

The Book of Acts

Lesson 16: Cornelius: The Gospel Comes to the Gentiles -- Acts 10:1-48

In Caesarea lives a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a soldier of the occupying army, a Gentile, an outsider to the covenant people. And yet Luke describes him in glowing terms: a devout man who feared God, gave generously to the poor, and prayed continually. He is sincere, generous, and seeking, but he is not yet saved. One afternoon an angel appears to him and tells him his prayers have come up before God as a memorial, and instructs him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter.

Meanwhile, up on a rooftop in Joppa, Peter is hungry and falls into a trance. He sees heaven open and a great sheet lowered, full of animals the law called unclean, and a voice says, rise, Peter; kill and eat. Peter recoils, I have never eaten anything common or unclean. But the voice answers, what God has made clean, do not call common. Three times this happens, and Peter is left puzzling over what it could mean. Then the men from Cornelius arrive, and the Spirit tells Peter to go with them, not to hesitate.

Peter goes, and standing in a Gentile home, surrounded by Cornelius and his gathered family and friends, the meaning of the vision becomes clear. It was never really about food. God has shown me, Peter says, that I should not call any person common or unclean. Then he speaks the words that crack the door of the kingdom wide open: truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. And Peter preaches Jesus, His life, His cross, His resurrection, the forgiveness of sins in His name.

And then, while Peter is still speaking, heaven interrupts. The Holy Spirit falls on these Gentiles just as He had fallen on the Jewish believers at Pentecost, and the circumcised believers who came with Peter are astonished that the gift has been poured out even on the Gentiles. Peter draws the only possible conclusion: can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commands them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The gospel has broken out of one nation and into the world.

Group Discussion: Peter declared, truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him is acceptable to him (vv. 34-35). What does it mean that God shows no partiality, and how does this truth confront the favoritism and prejudice we so easily fall into?

Personal Reflection: It took a vision, a journey, and the prompting of the Spirit to move Peter past a lifetime of barriers between Jew and Gentile (vv. 9-29). What barriers or prejudices is God working to move you past, so that you can see and love people the way He does?

Read Acts 10:1-48

Study Questions

1. Peter came to understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him (vv. 34-35). What does it mean that God shows no partiality, and what does this reveal about the scope of the gospel?
2. God shows no partiality, but our hearts often do (vv. 34-35). Where do you notice favoritism or prejudice in yourself, treating people differently based on appearance, status, race, or background? How does God's impartiality call you to change?
3. In Peter's vision, God declared, what God has made clean, do not call common, overturning the old distinctions between clean and unclean (vv. 9-16, 28). What was God teaching Peter through this vision, and how does it relate to the old ceremonial law and to the barrier between Jew and Gentile?
4. God had to work to move Peter past barriers he had held his whole life (vv. 28-29). What barriers, prejudices, or categories of unclean people do you still maintain in your heart that God has already torn down? How might He be calling you to see and love them differently?
5. Cornelius was devout, generous, and prayerful, yet he still needed Peter to come and tell him words by which he and his household would be saved (vv. 1-6; Acts 11:14). What does this teach about whether sincere, good people still need the gospel?
6. An angel did not preach the gospel to Cornelius but sent for Peter to do it, and Cornelius needed someone to tell him the way of salvation (vv. 5-6, 22). Do you sometimes assume that sincere or moral people do not need to hear about Christ? How ready are you to share the gospel with such a person?
7. Peter preached the heart of the gospel to Cornelius: Jesus' ministry, His death on the cross, His resurrection, His appointment as judge, and forgiveness of sins through His name (vv. 36-43). What are the essential elements of the gospel Peter preached, and why does each matter?
8. Peter was able to clearly explain who Jesus is and what He has done (vv. 36-43). Could you explain the gospel clearly if someone asked you today? What would it take for you to be better prepared to share the good news?
9. While Peter was still preaching, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius's household, and yet Peter immediately commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (vv. 44-48). Why was the Spirit poured out in this special way, and what does it mean that these believers were still commanded to be baptized even after receiving the Spirit?
10. Looking back over this whole account, God's impartiality, the broken barriers, the gospel preached, and the Gentiles brought into Christ, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to respond, in laying down prejudice, in sharing the gospel, or in obedience, and what is one step you will take this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 12:1-3, God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham; Ephesians 2:11-22, Christ breaking down the dividing wall and making one new people; Romans 10:11-17, no distinction between Jew and Greek, and faith coming by hearing; James 2:1-9, the sin of showing partiality; Acts 11:1-18, Peter's defense and the church's recognition that God granted the Gentiles repentance unto life