

TUTORIAL
2.16

The Lord sends Peter to teach the Gentiles

Jesus told Peter and the other Apostles that they were to be His witnesses not only in their local area but right out into the wider world. In this part of the Narrative, He makes it clear that He wants the Gentile nations to know Him and become part of His Church too. The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts chapter 10.**

Last time

We were introduced to Saul from the city of Tarsus, who will be the dominant character in the rest of the Acts Narrative. After Stephen's death, the young Church suffered a wave of violent persecution. Saul played a prominent role in the Jewish leaders' efforts to round up and punish Jesus' followers. On his way to Damascus to hunt down believers, Saul was suddenly knocked over and temporarily blinded when Jesus revealed Himself in His glory to him. Later, God sent His servant Ananias to explain to Saul that he had been chosen to play an enormously important role in the expansion of the Church. Saul quickly made enemies among the Jews in Damascus then Jerusalem when He began to testify that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God.

Gentiles in the Church? A question no one is asking

God is about to take His *Ecclesia* - His *called-out people* - into completely new territory...not so much, this time, into new *geographical* areas, but rather into uncharted realms of ethnicity and identity. It will launch His Church on a journey into new language and culture frontiers, which continues today. As always though, following Jesus further into His purpose will cost. But this time the obstacles won't come from antagonistic authorities, and the pain won't be the kind that results from a beating. In fact, what they face is for them, and us, a much more daunting and painful kind of challenge - when God's Spirit shows us how our most cherished assumptions are wrong, and that they need to be changed.

Up to this point, everyone who has put their faith in Jesus as Messiah - and subsequently had God's Spirit come to join them to His Church - has been a Jew. Yes, the Samaritans have dubious theological credentials but they do at least follow the Law of Moses...they respect the Sabbath, and practice the rituals and sacrifice for their sins. And most importantly, the men - the leaders of the families and communities - have the permanent sign of being God's people on their bodies...they are circumcised. Oh, there was that government official from Ethiopia that believed and was baptized into the faith by Phillip, but he was a practicing Jew as well. That's why he had come all the way to Jerusalem and was reading the words of the prophet Isaiah. As a foreign convert he'd have gone through all the necessary rituals for proselytes and would, of course, be circumcised.

Certainly no one's thinking that non-Jews - the uncircumcised Gentiles - can just believe in Jesus as Saviour and be joined to the *Ecclesia*. Of course not! It goes without saying that for someone to come under the New Covenant, they must first have to comply with the Old Covenant. You can't just become a follower of Jesus and have God's Spirit enter if you haven't first become one of God's people, under Moses' Law. That would be ridiculous! What, you mean like Phoenician sailors or Cretans or Assyrians or...those Romans, being added to the Church? I don't think so. No, no, God isn't going to let that happen!

An angel speaks to the Roman captain, Cornelius

Now, in his Account, Luke introduces us to one of those very Romans (Acts 10:1-8). Kornēlios (or Cornelius in English), was a non-commissioned officer ...a captain commanding a company of soldiers recruited in Italy. They are stationed with the rest of their brigade in the city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, about 100 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem. We aren't told how it came about, but Cornelius and his family have turned from the polytheism and Emperor cult practices of their Roman culture to worship the one, true Creator God. He hasn't gone through circumcision and the rest of the process to become a Jewish proselyte but he is devoutly religious...he's generous to needy people in the community and is disciplined in his prayers to God.

In fact, it's while Cornelius is praying one afternoon that God sends one of His angels with a message. Yet again we're going to see how God the Author continues to write His Narrative in real events and in the lives of human beings. The threads of what is about to unfold here connect back to promises God made to Abraham when He'd said that through him He'd bless all the ethnic groups - the *nations* - of the earth. The angel messenger gives very specific instructions to a rather stunned and terrified Cornelius: He's to send for a guy called Simon Peter who's in the ancient seaport of Joppa (today a suburb of Tel Aviv). He's staying there in the house of a man called Simon, who tans

animal hides for a living. They'll find his house right by the ocean, which is what you'd expect, because seawater is used in the traditional curing process.

We've noted many times before from His Narrative that God is eager to reveal Himself to human beings, and when they respond to that revelation He offers them even more. This is the case with Cornelius. He has been relating humbly to God in light of what he knows so far...but religious devotion won't bring him into the relationship with God that he's seeking. There is still a great deal he needs to understand, and God is giving him the opportunity to find that out. Cornelius immediately responds to the offer - he sends some trusted men to find this Peter that the angel has told him about.

God challenges Peter's assumptions

They travel south down the coast and the next day around midday they're nearing the end of their 50 kilometer trip (Acts 10:9-20). What they don't know is that the guy they're looking for in Joppa - who of course is the Apostle Peter - is himself about to have some amazing things revealed to him by God. He's up on the typically flat roof of the house, perhaps to get an ocean breeze and escape the all-pervasive smell coming from the tanning process below. An orthodox Jew would shun this place and these people because of the ritual uncleanness associated with dead animals. Peter has been willing to come here, probably because Simon and others there are believers, but it's likely that he's been pondering the whole issue of 'clean' and 'unclean' and what that means under the New Covenant. He's also hungry, and while he's waiting for a meal to be prepared in the house the thought of food is no doubt on his mind. God's Spirit uses these very real, very relevant circumstances as the context in which to teach Peter something with profound implications.

While he's there thinking and praying, his awareness of the house, the ocean and other things around him fade...he's seeing something being let down from the sky, a big piece of material maybe. It's an astonishing sight. In this large sheet are "all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds" the text records. But then, shockingly, a voice tells him to kill and eat them. We don't know if it's Jesus' voice he recognizes but he answers Him as *Lord*. And, characteristically, he protests vigorously - Oh no, he couldn't ever eat something like that! He's always followed the Jewish dietary laws and has never eaten what Moses' law prohibits - animals like camels, pigs and hares, birds like eagles, and most certainly no reptiles! And even the animals that are meant to be eaten are all mixed in with the others, so they are now 'unclean' as well.

The Lord challenges him. Who is Peter to call something unclean that God is now telling him is okay, to reject what He accepts? Three times this whole thing is repeated...it's not his imagination, God is insisting, pressing the point home. But even now he's not fully clear about all the implications. Is it just about dietary laws or are there wider implications in what God has shown him? As always, God's timing is perfect. His Spirit, who is always with Peter, ready to

point him in the right direction if he's listening, tells him that he's to go with the three men who've just arrived at the door.

Peter adjusts his thinking and behaviour

Clearly God's truth has begun to significantly reshape Peter's worldview assumptions, his beliefs and values, and is impacting his behaviour. (Acts 10:21-43) He invites the Gentile visitors to stay for the night - something no orthodox Jew would do - and then the next day he happily travels with them to the house of a Roman officer. As Peter explains when they arrive in Caesarea, entering the house of a Gentile or hanging out with them is against the Jewish law...but God has made it clear that old categories based on ethnicity are invalid. God doesn't value one race over another. And now the former fisherman shares with this Gentile family the Good News that has, so far, only been made available to the Jews.

Cornelius and his family already worship the one true God. They know they are sinners and need His forgiveness and salvation. They know something of what the prophets have foretold about the Messiah. Clearly from what Peter says they are also familiar with the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and even realise that He was someone sent by God to do good. They've heard that He was crucified. But then, with the unshakable assurance of an eyewitness, Peter also tells them that God brought Jesus back to life. He and the other Apostles had spent time - even eating and drinking - with Him after His resurrection. Peter concludes by clearly describing the choice they have: they can choose to face Jesus as God's holy, appointed judge, or turn to Him in faith as the promised Redeemer and have their sins forgiven.

Cornelius' family saved and part of the Church

The truth of all this is resonating with Cornelius, his family, and the people who are part of their household (Acts 10:44-48). There's no record of a particular formula or words they're told to pray - they simply believe everything Peter is saying as truth from God. And in that moment, seeing their faith, God rescues them from the control of Satan and their past identity as Adam's descendants; He wipes out their sin-debt and places them into His family, as righteous and cherished as His Son. And, under the New Covenant, they are now part of His Gathering, His Church. No application form is filled out, and no ritual takes place...they are miraculously joined into the Body by God's Spirit who now comes to live in them permanently.

Peter has brought some other Jewish believers along and they are amazed by what they're seeing and hearing. These are Romans, Gentiles! They don't sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem, they probably eat whatever they like, run around on the Sabbath...and they're not even circumcised! But look at them now. They're praising God for His Son Jesus...and now they're speaking in other languages that they've never learnt. God has poured out His Spirit on

these guys just like He did for us on the day of Pentecost. Obviously the New Covenant of Jesus' blood is also for those who've never even been under the Old Covenant. Wow, this changes everything. So that's what Jesus meant, Peter, when He told you and the other Apostles that we were to be His witnesses not only in this area but right out into the world. He wants the Gentile nations to know Him and become part of His *Ecclesia* too! Peter agrees and Cornelius and the others are baptized so they can demonstrate in an outward, physical, way what has already taken place spiritually inside.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Can you think of an example of some worldview assumptions you've held but which you then realized God was challenging - directly through His word, through events, or through someone else?
2. Imagine you've been sharing the Narrative up to this point with a friend who's had no other exposure to the Bible. How would you respond if one day they said they'd been talking with a Christian who regularly gets instructions from God speaking directly to them and sometimes in visions from angels?
3. Do you think that Peter would have felt free to eat some pork if he was offered it in Cornelius' house? Drawing only from what you think Peter would know up to this point, explain your answer.
4. Based on this event in the Narrative and all we've learned so far, do you believe there is evidence to say that someone needs to pray something in order to be saved? Please explain.



ACTIVITIES

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1. In just a few sentences for each, describe Caesarea and Joppa respectively, providing whatever details you feel are helpful in understanding the Acts account. Include a map and an image or two if you like.