

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from Bible Journeys: Peter's commission - Joppa to Caesarea - Acts 10:1-48

I started preparing this talk on 9 November 2014, the 25th anniversary of the removal of the Berlin wall, which was an historic moment in the unification of Germany. East Germans were set free from tyrannical communist rule and admitted into the free democracy of West Germany to become citizens of an equal standing to those in the west. Nowadays, we are right to consider it as an abiding symbol of their unification. Likewise, the happenings in Acts 10, when Peter took the journey from Joppa to Caesarea, became the significant event in the ways God took to establish the unity of the Church. So significant that I once heard a Scottish preacher call it the Gentiles' Pentecost!

How Peter was prepared by the Lord for the journey, Acts 9:31-10:20

Last week's talk was about the journey from Jerusalem to Damascus during which Paul was converted. Hostility towards the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria then ceased (Acts 9:31). As the apostle to the circumcision, that is, to the Jews, Peter took the opportunity this peace afforded to exercise his apostleship by visiting and edifying these Jewish believers. He then visited Lydda and Sharon (Acts 9:32-35). When a well respected Christian woman, Dorcas, died at Joppa (Acts 9:36-37), the believers there sent for Peter (Acts 9:38-39) as the towns were nearby each other on the coastal plain of Palestine. After he raised Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:40-41), he remained in Joppa because the miracle resulted in many converts and these new believers needed nurturing and nourishing (Acts 9:42-43). One day Peter decided to have a prayer time on the housetop of his lodgings (Acts 10:9). He had become hungry and, whilst a meal was being prepared for him, he fell into a trance (Acts 10:10). In his vision, he was commanded by God to kill and eat all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air (Acts 10:11-13). All of these were forbidden by Old Testament laws, which godly Jews, like Peter, followed. Peter protested, *"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean"* (Acts 10:14, English Standard Version). However, the Lord spoke to him a second time, *"What God has made clean, do not call common"* (Acts 10:15). This perplexed Peter. The vision was repeated three times to fully convince Peter it was real. At that very moment, the delegation from Cornelius arrived at the gate of the lodgings. They asked if Peter was lodging there and he, prompted by the Holy Spirit, invited them in as his guests. As he later explained to Cornelius, *"God has shown me [by the vision] that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came [to you] without [any hesitation, misgiving or] objection"* (Acts 10:28-29).

In our preparation for service of any description, you and I similarly need time with the Lord, above and beyond our normal 'quiet time'. Notice how a servant is prepared by God to do the work: of the Lord. It comes through prayer and dependence upon Him. It's only by obedience to His commands, which for us are found in His word. It's all prompted by the Spirit.

Many have commented on Peter's initial reaction in Acts 10:14, *"No, Lord"*, by pointing out that he called Jesus "Lord", but, at the same time, he was refusing to obey His command! Yes, these two words are truly incompatible! But we have to admit that Peter's attitude so often reflects our own attitude to the direct commands of the Lord. Perhaps we give Peter too much criticism, whilst too readily letting ourselves off the hook! (After all, he did have to learn how the Old Testament laws had been set aside.) When we seek the Lord's will for our lives, ingrained habits and attitudes, like those which confused Peter, will also be potential stumbling blocks to our own progress in discipleship.

Cornelius, the convert prepared by the Lord, Acts 10:1-8

Acts 10 opens with information of which Peter was totally ignorant. It was that God was already working in Cornelius' life to make him ready to accept the message of the Gospel from Peter. He's introduced in Acts 10:2 as *"a devout, God-fearing man, whose piety pervaded his entire household."* His genuine godliness was displayed by his charity; and by the way he prayed continually to God (Acts 10:2). In Acts 10:3-8, he didn't hesitate to obey the angelic vision. He immediately ordered a delegation to go to Joppa to bring back Peter to Caesarea. As he later said to Peter, *"I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come"* (Acts 10:33). His genuine faith was rewarded because he diligently sought further light from God. *"Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6).

At this point in the spread of the Gospel in Acts of the Apostles, God was clearly indicating that He was turning from dealing primarily with the nation of Israel to reach out to the Gentiles. There's a common thread that joins together all of the accounts in the Acts. Although His servants preach His word, God works sovereignly. Here we see so clearly that God had arranged this event. Peter is led to Joppa. Cornelius, a Roman, is brought to serve as a centurion in Palestine, where he learns of the one and only true God. God uses an angel to speak to him and to guide him to Peter, who was ministering in a nearby town (Acts 10:4-8). Yes, Cornelius' heart was prepared beforehand by the Lord to receive the Gospel.

The journey from Joppa to Caesarea

Although the actual journey from Joppa to Caesarea is the title of our talk, Luke has recorded no details about it. Peter was certainly focused on the task ahead of him and obeyed the Spirit's command. *"Rise go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them"* (Acts 10:20). Therefore he said in Acts 10:29, *"When I was sent for, I came without objection."* But he was acutely aware that he was breaking new ground and so he sensibly took with him six Jewish believers to be witnesses of everything he said and did. (Acts 11 shows how vital their eye witness proved to be.) They, too, must have been convinced that Peter was commissioned by the Lord to go. Otherwise the journey would not have started for there was much inbred prejudice against Gentiles from the Jews. And there were no initial objections to Peter showing the Gentile delegation hospitality for the night! The Spirit was in total control. The journey took one day. All we know about it is, *"The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him"* (Acts 10:23).

An extraordinary Gospel meeting!

Peter was personally greeted by Cornelius himself when the group arrived in Caesarea. The initial hiccup, when Cornelius fell down at Peter's feet, was soon corrected in forthright language, *"Stand up; I too am a man"* (Acts 10:26). After some preliminary discussion with Cornelius, Peter went into the house to meet the friends and close relatives of Cornelius. They had been deliberately called together by him to hear the Gospel message. He was convinced that Peter had a special word from God for them, *"Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord"* (Acts 10:33). The angel had promised Cornelius that *"[Peter] will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household"* (Acts 11:14). So Peter was sent in order to preach so that those who had not heard the Gospel could hear it and believe by calling upon the Lord for salvation (see Romans 10:14-15).

The Gospel was for Gentiles also

Peter preached the Gospel to these Gentiles against the background of declared Jewish hostility. Their understanding was that Gentiles were 'the uncircumcision', who were without the knowledge of the true God (see Ephesians 2:11-12). But now God had shown Peter by the vision that His ways had changed. Jesus Christ had come and peace was being preached through His Name (Acts 10:36). In fact, Peter learnt that day that God had always been impartial - He doesn't distinguish between the races when dealing with mankind (Acts 10:34). Anyone, anywhere who sincerely fears Him and as a consequence acts in a righteous way is accepted by Him (Acts 10:35). Now, during the Gospel era, *"God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. ... For there is no distinction between Jew and [Gentile]; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'"* (Romans 11:32 and 10:12-13). Today we preach that, *"everyone who believes in [Jesus Christ] receives forgiveness of sins through his name"* (Acts 10:43).

The Good News about Jesus Christ

In order for the people in Cornelius' house to believe on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved, they had to be reminded of the facts about His life, His death and His resurrection. Peter outlined these in Acts 10:37-43, *"You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all that He did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and caused Him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."* Today we continue to uphold these truths, *"that Christ died for our sins ... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures"* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Jesus Christ is Lord of all

Acts 10:36, "*Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all*" is a powerful text, which sets out some absolute truths of the Gospel. These truths must be presented in some form or other whenever the Gospel is preached:

1. Jesus Christ has claims over every person in the world. He's both Creator and Redeemer. Everyone is given opportunities by God, throughout life, to acknowledge and respond to the claims of Christ.
2. Jesus Christ has demonstrated His lordship over disease, the devil and death by His resurrection from among the dead. Everyone must face up to the fact "*that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ*" (see Acts 2:36). "*Every knee [must] bow to him*" (see Philippians 2:10) either voluntarily now or by compulsion in the day to come.
3. The Gospel has no take-it-or-leave-it options. It has now been published to the entire world, according to the command of the eternal God. People must obey it by faith (see Romans 16:26).
4. Peter said in Acts 10:42 that God had charged them to preach and proclaim that Jesus Christ is ordained by God to be the Judge of the living and the dead. "*[Mankind's] ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by [his appointed man, Jesus Christ]; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead*" (Acts 17:30-31).
 - a. The "*living*" in Acts 10:42 are those who have believed in Christ. They have passed from a state of spiritual death to spiritual life. In the resurrection to life, believers will be judged at Christ's judgment seat. Their service for Him will receive proper assessment and reward (see John 5:24 and 29; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-11).
 - b. The "*dead*" in Acts 10:42 are those who have never believed in God and who have refused to acknowledge Him. In the resurrection of judgement, they're raised to face Christ at the Great White Throne judgement and condemned to the lake of fire (see John 5:29 and Revelation 20:11-15).
5. The Lord Jesus also has authority to forgive sins. Believers do not face the judgement of the Great White Throne.
6. Finally, Philippians 2:10-11 states, "*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

The Result: Gentiles are blessed

This first preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles provides a good example of what should happen each time that message is preached. Conversions should follow. The Holy Spirit fell upon everyone in Cornelius' house - meaning that they were born again and believed. It was the Spirit of God who convinced and convicted those hearers. He enabled them to believe the message of salvation. They repented and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Acts 20:21). They also received the Holy Spirit to indwell each of them. (To convince the Jewish believers who accompanied Peter that this had happened to Gentiles, on that special occasion, they miraculously spoke in tongues.) They were baptised in water unto the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 10:48), showing their commitment to Him as their Lord. Above all, God was honoured and glorified (Acts 11:18).

A special day for Gentiles

There are several special issues associated with this first preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles that will help us to understand its significance: When Peter later defended his actions back in Jerusalem, he recounted what happened in Cornelius' house. "*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning [at Pentecost]. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' ... God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us*" (Acts 11:15-17). A few years later, Paul formalised the doctrine about the formation of the Church in a letter to the Corinthians, "*For just as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with [the Church]. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body - Jews [on the day of Pentecost] or [Gentiles in Cornelius' house], slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When the Judean Christians first heard of Peter's expedition to Caesarea, they were horrified and severely criticised him. According to their Jewish traditions, Peter had defiled himself by socialising with 'uncircumcised men'! But Peter told them how God had worked through him and asked, "*If then God gave the same gift to [these uncircumcised*

Gentiles] as he gave to us [Jews] when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17). Their reaction emphasises the importance of this unique event in the history of the Christian Church. "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18). In effect they were saying, "We now realise that the Gospel message of salvation is for the whole of mankind, not just for us Jews, God's chosen earthly people." The differences between Jew and Gentile disappeared. Peter's explanation in Acts 11 meant that his Jewish brethren could no longer object! The dividing wall of hostility had been broken down by Christ's death and peace had become a practical reality (see Ephesians 2:14-18). I mentioned the fall of the Berlin wall at the beginning of my talk. Sadly, for some Germans the old wounds are difficult to heal. The same attitudes soon manifested themselves in the early Church - see Galatians for example. Even worse, 21st century Christendom exhibits divisions in many other ways. We have not maintained "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (see Ephesians 4:3).

What does the Gospel mean to us 21st century Gentiles?

As I conclude today, each one of us must ask, "*Have I benefited from the Gospel going out to the Gentiles to take from them a people for God's name?"* (see Acts 15:14). Have you heard the wonderful Gospel about God's gift of His beloved Son for your salvation? Have you repented of your sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ? If you've been converted, then you're "in Christ"; you've been sealed with the Holy Spirit; and you're a member of the church of the living God. If you haven't, then you remain in your sins and you face the judgement of God with its terrible eternal consequences in the lake of fire!

If you're a believer, how much do you appreciate God's goodness in extending His blessings beyond the narrow limits of the nation of Israel? Let's heed Paul's warnings, "*Do not be arrogant towards [the nation of Israel]. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, '[They] were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God"* (Romans 11:18-22).

Finally, let's be active in spreading the "*glorious Gospel of the blessed God, which has been entrusted to us* (1 Timothy 1:11).

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