Hi,

I hope all of you made it through last night’s storms. All is well here and, oddly, we got almost no rain -- but it sure blew.

Here are today’s updates:

* In my noon Sunday class, I’m beginning a series titled, *God and the Virus*, in which we will be looking at the theological, pastoral, and personal challenges posed by a pandemic. As always, it will be on my personal Facebook page.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All of this week’s videos and podcasts have been posted.
* Keep sending in those movie and book recommendations.

If you walked the streets of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, you’d encounter a lot of Jews who wondered if and when God would keep the mighty promises brought by the prophets. Is a promise made always a promise kept?

***Acts 11:4-18 (NRSV)***

[After baptizing Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, into the family of believers, Peter returns to Jerusalem to explain why he did this.]

**Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”**

*A promise made*

God makes many promises in Scripture. God promises Noah that never again will he destroy all life with a flood (Genesis 9:11). God promises Moses that he will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:2-8). Jesus promises his disciples (that’s us too!) that the Father would send the Spirit of God to help them and be with them forever (John 14:16).

God makes some wonderful promises to Abraham as well. God will make Abraham’s family into a great nation. God will make Abraham’s name great. But the promise that shapes all the other promises comes at the end: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3). This is the purpose of it all; the end to which the other promises point.

God does not choose Abraham merely for Abraham’s own sake. God does not save the Israelites from Egypt merely for their own sake. Rather, this is how God has set about to renew and redeem all of humanity and all of creation from the damage wrought by the humans’ rebellion in the Garden of Eden. When the children of Abraham, i.e., the people of God, heard God well, they understood that they were God’s “treasured possession” and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6) so that they could be the ones through whom God would rescue his good creation. More than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah (4:1-5) spoke of a time when the nations would “go up to the mountain of the Lord,” beating their “swords into plowshares” and their “spears into pruning hooks.”

*A promise broken?*

When things are going badly, it can be pretty hard to remember, much less have confidence in, God’s promises. The Jews of Jesus’ day had enough problems hanging on to their own identity during the Roman occupation, much less remember that they were the ones through whom God would save the world. Ever since the Babylonian exile hundreds of years before, the Jews had been under enormous pressure to assimilate, to become more like the peoples around them. In Jesus’ day, this meant becoming more Greco-Roman. But the Jews steadfastly clung to their belief that the one true God, YHWH, had chosen them and they waited anxiously for the day when the entire world would see that they had been right all along. They also clung to certain symbols of their “separateness:” e.g., circumcision, the Sabbath, and their distinctive food laws. After so many centuries of oppression, the Jews surely wondered whether God would ever keep the promises he had made to Abraham.

*A promise kept*

Strangely, the followers of Jesus claimed that in his death and resurrection, God had kept his promise, he had been faithful to his covenant with Israel. Peter and the disciples, all Jews themselves, claimed that Jesus was not only the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but also the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus is not only, they said, the savior of Israel but the savior of the world. The time had come to fulfill the promise made long before to Abraham. Jesus’ disciples were to “make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19) and to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

*The conversion of Cornelius*

The story of this ever-widening geographic and ethnic circle of God’s blessing is told in the book of Acts. The work of God and the apostles begins in Jerusalem, moves on to near-by Judea and Samaria, and then, in Acts 10, reaches the pivotal point – the carrying of the Good News to the Gentiles. When we grasp how BIG a moment this is, it is easy to understand why Luke makes this his longest narrative in the entire book of Acts, spanning sixty-six verses. There are a few very important things to notice about the story.

* First, this is all God’s doing. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
* Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by the God’s insistence that, in essence, it is acceptable to eat pork. The much-protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God.
* No sooner does Peter recover from the dream about pigs, than he has to go see Cornelius, a respected and God-fearing man, but a Gentile nonetheless. When Peter sees the Holy Spirit poured out on Cornelius and his household, he proceeds to baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ. [What is a God-fearer? Some Gentiles found themselves drawn to the religion of the Jews. Such people might read Torah (in Greek) and even go to the synagogue. Perhaps even a few men underwent circumcision to become a full-fledged convert. It seems that Cornelius is well-known by the Jews and has been involved in their religious life. But he was not a convert; he had not been circumcised. Otherwise, he would not be referred to as a Gentile.]

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter’s baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jews, Peter shouldn’t have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God’s way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised . . . and avoid pork . . . and keep the Sabbath . . . and so on. The decision made by the conference was a firm “no” (see Acts 15). Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such “works of the Law” (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from non-believers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us.

*Movie recommendation*

John Ball has recommended the movie, *Greater*. “It's a true story about an Arkansas boy growing up to be an All-American football player at the University of Arkansas. He has enormous faith and true grit. Can't believe Robert hasn't suggested it!!!!!” Spot on, John.

*Book recommendation*

I enjoy historical novels that are well-researched, with sharply-drawn characters and a plot that moves. Some of the best have been written by Bernard Cornwell. He created the character Richard Sharpe, a rifleman in the British army at the beginning of the 19th century. If you want to try a couple of Sharpe novels, begin with *Sharpe’s Tiger*, set in India. It is the first in the chronology of Sharpe’s life, not in the order of publishing. The three “India” novels were written later by Cornwell, but really begin the series. All three are rip-roaring fun.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott