

Lesson 15: Acts 10:1-48 Culture, Covenant and the Inclusion of Gentiles

Introduction

We've come now to a critical moment for the future of Christianity. At this moment, in Acts chapter 10, before we go any further in the story, we can imagine Christianity becoming stuck as a Jewish movement. Peter traveling throughout Judea and Samaria encouraging the faithful in Christ Jesus, who by culture, continue to practice the Old Covenant commands just as always. Looking from outside in, there is no major cultural shift. Christians are just another sub-group of Jews. You've got your Pharisees, and your Sadducees, and your Zealots, and your Essenes out by the Dead Sea, and now these Christians. Pick one. They are all Jewish.

Try for a moment to imagine that you have never heard of Christianity. You are studying comparative religions, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, the big three. And you start reading in your assigned text book the chapter on first-century Jewish denominations, Pharisees, Sadducees, Christians. They are the ones who think the Jewish Messiah has already come. And you are surprised to learn that they still exist. They call themselves Messianic Jews and some non-Jews even attend their synagogues. Interesting.

In Acts chapter 10, this is one of those moments where you can imagine a very, very different trajectory for the Christian movement. No worldwide impact. No going to all nations. Christianity remains a Jewish sub-group. Only those non-Jews willing to adopt Jewish culture become included. This is a critical moment. Will Peter cross the bridge from Old Covenant to New Covenant? Can he shake off his commitment to Old Covenant requirements and his own internal prejudice which he is not even fully aware of?

Well, we know he does. But he is going to need a lot of help to do so.

First, stepping back and considering this whole third part of Acts, we have two movements made up of two pairs of stories each. So, we start with the two healings; then we have the two accounts related to Cornelius; the two accounts in Antioch; and the two accounts related to Herod. Central to the story are Peter's recognition that God does not distinguish between Jew and Gentile; and the planting of a church of Jews and Gentiles in the significant Gentile city of Antioch.

David Gooding recognizes in all these stories a shift away from Jerusalem. The shift is both cultural and administrative. Jewish culture will not dominate the growing Christian movement. And Jerusalem will not be established as a central hub of top-down administration for the growing movement. We are going to see a significant shift in the nature of the people of God, which under the Old Covenant was intentionally Jewish in religious culture and was intentionally centralized with administrative leadership of priests and king in Jerusalem. The New Covenant is a new wineskin, not Old Covenant 2.0. With the New Covenant, God is transitioning to a different plan, a different vision for the cultural and administrative make-up of his people.

We've already noted how the New Covenant vision for reaching the world is one of going out rather than pulling in. The Old Covenant prophetic vision saw the Gentiles streaming into Zion. Jesus directed a move out from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the remotest parts of the earth. That movement outward is what we will see through the book of Acts. New Covenant evangelism and missions does not wait for non-believers to come in. New Covenant evangelism and missions goes out.

The first going out was initiated by the persecution that followed Stephen's death. In our first two stories in this third part of Acts, we see Peter going out, not because of persecution but because of what appears to be intentional ministry strategy. He is outside of Jerusalem, giving witness to Christ,

strengthening the saints in the towns on the southern end of the plain of Sharon. Peter did not plant these churches, and it is not clear that he is exerting any administrative control over them. As we go through Acts, we will see the role of the Apostles diminish even in Jerusalem where James the elder will take the lead role. Church tradition tells us that the Apostles saw themselves as missionaries tasked as sent ones to take the Gospel out. They go out. They don't stay to administrate.

The second pair of stories, after those two miracle stories with Peter, address a cultural shift away from a Jewish center. The cultural shift is enabled by a theological transition from what it means to be the people of God in the Old Covenant to a new definition for what it means to be the people of God in the New Covenant. The transition is going to be both theological and cultural because the Old Covenant requirements created a really distinct religious culture for Israel. So, when you move away from those theological requirements, then it changes the culture. It is important to recognize this difference between theological requirements and culture in order to correctly understand Peter's struggle regarding entering into a Gentile home to give witness to Jesus. The challenge for Peter is not merely cultural. It is not merely the case of a missionary forcing himself to eat a grub, or to drink Yak milk. You know, the hard things missionaries do to cross-culture. But this for Peter is something deeper, something more. The challenge is theological. He is being required to accept a transition away from the word of God that he was taught all his life.

Our two stories here include the conversion of Cornelius' household described in chapter 10 and Peter's report of these events to the brothers in Jerusalem, which is described in chapter 11, verses 1-18. Working together, these stories raise two very significant issues I want to address. The first issue concerns Gentile inclusion into the New Covenant in light of the Old Covenant restrictions. How are we to understand the transition from Old to New that makes Gentile inclusion possible? The second issue I want to address concerns the work of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues experienced by the members of Cornelius' household.

In this lesson we will cover the conversion that happens in chapter 10 and the first issue of how to understand the inclusion of Gentiles into covenant. So then I'll wait for our next lesson to cover Peter's defense of his actions back in Jerusalem and to then also consider the second issue of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

So, for this lesson: culture, covenant, and the inclusion of Gentiles. Let's dive into the narrative. The story occurs over four successive days. We start with the first day, reported in Acts 10:1-8.

Day 1: God's Message to Cornelius (10:1-8)

¹ Now *there was* a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, ² a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the *Jewish* people and prayed to God continually. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had *just* come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" ⁴ And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ "Now dispatch *some* men to Joppa and send for a man *named* Simon, who is also called Peter; ⁶ he is staying with a tanner *named* Simon, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, ⁸ and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Caesarea is as Gentile a city as we can get while still in Judea. It is the Roman capital of the province. Herod the Great built the city on the site of a smaller town, giving it a man-made harbor, theater, an amphitheater, and even a temple dedicated to Caesar. Jews were a minority in the city.

Luke tells us Cornelius belonged to the Italian cohort or battalion. A cohort made up of Roman legionaries consisted of 600 men. A cohort made up of men in the provinces consisted of 1000 men. Supposedly there were no legionary cohorts in Judea at the time, so either Cornelius is an officer in a battalion originally raised in Italy but now consisting of provincial troops, or he has retired from the Italian cohort, and he keeps his rank and his designation, but he settled in Caesarea. So we're not sure.

Unembellished details like this support Luke's reputation as a historian. They also tell us something about the man, Cornelius. He is Roman. He is military. And he is an officer. He is definitely not Jewish in his culture or worldview, though the Jewish worldview has begun to have an effect on him. He feared God. We do not know if he feared God, exclusively. It would be a significant step for a Roman to worship the God of Judea. That would be a big step. It would be a gigantic step for a Roman to worship the God of the Jews as the one and only true God.

We are not sure how far along the continuum of fearing God this centurion has come. Luke does indicate the significant impact faith in God has made on his wallet and his day planner. Not only did he give his money in charity to Jews in need, but he gave generously. And not only did he give his time in prayer to God, but he gave it continuously. Faith in God has made a big impact in his day-to-day priorities.

In fact, the angel who appears says, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God." His time and money show the sincerity of his faith. He is a true seeker of God. He has knocked. And now God is opening the door.

I really like the specificity of the directions the angel gives. "Drive south until you come to Joppa. And when you get in town, take the street running along the coast and look for the sign of a tanner. You will probably smell it before you see it. Ask for Simon. And then there is gonna be another Simon staying with him. You really can't make a mistake. Two Simons in a tanner's home on the coast in Joppa. Oh, and the second Simon is also called, The Rock - Peter. He is the one you want."

Cornelius is open about his faith in his household. He summons two personal servants and a devout soldier and explains everything, and he sends them to Joppa immediately. Now we turn in our story to Peter in Joppa. Cornelius is prepared. Peter needs to be prepared. This is day 2. This is Acts 10:9-23a.

Day 2: God's Message to Peter (10:9-23a)

⁹ On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all *kinds of* four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." ¹⁵ Again a voice *came* to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. ¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; ¹⁸ and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you." ²⁰ "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." ²¹ Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" ²² They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was *divinely* directed by a holy angel to send for you *to come* to his house and hear a message from you." ²³ So he invited them in and gave them lodging.

Our scene has moved about 50 miles, just over 60 kilometers, south to Joppa. The day starts at 6 in the morning, so the sixth hour of the day is noon. Peter is hungry for lunch. The roof has a flat top. He has gone up to pray while he is waiting, and he falls into a trance.

In the trance Peter sees a portion of the animal kingdom. “Crawling creatures” here seems to refer to reptiles. There is no mention of insects or sea creatures. But this group will do. According to the food laws in Leviticus 11, some of the four-footed animals are considered clean, cow and sheep for example, while others are considered unclean, like the camel and pig. All reptiles are considered unclean. Among the birds, pigeon and chicken are clean, but raptors and scavengers, like the eagle and buzzard are unclean. One of the principles seems to be that all scavengers are unclean. The animals associated with eating dead flesh, whether mammals, or sea creatures, or birds: pig, crab or vulture - all unclean.

There might be some protective reasoning in that. God is protecting the Israelites from the more toxic meat of scavengers. The connection to death fits the primary purpose of the ceremonial laws, which was to make a symbolic statement about spiritual truth. Clean and unclean animals are clean and unclean symbolically to remind the Israelites of the moral uncleanness of sin and to call them to the cleanliness, purity in their walk with God. This symbolic teaching purpose extends to the whole ceremonial cleanliness code, including the code regarding food, but also regarding dead bodies, human and animal, contagious diseases, bodily fluids. And in all that, there does seem to be a secondary, hygienic or medical value and two primary purposes. One primary purpose is the symbolic pedagogical purpose: pointing to the reality of moral and spiritual cleanliness. A second primary purpose is to separate the Israelites from the pagan worship of their Gentile neighbors. The cleanliness code creates a barrier that Gentiles can choose to pass through if they will accept Jewish law, but Jews are forbidden to cross for the protection of their monotheistic society.

There is purpose in the ceremonial cleanliness code, but to be ceremonially unclean is not the same thing as actually being morally unclean. It is a designation assigned by God for specific purposes. So, to eat bacon is not sinful in and of itself, but when God says, “don’t do something,” then it is sin to knowingly disobey His clear command. So, to break these commands while under Old Covenant, while they’re still enforced, is the immorality of rebellion. That’s the life Peter grew up in.

Now, Peter has already recognized some sort of shift away from the ceremonial laws of clean and unclean. This is suggested by the fact that he is staying with a tanner. By nature of their vocation, by dealing daily with the skin of dead animals, tanners are continuously unclean in a symbolic, ceremonial sense. It’s tough for them to get to the Temple. People who come into contact with tanners then can easily become unclean. And yet, here is Peter, staying in the house of a tanner, seemingly unconcerned with being ceremonially unclean himself. Peter has made a small step away from the ceremonial cleanliness code within his own Jewish culture. God is going to push him out to a much larger step away from the Old Covenant cleanliness code.

God puts Peter into a trance and shows him animals, both clean and unclean. And Peter is told in his vision, “Get up, kill and eat.” He is not surprised at being told to kill and eat. Peter does not pick up his food in plastic wrap from the meat section at the grocery store. He is familiar with this fact of life, that to eat meat one has to kill an animal. So that doesn’t surprise him. He is surprised at the implication that he can kill and eat any of the animals he chooses, and so, ignore Levitical law.

“By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” ¹⁵ Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

Peter’s resistance is both theological and cultural. To understand the cognitive dissonance Peter is going through, the mental dismay, we need to consider the nature of the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. And to do that, we need to consider two essential questions of covenant. When we enter into covenant with God, there are two different questions that must be asked. This is true of the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the New Covenant.

The first question of covenant asks, “What makes me righteous enough to be in covenant relationship with God?” We can answer that question in terms of Law and grace, with Law being what we do and grace being what God does. On a scale from 0 to 100%, how much of this question depends on Law, and how much on grace? How much depends on what I do and how much depends on what God does for me? What makes me righteous enough to be in covenant relationship with God?

When I ask this first question of Covenant of students, I get a range of answers. What percentage is God’s part and what percentage is our part? 50% law, 50% grace. No, no, no. 100% law, 0% grace. 10% law, 90% grace. Well, the Biblical answer for the first question of Covenant is clear and emphatic. The only way for you to be righteous enough to enter into covenant relationship with holy God is if you enter in based 0% on the law that you keep and 100% on the grace that God gives to you. This is really counter-intuitive to all human religious systems. All of our systems are about the law we keep. And that is not Bible. It’s not Old Covenant. It’s not New Covenant. You can only enter by grace. If even 0.1% depends on you, you will mess it up and become guilty of the whole Law. Perfection is required. Perfection of thought, of word, and action. God’s holiness is too high for anything less. And so, for us perfection is found for us only in Jesus Christ, as a gift of grace.

After this event, later in his ministry, Peter is going forget what happened in this vision and happened with Cornelius, and he is going to slip back towards Jewish food requirements to the exclusion of Gentile brothers and sisters. And it’s going to happen while he is visiting the church in Antioch. Paul tells us about this in Galatians 2, this incident where Peter affirms a public division between Jew and Gentile. Jews eat at one table, Gentiles eat at another table. Paul rebukes Peter by focusing him back on to this first question of covenant. “Peter, remember! You’ve got to remember, Peter!” We read what he said to Peter in Galatians 2:15-16.

“(Peter,) We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we (even we who have the Law of Moses) we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

It doesn’t work. It was never the intention. This was true under Old Covenant, and it continued to be true under the New Covenant. The Law points us to our need for grace. For all Biblical covenants, the answer to the first question remains the same. “What makes me righteous enough to be in relationship with holy God?” Grace! 100% Grace! The righteousness that gives you standing with God is wholly a gift that you receive by faith. As Paul tells the Romans, “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace (Romans 11:6).”

Now, this is not the big question that’s really troubling Peter here. He may have the questions mixed up a little bit, but it’s the second question of Covenant that Peter is really having resistance to. Having established the basis for relationship with God, and that it’s 100% by grace, we are now ready to ask that second question, “How then shall I live? Having entered into relationship with God by grace through faith, how then shall I live? What are God’s expectations of me?” And that’s what covenant does. Covenant lays out the expectations of the King of Kings. How does He want His people to live? And so, the answer to that question is not the same for all Biblical covenants. Abraham was given an answer. But that answer was kind of subsumed, updated in the Mosaic Covenant which was given for all Israel. But then, that answer is changed when that Covenant ends and a New Covenant begins. So, this is an essential point. If you are under the Old Covenant then the laws, the stipulations, the commands of that covenant are all good and they all apply to you. They do not exist as a standard to make you acceptable to God. That doesn’t work in any covenant. They do exist as God’s moral and ritual expectations for you, as a child, a servant of God, for how you should seek to love Him, and serve Him, and worship Him with your life. How do I love my Heavenly Father? How do I worship my God? How do I serve my King? How do I do that? This is the question of a true

believer. And the Old Covenant answers that question. Old Covenant believers ought to pursue with mind and heart and strength the stipulations of the Covenant. Those laws are righteous, holy and good, a means God has given by which His people express love and gratitude and worship in relationship to Him.

The transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant brings about a change of stipulations. The question is the same - "How, then, shall we live? What are God's expectations?" But the expectations have changed. The moral expectations have not changed. The moral reality remains the same. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His moral nature does not change, and so the moral commands are largely repeated in the New Covenant writings. The transition from Old to New does not essentially bring about a new vision of morality. God's moral will doesn't change. There are two other major areas of change that do occur when we ask the question, "How then shall I live? Not as an Old Covenant member of the people of God, but as a New Covenant member of the people of God." So, what does change?

First, the civil code of the Old Covenant is no longer required. The calendar laws, the punishments, the civil actions. The people of God is no longer to be organized as a geopolitical entity. That civil law was an essential part of the Old Covenant vision for Israel, the people of God, a real nation in a real place. Geopolitical. The New Covenant people of God are organized spiritually as those who believe in Jesus Christ. We are a remnant in all cultures. And those of us who have entered into union with Him, we are now the Church. And so, the civil code is not included in the New Covenant.

Second, the ceremonial code that symbolically pointed to Jesus has been both fulfilled and therefore ended in Jesus Christ. The sacrificial law, the temple law, the food laws, these have all ended with the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. God lets it fall out.

Second, the ceremonial code that symbolically pointed to Jesus has both been fulfilled, and therefore ended in Jesus Christ. So, the sacrificial law, the Temple law, the food laws - these have all ended in transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. Jews may still choose to apply Old Covenant civil code in their laws and the laws of Israel. They can still hold those codes and follow Old Testament Law. They can choose to continue to apply Old Covenant ceremonial behaviors as a way to honor God. So the early Christians, they're going to Temple. And we're going to see Christians at the end of Acts who are making vows, and even offering sacrifice. And they're keeping the food laws. But they are not requirements. And there is no longer any theological basis requiring obedience. Jews are not to continue living under the Old Covenant while Gentiles embrace the New Covenant. It's not that kind of division. All of God's people are now under a New Covenant. The Old has ended in Christ. Continuance in Old Covenant practice is no longer a theological requirement, though you can still do it if you find it wise. Old Covenant laws and practices can be part of your culture. That's not forbidden under New Covenant.

This is the struggle for Peter. The theological basis for these distinctly Jewish cultural practices has been removed. So, we might say that they are now merely cultural, whereas before they were commanded and, therefore, became cultural. God has said, the food laws are no longer required. Sacrifice is no longer required. Does that mean you should stop doing these things? Well, that is a question of wisdom. You can continue in these practices if they do not prevent you from loving God and loving your brothers and sisters in Christ. But when these behaviors contradict the Gospel and contradict expectations expressed by God in the New Covenant, you need to let the Old go.

Peter has got to face that reality. And it is tough. Cultural values are deep seated. Peter and his Jewish brethren easily accept some aspects of the New Covenant. Other aspects of the New Covenant challenge these values that they feel so deeply, they just can't get over them. And keeping the food laws is one of those values that are so ingrained in an observant Jew like Peter that he cannot help feeling revulsion, it's an emotive response at the thought of eating something unclean.

My brother told me a story. While he was serving as a missionary, he had a surreal experience. He passed by a butcher shop, and he looked at a strange animal, skinned and hung up on a hook for sale.

As his eyes scanned down the body of the animal, he was just looking in curiosity, his mind focused in on the un-skinned face of a German Shepherd. And at that moment his emotions revolted in disgust.

I try to use that as a way to imagine Peter's response. The sheet lowering down. He is curious. And all these animals are running around. No problem. But when the voice says, "Kill and eat anything," Peter's response is not the response of a person who love to eat bacon if he were just allowed. Uh-uh. No! The rat, the vulture, the pig, the camel, the dog, the thought of eating those animals, it wasn't just a choice. It's detestable. But is it sinful? Well, it was when he was a boy. His cultural revulsion for eating such meat came out of a correct theological understanding of correct Old Covenant expectations, requirements. Those requirements have ended. Peter's values are still ingrained.

The food laws are a part of who he is, a part of what it means for him to be Jewish. It is not so easy for him to unravel the theology from the culture. There are some parallels here to everybody who grows up in a religious household. So, the rules of your church or the rules of your family. It's not always easy to unravel, you know, why did we do that? Why couldn't we listen to that, or sing that, or play that, or why do we have to wear that, or we couldn't watch that, or eat that, or we couldn't hang out with them. Was there any reason why? And it just feels wrong now. How do I unravel my cultural values from Biblical theology? It's not easy and I believe that is why God is going to such lengths to reassure Peter. We see in this whole story that God is doing a lot to make sure Peter gets the message.

And it is not all completely new to Peter. When Jesus was on earth, Peter had heard him say,

"Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man (Mark 7:14-15)."

The disciples, including Peter, didn't understand and they questioned Jesus at that time about what he meant. And Jesus said to them,

"Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated (Mark 7:18-19)?"

And then Mark even goes on to add as a side comment, "Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean."

Peter had heard this before, but he is pretty nervous about getting it right. He does not feel the freedom in himself to eat. There is a revulsion. It feels wrong. So, God sets up this whole story to help convince Peter of the correct application to the word of truth that he has already received from Jesus. "It's okay, Peter. This is New Covenant." Under the New Covenant the ceremonial cleanliness laws fall away and when the ceremonial cleanliness laws fall away, the barrier to interact with Gentiles falls away. That was the big problem with going into a Gentile home. You know they do not follow the food laws along with whatever other cleanliness laws they are breaking. And if contact with the Gentile does not make you unclean, you know when you go as a guest into an ancient Near Eastern home, you are going to be served food. And you know that politeness will demand that you eat the food. So, it's just a lot safer to stay outside. You just don't go into a Gentile home.

But that which was right under Old Covenant is no longer required. The barrier has been removed, and God is taking some pains to help Peter unravel the theology of the New Covenant from his deeply held cultural values.

First, God repeats the vision three times to make sure Peter gets it. It's not a nightmare vision you had because, you know, sunstroke and hunger. It's repeated. And then, while Peter is still perplexed about the vision, and this is God's excellent sense of timing, God has the men from Cornelius show up right then, so when the Holy Spirit speaks to Peter and says, "Go down to these men! They're right there." And God does not send the servants with a simple request from Cornelius. God has already done some pre-prep. He sends them with the claim that a holy angel initiated the invitation from that end.

So, the timing, the nature of the message on top of the vision are enough to convince Peter to go and see. And he's going to take day 3 to travel and then he'll enter into Caesarea on day 4. Listen to the dialogue that occurs when Peter arrives in Acts 10:23b-48.

Day 3-4: God's Saving Work In a Gentile House (9:23b-48)

And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for him and had called together his relatives and close friends.²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped *him*.²⁶ But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am *just* a man."²⁷ As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled.

²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean."²⁹ "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."³⁰ Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments,³¹ and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.'³² 'Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon *the* tanner by the sea.'³³ "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

³⁴ Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality,³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him."³⁶ "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—³⁷ you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed."³⁸ "*You know of* Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and *how* He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him."³⁹ "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross."⁴⁰ "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible,⁴¹ not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead."⁴² "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead."⁴³ "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

This is good! There are three paragraphs here. First, in 23b-27, we find Cornelius waiting with close friends and relatives. Presumably, there are also servants and soldiers present, like the three he sent to Peter. And Cornelius has already called them together. That speaks to his excitement to have everyone close to him hear the message this servant of God would bring.

When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls to his feet to worship him. That's a reminder, I think, that Cornelius, while fearing God and praying to God, is coming out of a different worldview. He does not understand how to correctly interpret Peter's role. An angel has announced Peter. So maybe, perhaps, Peter is greater than the angel? So Cornelius falls down. Peter corrects Cornelius, "Stand up, I too am just a man." And Peter enters and sees a crowd assembled.

The second paragraph, verses 28-33, begins with Peter answering the question everybody is thinking. "Good Jews do not enter into our homes. How is it now that this guy enters in? What relationship will his message have to the God of Israel if he, being a Jew, is disobedient to the Law of God? You know, what is his view of the Scripture if he is not keeping the Law?"

So, Peter explains without being asked,

“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for.”

Then he asks a question of his own, “So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.”

The answer is a fabulous set up for an evangelist. Cornelius retells part of the story, explaining that a man in shining garments told him his prayer to God was answered and he should send to Joppa for a man named Peter. He concludes, “Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” That’s an awesome set up! “Here we are. Tell us what God wants us to know.”

So, in the third paragraph, verses 34 to 43, Peter tells them. He speaks a message that parallels the four evangelistic speeches we heard him preach in Jerusalem in Acts 2 through 5. There’s no major change here. Well, two significant changes. First, he does not accuse this Gentiles of murdering the Messiah. That is a charge we only see being made in the early sermons to the Jews of Jerusalem, this direct accusation of murdering Jesus. Second, before starting, and this is different, Peter comments on what he has learned these past few days.

“I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality,³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.”

Peter is not saying that under the Old Covenant God did show partiality and now God no longer shows partiality. The change is not with God. The change is with Peter’s understanding. He seems to be saying that in his own practice of the cleanliness code, he assumed partiality. And that’s a natural fault of the sin in all religious people to assume some special privilege with God based on our particular obedience to a certain theology, or custom, or practice. We need to see ourselves as special. And when we do that, we then have this prejudice against people who do religion in a different way.

The ritual system that God created as barrier between Jews and the pagan practices of non-Jews easily became a source of pride and prejudice for observant Jews. God shook Peter when he forced Peter to re-evaluate the food laws in light of the New Covenant. Having been shaken, Peter was then able to take a new look at his own presuppositions, and he saw this false presumption that Jews are better than Gentiles.

The first question of Covenant has always provided an open door to anyone who would receive the grace of God by faith. That was true under Old Covenant. It wasn’t just for Jews. Gentiles had always been acceptable by faith. Abraham himself was called out of the Gentiles, the Egyptians who went up with the Israelites from the Exodus were acceptable to God. Rahab, Ruth, Naaman were acceptable to God. The people of Nineveh who responded to Jonah’s witness were acceptable to God. God doesn’t show partiality.

But the Old Covenant answer to the second question of covenant which emphasized this protection of the people required a significant step culturally for Gentiles who wanted to participate in covenant relationship with Yahweh. Gentiles would need to accept the religious requirements of the Mosaic Law. They would have to step away from their own culture towards a different culture.

The New Covenant answer to the second question of covenant lowers the protective element of ritual requirement. It doesn’t protect us so much with all these customs and rituals, which enables God’s New Covenant people to more easily enter into pagan culture and allows Gentiles to retain much of their native culture. It’s not forbidden under New Covenant. This freedom of culture is both a blessing and also the source of new challenges for the people of God. And we will come back to some those challenges when we get to chapter 15.

For now, Peter has come to understand that the move to the New Covenant removes the ceremonial barrier between Jew and Gentile, and he has faced his own prejudice towards Gentiles, coming to the realization that God indeed does not show partiality over one ethnic group or the other.

This understanding frees Peter to enter into this Gentile home and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to this Gentile audience in pretty much the exact same terms that he has preached the Gospel to Jews.

He acknowledges his listeners' awareness of the ministry of Jesus. "You all know what has been happening in the land through Jesus." He claims to be a witness, which is what he regularly does. He gives testimony to Jesus' crucifixion and to His resurrection. He emphasizes the bodily resurrection of Jesus by claiming that they ate and drank with Jesus. He names Jesus as the judge of the living and the dead. He claims the prophets gave witness to this. And though these are Gentiles, they are aware enough of Jewish faith to appreciate that Peter is saying that his Gospel is in line with Jewish Scripture, and the prophets declare this. And he concludes by claiming that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sin.

Those last words parallel Peter's quote from Joel 2:32 in his first sermon at Pentecost, "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21)." And I imagine that that word, "everyone," - it's in both places, "Everyone who calls on the name will be saved", "Everyone who believes," - that word, "everyone," must have had an impact on Peter at Pentecost. You know, as he was preaching to Jews and God-fearers from all over the Roman and Parthian Empires who had come to be in Jerusalem. But "everyone" at that point in time meant "everyone" who was willing to be like us. Everyone who has embraced our culture, who has come to the feast of Pentecost. It felt like "everyone."

But Peter's concept of "everyone" needs to be enlarged, and is here being enlarged to include not just everyone who is willing to come towards us, but everyone of any culture everywhere who seeks God and wants to walk with him. It must have been a very different experience for Peter then at Pentecost, now here preaching to this Gentile audience in a Gentile home in a Gentile majority city. The word, "everyone," means so much more.

Peter did not change his Gospel presentation much at all for them. He only leaves out an invitation to repent and believe, but that's because the Holy Spirit beats him to it. He would have said that. But here is the effect of Peter's witness, verses 44-48.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Can a person be born again in a moment? What about a room full of people? Can a room full of people be born again in a moment? But what about a room full of people who do not know much Bible at all and have grown up with a very different, non-Biblical worldview? Can they all be born again? Yes, they can.

Peter had barely finished his Gospel message. He did not even get to challenge them to believe. It was not necessary. God had already done the work. And he had been working on Cornelius for years. The religious customs of an imperial Roman soldier left Cornelius wanting for something more. And he found it when he was posted in Israel. His longing drew him to Yahweh. What he understood of God moved him into prayer, motivated him to give, to care for people around him. He was so hungry to believe that he invited everyone close to him to come hear this message. His heart was ripe. And

the integrity of his own search for truth had had a significant effect on his relatives, and friends, and servants. The whole field was white for harvest. A whole house church was born into Christ that day. Peter recognized the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as proof that the Gospel had genuinely been received. So, he ordered that they be baptized, then and there, in the name of Jesus.

I'll end by repeating the two significant lessons God taught Peter through this. First, Peter moved forward in his understanding that the Old Covenant had come to an end and with it the cleanliness code was now optional. In this lesson I have just touched on the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant and the importance of distinguishing between the two questions of covenant. I'm not going deeper into the two questions of covenant in this series. If you would like to understand better Biblical Covenant, I recommend my series on interpreting the Pentateuch. If you want just a couple of lessons, I recommend the Pentateuch lesson on Genesis 12-15, "Abraham I," and the Romans series lesson on Romans 3:21-30. I address the question of covenant in both of those places. I've also posted a link on my homepage at observetheword.com to a pdf article called, *The Two Questions of Covenant*. And we will come back to this concept, it will be important, in Acts 15.

Peter's first lesson was about the end of the cleanliness code which removed the ceremonial barrier between him and Gentiles. His second lesson had to do with his own prejudice as a Jew which assumed God's special favor. I'll end with his words on this lesson he learned.

"I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him...everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:34b-35, 43b)."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 10:1-48. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Did God appear to Cornelius (10:1-8) more for the sake of Cornelius or for the sake of Peter? Explain your answer.
3. Why do you think God showed Peter the vision three times? What does that suggest about Peter? What does it suggest about the message?
4. What is the significance of verse 23a?
5. What specific laws or customs does God direct Peter to break in this story? What is the basis for those laws or customs?
6. What underlying message does God want Peter to learn?
7. How do you understand the Old Covenant's relationship to that message? Is God teaching Peter a new idea that was not present in the Old Testament?
8. Imagine the scene of Peter preaching and the members of Cornelius' household speaking in tongues. What do you think that was like? What is the significance of speaking in tongues in this situation?