who talked about their one God after Cornelius had grown up hearing about the many gods of the Romans. There was something appealing about this God of the Jews, so he soon was interacting with the Jewish community in his city.

God often puts us in unique places or circumstances that gives us the opportunity to encounter His grace. Recently I was talking with someone and they were thrilled that a family member, who just got a new job, just happens to be working for a Christian! A crossroad.

I told you last week of Rev. Houseman who found himself in a foxhole afraid for his life: a crossroad.

My crossroad was simply growing up in a Christian home where I heard of Jesus from my earliest days, went to church, and worshipped with my parents both at church and at home. Lise also grew up in a church home, but her crossroad came when as a teenager she moved out on her own and her roommate was a born-again Christian.

In verse 3 of our chapter we read that Cornelius' crossroad became very interesting as an angel appeared to him in a vision and said, **"Cornelius, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea."** (vss. 3-6)

Not everyone gets an angel visit, but certainly this was a crossroad in his life!

### **Curiosity**

We are told in verses 7-8 that Cornelius is curious enough to send two servants and a soldier to find this Peter the angel spoke of. When the servants and the soldier return with a stranger, who he assumes is Peter, Cornelius gathers his relatives and close friends to hear what this Peter has to say (verse 24).

There are people who will show up at a church curious to know what is happening there, curious to know if they are welcome, curious to know if the people in that church really believe what they are singing and talking about. They are curious, and God uses that to draw them closer to himself.

You know when someone has experienced the sneaky grace of God for they are full of questions. What an open door for the Christian who will stop and listen.

In the study book of the Home Groups, you will read of what God is doing in countries where sharing Jesus is illegal. It tells of a pastor who was asked how the church did evangelism when it was illegal to try and convert people. He said the people in the country were having dreams, and seeing a man in white, and they want to know who he is. They ask questions, and it is perfectly okay to answer their questions, telling them about Jesus, the one revealed in their dreams.

Sadly, some Christians stop listening to the questions being asked of them and they start to preach before the person is ready. They mean well, for they want to get people saved, but the sensitive Christian will see that God is already at work in that person's life through their questions. Those questions will help you point them to Jesus.

### **Companionship**

Often God's sneaky grace, or seeking grace, draws people into relationships.

Cornelius sends for Peter, and Peter is invited into his house to share whatever it is God wants him to share. Cornelius has already sought out the fellowship of the Jews, but now God was drawing him to a new circle of friends – the Christians.

Peter is taken back by this, for all his life he had been told that Jews do not make friends with non-Jews. But how could he argue with God? Listen to what Peter learns through this encounter: (vss. 34-35)

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

God's grace was drawing people together, and this is so important, for the Christian journey is not easy. Christians experience pain and loss and disappointment like everyone else, but they never have to go through these things alone. First they have God with them, and second, they have a new family with them, the family of God.

This is what Cornelius seeks and what God reveals to Peter. Jesus knew that the deepest desire of all of us is to be loved, so he tells his disciples the following: **"By this will all men know that you are my disciples: if you have love one for another."** (John 13:35) God's grace invites everyone into the fellowship of the church. And in that fellowship there are no barriers – no barriers formed by age, no barriers formed by race, no barriers formed by language. We are one in Christ and welcome everyone, no matter where they are on the journey to Jesus.

### **Conviction**

Peter would go on to recount the story of Jesus' life in verses 36-43. The heart of his message is found in verses 39-40 where we read:

**<sup>39</sup> "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.**

Then Peter sums up with this altar call: <sup>43</sup> **All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**"

We have to conclude that Cornelius came under conviction and sought forgiveness through repentance and faith in Christ, because God sent the Holy Spirit on him and all those with him. There was revival in the house that day.

But this wonderful moment of salvation would not have happened if God was not seeking Cornelius all the time, ever drawing him closer and closer until he realized what he needed to do to be saved.

I could spend another hour exploring how God worked in Peter's life, preparing him to be the one who shared the Gospel to Cornelius. Peter had his own vision, because he had prejudices that would have prevented him from embracing a non-Jew. God had to break those down before he could be used to point Cornelius to Jesus.

That may have to happen in our lives as well. We can carry prejudice and judgements about people that will prevent us from sharing Jesus with them. God is bringing Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and all kinds of other peoples into our neighbourhoods, and instead of locking our doors to keep them out, we should be looking at how God's sneaky grace is opening doors for us to befriend them, and point them to Jesus.

Well, I hope you will read Acts 10 even today, for it is a fascinating chapter that reveals a God at work in both the speaker and the hearer so that salvation could come into the house of Cornelius. We serve an amazing God, and he is constantly at work in every single person's life, seeking to draw them to himself. God never forces anyone to come to him, but he gives the invitation: "Come."

This morning I hope you have reflected on God's sneaky grace in your life. Can you see how many times he has been there for you, even before you said "Yes" to him? Can you see that he loves you too much to see you perish without him, so he comes to you time and time again, knocking on your hearts door asking to come in.

Before we come to the Lord's Table, to remember and celebrate the salvation provided for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, I want us to bow for prayer. There may be someone here today who says, "I see how God has been working in my life. Today I want to say yes to him." It may be someone online who will say, "Jesus, thank you for loving me, for dying in my place. Please forgive my sin, fill me with your Holy Spirit so I may live a new life with you as Lord. I want to be your child today."

Bow with me and talk to God in prayer: You may want to thank him for the sneaky grace that led you to him, or ask him to come into your life today. Would you pray with me?