



Assaulted By God's Vision

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Acts 10:9-16

We have our preconceived notions for looking at things. On one level, our prejudices help us analyze many things quickly. They allow us to order so much information that assails us. They are often beneficial. We trust a church pew to hold our weight because of our prejudices. We trust every hymnal in our pew racks to contain the very same hymns. We trust our Bibles to contain the same texts and convey essentially the same meaning, despite translation differences. We trust the service to be over in time for lunch, because of notions based on repeated experience. We build perceptions and expectations for life on prejudices, education, and previous experience. We build a vision for our life and future. Then we expect it to hold together.

There are times, however, when our preconceived ideas, our vision of reality, fall apart. Our prejudices don't always hold true. They aren't always helpful.

This week we remembered an event that changed our national prejudices. On September 11, 2001, a vision of security in the United States of America fell to shreds. Many were devastated by the loss of life and limb. Perhaps much more powerful was the rift in our preconceived notions that these United States were inviolable, akin to that all but forgotten "Day that will live in Infamy." Sure, we still harbor memories of the bombing of Pearl Harbor in the American psyche, but the shock of that experience had faded over time. Meanwhile, our nation had built a new myth of being impregnable and safe, a fortress somehow protected from the disasters and atrocities of war on foreign shores.

When planes flew into buildings symbolizing the power, wealth, and security of the nation, much more than brick, mortar, and drywall fell apart in clouds of smoke, dust, and ash. More than the 2,996 people died in those attacks. A spark of vibrancy, security, and innocence died as well. That myth of being untouchable died in those coordinated attacks.

We lost something of our national vision. We lost a measure of hope and tranquility. We lost the security offered our lives by the prejudices crafted over years of experience, education, and notions of reality. When our visions of reality slowly shaped over the years were dashed, many did not know how to begin the process of creating a new vision. Few even sought God's vision on which to base our lives and perspectives of reality and worthwhile priorities.

Peter had one of those life-shattering experiences on a rooftop in Joppa. No, there were no planes crashing down, but the foundational structures of his religious perspectives were shattered in a three-pronged attack.

First, there was the vision he received. A sheet came down out of heaven with God's voice calling him no longer to consider the distinctions he knew between clean and unclean animals. That does not seem like a big distinction to our perspective today. For a First Century Jew, this was a very big issue. The basic building block of Jewish religious observance was maintaining categories of what was clean and unclean. It applied to food. It applied to clothing. It applied to buildings which one might or might not enter. It applied to the weaving of cloth, the planting of crops, and to interpersonal relationships. Becoming unclean was deemed equivalent to cutting oneself off from God.

It was a matter of keeping God's blessings for Israel, of national security, as well as personal faith. The actions of the individual were seen as impacting the whole nation. Eating the wrong meat, prepared the wrong way, contaminated by dairy products, containing blood, or with improperly washed hands had the potential to invoke God's judgment on Israel. The taboos of his vision of reality and relationship to God were very strong and demanded absolute allegiance.

God's vision was repeated for Peter three times.

Second, as he was collecting himself from such a devastating blow to his understanding of the proper relation and approach to God, strangers came calling.

Peter recognized in their arrival that his vision of reality had to change. He was reeling from the shock. He was dumbfounded by the headlong blow to his cherished definitions of how one related to God. He was uncertain of with the lifelong prejudices placing non-Jews in a category of unfit, unclean, and unworthy of God. He also knew that God was calling him to adopt a new vision of reality.

Security would no longer depend upon keeping categories of differing value, worth, and purity. It would begin with a global shift in perspective, whereby he would learn to accept all life on earth as worthy of God's love, care, grace, and blessing equally.

Peter's distress was akin to the upheaval of racial unrest in the days of school desegregation. The violence that erupted then was akin to the turmoil working within Peter as he wrestled with the first and second punches of God's revelation on that rooftop. A foundational principle of his personal sense of security was being ripped away, and there was no way to recover is without going against God!

God wasn't finished with Peter, however. Third, Peter was called to go with the visitors, heading to another town where he should enter the home of a Gentile and accept his hospitality. Why would you willingly leave on a journey to a place you don't want to go to do something you do not want to do, something you feel should rightfully cut you off from the God you have dedicated your life to serve?

I remember a Sunday School class in Mississippi, a quarter century after desegregation, telling me you just couldn't have an African-American in your home as a friend to share a meal with you. It might be alright to be friends and coworkers, but not to bring them into one's home. I was shell-shocked with such a position, but Peter somehow seems to take it in stride.

One might say that in Acts 10 we finally see Peter assuming the role of leader among the disciples for the first time. It was there he began to lead by following a new vision. It was there he began to allow God to place within him a new concept of reality and the implications of the gospel.

Jesus had preached a message of inclusion. Peter had heard it and even seen Jesus reach out to Samaritans, women, lepers, demon-possessed, tax collectors, and Gentiles. Only in that rooftop vision did Peter begin struggling to allow Jesus' example and teaching impact the direction and quality of his actions. The shattering of his old vision was a game changer as Peter began to see life according to a wholly different perspective and category of judgment.

He had to replace the old prejudices with new ones. That is no easy task. If we read ahead, we find that Peter is still amazed and shell-shocked on arriving at Cornelius' house and on returning to give account of his actions to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

The new vision changed the playing field.

No longer could Peter assess life from the old categories. He had to accept new ones. He had to rebuild life and security on wholly new patterns of living. He had to expand his understanding of the concept that God does not look upon people in human categories of worth. He had to expand his own application of God's vision and grace.

What old categories are we still hanging onto? Do we still subscribe to some myth of living a life that is inviolable and secure from the vagaries of social, economic, and cultural upheaval? Are we ready and willing to exchange the categories that offer us false peace and security for God's? Peter's categories of security were social, limited, material, and futile. God called him to a new pattern of spiritual vision. God called him to grasp the extent and purpose of grace to reach out to include others in the same net of faith that grants us security. Are we willing to allow God to replace our prejudices with God's? Until we are caught by God's vision, it's a matter of time before the planes come crashing around us.

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