

## **The Beginning of Something New**

Psalm 98; Acts 10:44-48

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I perused *Time* magazine's recent list of the world's 100 most influential people. The list includes some people you might expect: President Obama and other heads of state, radio host Rush Limbaugh, mega-church pastor Rick Warren, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Governor Sarah Palin, and others that you might expect to make a list like this.

The list also includes some you might not expect: the alleged criminal Bernie Madoff, the female hosts of the morning talk show *The View*, the comedian Tina Fey, and Twitter guys—Biz Stone, Evan Williams, and Jack Dorsey.

It's an interesting list. It includes scientists, media moguls, authors, economists, philanthropists, politicians, and others. They come from many disciplines and have varied paths to their positions of influence. From Obama to Limbaugh, Tina Fey to Sarah Palin, from a twenty-one year old to those much older, they all share this in common. Somewhere, sometime they graduated from high school. Yes, they sat in a folding aluminum chair or something similar and waited for their name to be called. It was an accomplishment for them just as it was for us and just as it is for Jeff Sells and Emily Elliott. That day for all of us is a pivot point, the beginning of something new. And like the text from Acts 10, it is a moment filled with great potential.

Theologians call that text in Acts 10 the *Gentile Pentecost*. You may remember the day of Pentecost back in Acts 2. It was a *Jewish Pentecost*. It came shortly after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples, like tongues of fire. They all began to speak in a unique language. Peter, already a leader among the disciples, stood to speak to the people. After his message, 3,000 people were baptized. Can you imagine that? We refer back to that day now as the birth of the church and will observe it in a couple of weeks.

A Jewish Pentecost, where God came to the chosen people, was consistent with the thinking of their day. God chose the Jewish people and guided them through the Law of Moses and the prophets of Israel. In Jesus, many believed, God was again guiding the chosen ones. In the earliest days of the church, there was not clear distinction between church and synagogue. Jesus was Jewish, remember? Peter was Jewish. James and John were Jewish. The earliest followers of Jesus were Jewish. The church was a subset of the synagogue. Until Acts 10.

In Acts 10, the unbelievable occurred. Notice, Peter was speaking again just like in Acts 2. Notice also that the Holy Spirit fell, just like before, and the people began to speak in a unique language. The major difference in Acts 10 was that the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles. Now, the text says that the “circumcised believers” were present when this occurred. Circumcision, of course, was a sign of the Jewish covenant with God. The word “believers” referred to those who had become followers of Jesus. Circumcised believers, then, referred to Jewish people who had become followers of Jesus. They were present when a Pentecost-like experience occurred with the Gentiles. This was not expected. Gentiles were outsiders. This was not consistent with the thinking of their day. If this was of God, God clearly was operating outside the boundaries of their paradigm.

Here’s what happened. The Jewish believers were, according to the text, “astounded” by this. Now I don’t think that English word conveys the full meaning of the Greek text. It is translated as “surprised,” “confused,” “astonished.” The word literally means “out of one’s mind.” The English word “ecstasy” comes from the same word. Today we might say, “They were going berserk.”

So Peter, seeing the Jewish believers going berserk because the Holy Spirit fell upon Gentiles, asked a crucial question, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Apparently no one objected, and Peter ordered that the Gentiles be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This event was a major pivot point for the Kingdom of God, one of those turns that set the direction of the early church. It confirmed that God’s

Kingdom would include all people, not just a chosen few. God was creating a universal family of faith, and as a result the Gospel would spread to “the ends of the earth.”

We all face these pivot points in life, don't we? Our graduates are certainly standing at one this very day. These transition moments can be unsettling, but this text gives us some guidance on how to face them.

**First of all, it says that we should expect to be astounded.** As our graduates go to college and into the workforce, they are at the front end of an exciting challenge. They will be introduced to new ideas, new ways of thinking about life, God, and the church. At some point along the way, they are bound to say, “Now this is not what I expected. This is not consistent with my thinking. It's a new paradigm.”

Some of you know that I started preaching long before I should have. I was fifteen years old. My father had to drive me to my first preaching engagements because I didn't have a driver's license. It may surprise some of you to know that I was a fiery young evangelist back in those days. I was called upon to preach revivals in small rural church all around Calhoun County. I'll never forget one in particular. It was right before I went off to college at Samford University. You need to know that in small rural churches in Calhoun County some people were suspicious of the big city of Birmingham and the fancy religion professors at Samford University. This one revival was particularly successful. When it was over, I announced to the pastor that I was going to pursue my ministerial education in Birmingham at Samford University. I'll never forget his counsel. He said, “David, don't let 'em change you. Don't you go over there and let those religion professors take away your beliefs.”

At the time, I thought that was pretty good advice. I was determined that those hoity toity religion professors weren't going to change me.

Was I ever astounded! I was out of my mind, going berserk about all the new things I was being taught. I wish someone had taken me aside and said something like this:

*David, you've not learned everything about God that you're going to learn. You may not realize it, but you've really only scratched the surface. Be open to your scholarly, godly*

*professors. Be passionate about discovering truth. And remember that there is never anything to fear about the truth.*

That is what I want to say to our graduates. You are at a pivot point in life. Expect to be astounded. Be passionate about discovering the truth, and trust deep in your heart that there is nothing to fear from the truth.

**The second bit of guidance from Acts 10: we want to end up where God is, a part of what God is doing and not over against what God is doing.** This is not as easy as it seems. Discerning the will and way of God is not always easy. The Jewish believers thought they understood the will and way of God, and then God did something new. They could have dug their heels in and said that the Gentiles didn't belong in God's family. They could have, but they would have been standing against what God was doing.

Some of us put up more resistance than that. I came kicking and screaming into a new understanding of God. I really felt comfortable with what I was taught in Sunday School and from significant others in my life. Then I met Karen Joines, Dub Edwards, Sigurd Bryan, and Mabry Lunceford. I cannot imagine a more scholarly and godly religion faculty that existed at Samford University during my years there. These men were patient and gentle. They helped students like me grow up, and I am profoundly grateful.

This is what I learned. I thought that at ages eighteen and nineteen I had God all figured out, wrapped up in a neat package. I learned, though, that God is far bigger than that and is unwilling to be wrapped up. As difficult as it was, I realized that if I wanted to end up where God is I had to let go of my childhood faith and embrace a more mature, growing faith.

And one last lesson from Acts 10. **When we genuinely seek God, doors to great things will open.** In Acts 10, the door to the rest of the world opened. Put another way, the door to your life and mine opened because we're Gentiles.

Who knows where these youth will end up. They may be on *Time's* most influential list some day. More importantly than that, though, is to be counted among those who used their pivot points, their new beginnings, to do great things for God. Jeff and Emily, may that be true for each of you.

## Closing Prayer

Lord, may it be true for each of us. May it be true for our church.  
Use us to do great things for your Kingdom's sake.