

## ***Cornelius, Peter and the conversion of Gentiles***

### **Acts Chapter 9 v 43 to Chapter 10 v 48**

So far the Gospel has been preached only to Jews, converts to Judaism (proselytes) and Samaritans (who observed the Law of Moses). Now God makes it plain that the message is for all people. He prepares Cornelius, then he prepares Peter. Joppa was a very Jewish town, loyal to ancient traditions. Caesarea was a semi-pagan city, modelled on Rome. Peter was staying with Simon, a tanner (Acts 9 v 43). Tanning was an ‘unclean’ occupation for a Jew – so already Peter was beginning to lay aside some of his prejudices...

### **God speaks to Cornelius (Acts 10 v 1 to 8)**

- How would you describe the character of Cornelius? What impact did he have on his family (v 2) and servants (v 7, 8)? Why did God choose Cornelius to be one of the first Gentiles to receive the gospel?

Cornelius was in the category of what the Jews called ‘God-fearers’. These were Gentiles who loved the God of Israel; they were sympathetic to and supportive of the Jewish faith, yet they stopped short of becoming full Jews in lifestyle and circumcision. “And prayed continually to God” (v 2) – because of the way the life and heart of Cornelius is described, we see a man who had a real relationship with God; yet he was not a part of the mainstream of Jewish life. “He called two of his servants and a devout soldier” (v 7) – Cornelius’s faith was clearly contagious, and there were those of his household and under his command who also honoured the God of Israel.

### **Peter’s vision (Acts 10 v 9 to 23a)**

- Why is the beginning of v 14 a contradiction? Notice Peter’s bad habit of saying “no” to the Lord (see Matthew 16 v 22, John 13 v 8)!
- What upset Peter so much about God’s command in v 13? For ‘kosher’ laws refer to Leviticus 11.
- How did God respond (v 15)? What point was God making? Why did this happen three times (v 16)?
- How do you think Peter might have reacted to the visitors’ reply in v 22? How did Peter actually respond (v 23a)?

“Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (v 13) – this clearly went against Peter’s commitment as a Jew, which was to never eat anything except kosher foods. Certainly, among the “all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (v 12) there were non-kosher animals included. In Old Testament thinking, there was the ‘holy’ and the ‘common’. The holy was made common when it came into contact with something common, and could only be made holy again through a ritual cleansing. “Peter went down to the men” (v 21) – Peter must have been shocked when he opened the door and saw two servants and a soldier (v 7). He would have known immediately that they were not Jews, and he would have wondered why God told him to go with them and why God had sent them.

“So he invited them in to be his guests” (v 23) – we can see the change in Peter’s heart by the way he invited them in. Peter did not just coldly give these Gentile visitors a room; he entertained them as welcomed guests, and he did this against every custom of the Jewish people of that day. By entertaining these Gentile guests, Peter went against the customs and traditions of Israel, but not against God’s word. Perhaps God reminded Peter that although the Old Testament taught that God’s people were not to become like their pagan neighbours, it also said God wanted his people to become a light to their neighbours who did not know the true God.

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## **Peter goes to Cornelius' house (Acts 10 v 23b to 33)**

- Why do you think “some of the brothers from Joppa” (v 23b) went along with Peter? In Acts 11 v 12 Peter tells us that six men went with him; adding three from Cornelius' household the total number in the party was 10, a number that has the significance of ‘witness’.
- How do these verses show that Peter had completely understood the vision of the large sheet? How does the passage show Cornelius' eagerness to hear the gospel?

“Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I too am a man’” (v 26, 27) – Cornelius must have thought Peter to be a special man of God, so he fell down at his feet and worshipped him. This reaction was understandable, though wrong. Peter corrected Cornelius by saying, “I too am a man.” Significantly, whenever worship is offered to men or angels (Revelation 19 v 10), it is refused. But Jesus received such worship freely (Matthew 8 v 2; 9 v 18; 14 v 33; 15 v 25; 28 v 9), proving that Jesus is more than a man and greater than any angel (Luke 4 v 8).

In saying “I should not call any person common or unclean” (v 28), Peter understood that the vision was about people, not food. Paul also knew this principle: “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Romans 14 v 14). Therefore Paul could conclude: “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink... these are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2 v 16, 17).

## **Peter's speech (Acts 10 v 34 to 43)**

- When Peter addressed Jews, what truths did he emphasise? See Acts 2 v 36 and Acts 3 v 13 to 15. What truths does he use now? What are some other indications that Peter was speaking to a Gentile audience? Notice how Christ-centred Peter's speech is – what does he actually say about Jesus?
- Cornelius was devout and God-fearing, but what did he still need to do (v 43)?

“God does not show favouritism” (v 34) is not a new concept – this truth is also shown clearly in Deuteronomy 10 v 17 and 2 Chronicles 19 v 7. Verse 35 is not talking about ‘salvation by works’ but simply points out that no one is excluded from salvation on the grounds of nationality. Verse 43 emphasises the inclusiveness of God's offer of salvation (“everyone who believes in him”). Notice that Peter's message was short, but there was much preparation! “He is Lord of all” (v 36) – this is a powerful phrase, showing the deity of Jesus. Peter could never say this if Jesus were not (and is not) God. Furthermore, Jesus is Lord of *all* – meaning both Jews and Gentiles.

“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day” (39, 40) – Peter's preaching to the Gentiles was essentially the same as his preaching to the Jews. He presented the person and work of Jesus Christ, with an emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus and our responsibility before God in the light of these truths.

## **The Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 10 v 44 to 48)**

- How did the Jewish believers know that the Holy Spirit had been ‘poured out’ on the Gentiles? What did Cornelius, his household (family), relatives and close friends gain by believing in Jesus?

The Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ is for all people, regardless of colour, nationality or background. God is willing to use extraordinary means to reach those who desire to know him. The admission of Gentiles into the church was not a ‘new’ plan, but something promised long before – see Genesis 12 v 1 to 3, Isaiah 60 v 1 to 3, Matthew 8 v 11, John 12 v 32...

*Prayer – Lord, thank you for this amazing story of Peter and Cornelius, and the conversion of Cornelius and his family and friends. Help us to share the Gospel of salvation with those we meet and know, remembering that the Gospel is for all people, regardless of colour, nationality or background. Amen.*