

Acts 10:24-48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 10 verse 24 to 48. And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, 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. And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered.

And he said to them, You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I asked then why you sent for me.

And Cornelius said, Four days ago about this hour I was praying in my house at the ninth hour. And behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon at Anna by the sea. So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord. So Peter opened his mouth and said, 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. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. 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 up on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who have 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 the 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. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. In the first half of Acts chapter 10, two men had received visions. Cornelius had received a vision while he was praying, a vision that told him to summon Peter, who was staying with Simon the Tanner. The apostle Peter had received a vision of his own. Three times a sheet containing various unclean animals had descended from heaven, and he was told to rise, kill and eat. Each time he had resisted, and been told that what

God had cleansed, he should not call common. The explanation of the vision began to become apparent to him, as he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the three men who were to bring him to Cornelius.

[3 : 22] Now in the second half of Acts chapter 10, these two men with their two separate visions are brought together, the Lord demonstrating in bringing them both together, that the visions were ultimately from him, and that his purpose was to bring them together in an act of mutual recognition. Neither of them fully knows the information of the other yet. Peter does not fully understand why he has been summoned, and Cornelius does not yet know the message that Peter has to give to him. Much of Acts chapter 10 and 11 is concerned with the relaying of information from one party to another, communicating to other parties what we, the reader, already know. Cornelius' story is told first of all by Luke, then it's conveyed by the messengers to Peter, then it's related by Cornelius to Peter, and then later by Peter to the people in Jerusalem. The point of all of this is not merely that Cornelius and the people in his household receive the Holy Spirit, but that they and the Jewish Christians be joined together as one body by the Spirit. The act of mutual recognition for which the conveying of the story again and again to different parties is so important is at the very heart of what the chapters are about. When he arrives at the house of Cornelius, Cornelius responds by falling at his feet and worshipping him. This is clearly an inappropriate response to Peter, and Peter makes very clear that he is just immortal. He is not divine, he's not worthy of worship, he's a human being like Cornelius himself. In a couple of chapters time, we'll see a contrast between Peter and another man who accepts such worship. Herod, at the end of chapter 12, receives the worship of the people, and as a result he is struck down by the Lord.

Cornelius, in anticipation of Peter's arrival, has clearly summoned a great number of people. His relatives, his close friends, and all of his household are gathered together. There is clearly going to be a sense of great anticipation. What is Peter, this man who has been sent by God, going to say to him?

Peter begins by explaining how remarkable it is that he's coming into a house to socialise with a Gentile. This is not something that a typical observant Jew would do. Rather, they would scrupulously maintain a distance that would enable them to remain clean. Yet Peter sees in his vision a message concerning this, that the Lord has taught him not to call anyone common or unclean.

God is going to form his holy people from people of all nations, not just people of the Jews. The very fact that Peter has come into a Gentile's house to socialise with him is already a sign that God has spoken to him, that his former opinions have been changed. Having related something of the vision that he has received, he asks why Cornelius sent for him. Cornelius proceeds to relate his own vision. Cornelius' story begins four days previously. Presumably he had received the vision that day, the next day he had sent out the messengers, the day afterward, the third day they had arrived in Joppa, and then on the fourth day they arrived back in Caesarea with Peter. Cornelius describes being visited by an angel in bright clothing, described here as a man. The angel tells him that his arms have been remembered by the Lord. The Lord has seen Cornelius' acts of love and faith, and in response to those acts he is going to bless Cornelius. He instructs Cornelius to send to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter, who is lodging at the house of Simon the Tanner by the sea. The location of Simon the Tanner's house might be interesting to us. Both of these places, Joppa and Caesarea, are towns by the sea. Within Luke's gospel he does not really talk about the sea in the same way as the other gospels do. Each of the other gospels talk about the Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberias, whereas Luke talks about the Lake of Gennesaret. In the book of Acts, however, he talks about the sea, as the gospel goes out to the Gentiles and to the people who are farther off. Symbolically, the sea represents the realm of the Gentiles, and as the gospel moves out to these seaside towns and cities, there is a sort of symbolic setting of the scene for the gospel going out from the land to other lands farther off. Cornelius tells Peter that all the people have gathered together to hear the message that he has from the Lord. And Peter goes on to relate the gospel account.

He begins by talking about the lesson that he has just been learning. God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. The message of the kingdom is not just for Jews, it's for Gentiles also.

[7 : 45] While God might formally have focused his work and his message upon the people of Israel, this was always towards the end that one day it would spread out the entire world. Peter, as he goes on to relate the gospel message, does not at all disguise the fact that it is centered upon the Jewish people and their land. He talks about what has happened in Judea, in Galilee, talks about Jesus of Nazareth and of the country of the Jews in Jerusalem. While the word of Christ can be delivered to people of other nations, Jesus never ceases to be the king of the Jews.

Peter's message begins with God. Jesus is the word that he sent to Israel. God declares his good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all. The testimony of the apostles began with the ministry of John the Baptist and moved on to the resurrection of Christ. And Peter here tells the story in such a way. He begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism that John proclaimed, and then how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and with power at the baptism of John.

Then he goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. Jesus is a man of the Spirit who acts in the power of the Spirit to deliver and to save people. In so doing, he manifests the power of the kingdom that has been promised by the Lord. He also achieves the victory of God against the devil, the one who oppresses, binds, and accuses, keeping people of all nations under his sway. Jesus was put to death by his people who hung him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him appear to people who had been chosen by God as witnesses of him. These people ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. We often downplay the significance of the post-resurrection meals with Christ. These served as a demonstration of Christ's embodied existence following the resurrection. They also served as a joyful manifestation of the meaning of Christ's victory.

Performing the actions associated with the Last Supper in the context of the meal at Emmaus, Jesus gives that action a new meaning. It is not just seen in the anticipation of his forthcoming death. It also serves as a joyful celebration of the victory looking back. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, it has both of these aspects to it. In one respect, it might take us back to that evening that Christ was betrayed, to the evening of the Last Supper, the sorrow of Gethsemane, and the great shadow of the forthcoming death hanging over at all. However, it should also take us back to the joy of the post-resurrection feasts, to Christ eating with the two travellers at Emmaus, or to Christ eating with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. Christ commanded the apostles to preach to the people, to testify that he was appointed as the one to be the judge of all. Christ is the King of the Jews, he is the Messiah, but he is also the Lord of all, the judge of all. The message of Christ's universal lordship, and the fact that he will judge all persons, is very much central to the message of the apostles to the Gentiles in the book of Acts.

Although we can often speak about the gospel as if it were a sort of salvation system, the gospel at its very heart is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. It's the proclamation that God's kingdom has been established in him, that God has brought about salvation, deliverance, and forgiveness for his people, and that everyone should go down on their knees to pay homage to him, and every mouth should confess his authority and rule. As such, it is not just a message of personal salvation, it's a message of cosmic rule. It is a message about a public fact, a great fact in light of which everyone must live their lives differently. The truth of Christ as the judge of the living and the dead is something that all the prophets have borne witness to. Everyone who believes in this one also receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Jesus' name comes with authority and power, as people receive the summons that comes in Jesus' name and with his authority. Their sins can be forgiven, their lives can be changed, they can be delivered from death to life and released from the clutches of the evil one. Even as Peter is still saying these things, the spirit comes down upon those who hear the word. Presumably they have received it and as a result they receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's descent is a sort of second Pentecost. It's like the event of Pentecost received in Acts chapter 2, when the Spirit descended upon the Jewish Christians in

[12 : 04] Jerusalem, but here it's happening to Gentiles. This serves as the Spirit's imprimatur of the Gentiles, a sealing of them as true members of the people of God. They've not been circumcised, they've not even been baptised, and yet they receive the Spirit. Both Peter and Cornelius had received visions from God, visions from God that when brought together, brought a degree of illumination. They began to understand why the Lord had brought them together. But now in the descent of the Spirit upon the Gentiles, there is a powerful confirmation that the Spirit's hand has been directing all of these events.

By the Spirit, Christ is forming his church, and by giving the Spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, he desires that they recognise each other as brothers and sisters, as those who truly belong to Christ on the same level ground. In Christ there will be no Jew nor Gentile. At this point, baptism is pretty much a formality. It's a recognition of what God has already done within these people. They have received the Holy Spirit, they've been received by God, and so to withhold baptism would be going against God. It would be refusing to recognise and receive and welcome those who had been welcomed by Christ. The act of mutual recognition, reception and welcome is confirmed by the fact that Peter remains with them for a number of days. In accepting the hospitality of Gentiles and living with them and eating with them, Peter is treating them as full brothers and sisters.

A question to consider. What lessons might we learn for our presentation of the Gospel to people from Peter's condensed Gospel message within this passage?