

# A New Chapter

Acts 10:1-33

© July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Acts

Last week we left of our study by pointing out that God had been working in Peter, preparing him for what was about to come. We saw him staying at the home of Simon the tanner, which seemed like a strange choice, given that tanners were seen as unclean under Jewish law. We noted that God seemed to be working in Peter to help him to see that there was more to the Christian faith than the laws he had grown up following so diligently.

Today, we get to see what God was preparing Peter to do. This passage represents a seismic shift in the church's understanding of their relationship with God. Peter was the first to understand this shift, but we will eventually see it spread throughout the remainder of the church as well. The ripples of this event continue to be felt by us in the church today.

## Cornelius

Our passage today can be broken up into three parts: God's work in Cornelius, God's work in Peter, and the effects of this work. Next week, we'll look further at what happened as a result of these events, but today I want to focus on how God worked in these men to prepare for them to meet. Luke begins by introducing us to Cornelius.

In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. <sup>2</sup> He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. <sup>3</sup> One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said. <sup>4</sup> Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel. And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! <sup>5</sup> Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore." <sup>7</sup> As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. <sup>8</sup> He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa. (Acts 10:1-8, NLT)

Cornelius was a Roman centurion living in Caesarea. There is a lot of information in these facts, though admittedly, most of it is lost on us. Cornelius is described as a centurion in the Roman army (though the NLT lists him as an army officer and calls him a captain). Centurions generally were akin to non-commissioned officers and had command over roughly 100 troops (which is where the name "centurion" comes from). So, they would likely be equivalent to something like a First Sergeant in the US Army today. Centurions had risen through the ranks of the army. They'd paid their dues, and generally speaking, they were hard, grizzled soldiers tasked with leading and maintaining order amongst their troops. They did not merely give orders from an office; they were in the thick of things with their fellow soldiers. Despite their reputation as

hardened military leaders, every time centurions are mentioned in the Bible, they are described in a positive light. Cornelius joins the ranks of other centurions in the Bible and is described as devout and God-fearing.

He lived in Caesarea, a significant city in Israel. Herod had rebuilt the city and named it Caesarea in honor of the Roman emperor. There was even a temple to Caesar in the city. While it was a Jewish city, it had a heavy Roman presence, including a significant military presence. So it is not surprising that Cornelius was there.

What is surprising, however, is the way he is described. In ancient Israel, calling a Gentile “God-fearing” usually meant the person worshiped the God of Israel, but had not formally become a Jew. A God-fearer would not have gone through the rite of circumcision and formally converted to Judaism, but they may have still worshiped the God of the Bible as they were able. God-fearers were permitted to attend synagogue but had to sit in the back (just as a side note, yes, there was a time when the back of the church was not the best seat!) So, Cornelius, despite his status as a Gentile and a Roman soldier, had a good reputation among the Jews. He had been caring for the poor and praying regularly to God, things we would not expect from someone like him.

We are told that he was praying one afternoon at about 3 o’clock, which was one of the prescribed Jewish times of prayer. This lends credence to the notion that Cornelius was likely a follower of God, even though he was not a Jew.

While praying, Cornelius encountered an angel who told him God was pleased by his prayers and gifts to the poor and told him to send some men to Joppa to summon Simon Peter, who was staying with Simon the tanner. The angel did not give Cornelius much more information than that (though chapter 11 does tell us the angel said Peter would have a message for him.) I wonder if Cornelius found it strange that this Jewish leader/teacher would be staying at the home of a tanner, but he did not question the order. As a centurion, he understood the importance of following orders. He had received an order from the Lord, so he immediately sought to follow it. He called two of his household servants as well as a trusted (and Luke says, devout, meaning possibly also God-fearing) soldier to accompany them, then sent them to Joppa to find Peter.

Joppa was about 30 miles away from Caesarea, so the men did not arrive until the following day. Cornelius would have been familiar with the area and would have known it would take several days for his servants to return, hopefully with Peter in tow.

## **Peter**

The second scene of this passage focuses on Peter. Last week we left Peter at the home of Simon the tanner, where Luke said Peter stayed for a long time. We don’t know exactly how long Peter stayed with Simon, so we don’t know how much time passed between chapters 9 and 10, but we do know that just as God had been working in Cornelius, He also was working in Peter.

<sup>9</sup> The next day as Cornelius’s messengers were nearing the town, Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, <sup>10</sup> and he was hungry. But while a

meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them." <sup>14</sup> "No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean." <sup>15</sup> But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." <sup>16</sup> The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

<sup>17</sup> Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, <sup>18</sup> they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there. <sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. <sup>20</sup> Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them." <sup>21</sup> So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?" <sup>22</sup> They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." <sup>23</sup> So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa. (Acts 10:9-23, NLT)

Peter didn't know there were men on their way to see him. It was just another regular day for him. But God knew what was going on and was orchestrating events to happen as He desired. At about noon, Peter was waiting for lunch to be prepared and headed to the roof to spend time in prayer. Noon was not one of the prescribed Jewish times of prayer, so this gives us a bit of a glimpse into Peter's own habits. He viewed prayer as an essential practice to draw close to the Lord and be led by Him.

While he was praying, he fell into a trance or dream-like state and had a vision. In the vision, a sheet was let down from the sky filled with all sorts of animals. Some were animals that were acceptable for Jews to eat, and others were not. A voice commanded him to get up, kill, and eat these animals. Peter, as a devout Jew, immediately responded that he couldn't because they were unclean. Then the voice replied, do not call something unclean if God has made it clean. The vision was repeated three times.

Peter was confused by the encounter. While he was still considering the meaning of the vision, the three men Cornelius sent arrived, asking for Peter. The Holy Spirit told him this was happening and told him to go downstairs and go with them without hesitation.

When Peter went down, he asked the men why they were looking for him, and they told him about what had happened to Cornelius. Peter invited the men to stay for the night and then went with them to Joppa the next day.

While this seems like a very natural response, it shows a shift in Peter's understanding and reveals that Peter was beginning to understand the meaning of the vision.

Listen to how James Montgomery Boice describes this event.

Now notice this: Verse 23 says, “Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.” Peter was learning already. A Jew would not normally have done that. Normally a Jew would have said, “Well, it is nice to meet you, but we need to stay out here in the street. You can’t come inside.” Or he might have said, “If you go down this street a little way, I think you’ll find an inn where you can stay.” Or, “You can camp out on the beach. I think you’ll manage all right there.” No orthodox Jew would have invited Gentiles into his house. He would not have sat down at the same table with them. He would not have had fellowship with them. It was forbidden. Peter had gotten the point of the vision thus far. God had called these men clean. And since God had called them clean, he was not to call them unclean. So they came in.<sup>1</sup>

Peter seems to have understood that God was declaring things to be clean that had previously been viewed as unclean. As we have mentioned, Peter probably had begun to understand this in some part, since he had stayed with Simon the tanner. But to invite Gentiles into your home to eat with you was another huge step. And to go to the home of a Gentile would be as well!

This passage creates a shift in emphasis for the Christian church. So far, the church was made up of Jewish people who had come to believe in Christ. They were already circumcised, they were keeping the Jewish laws, but they recognized that Jesus was the Messiah and submitted to His teachings and trusted in His sacrifice. They began to understand that it wasn’t necessary to become a Jew to worship God. Instead, people were welcome to come to God through Jesus, simply by submitting to Him.

If you have ever read through the Old Testament, you would have read through the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Those two books contain a massive list of rules and regulations that God gave to the people of Israel. Some of the rules make sense to us (such as the rules about murder or thievery), while others seem strange to us (like the sacrifices, the dietary laws, and a number of others in this vein.) For the most part, we divide these laws into two different categories. One is the moral laws—the things that God says are right and wrong for all people everywhere. The other is the ceremonial or civil laws. These were laws that were given to the people of Israel to set them apart. God was telling Peter that these ceremonial laws were no longer necessary. Obviously, we can understand why sacrifices were no longer needed, as Jesus had been the perfect sacrifice. But now, we see God making clear that the other ceremonial laws had passed away. He was saying all foods were clean, and that He had made all people clean before Him.

This point often rears its head in the debate about homosexuality today. Many opponents of Christianity attempt to discredit Christians’ opposition to homosexual behavior by pointing out that while Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both condemn it, Leviticus also contains laws condemning eating bacon or wearing clothing woven of two different

---

<sup>1</sup> Boice, James Montgomery. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

fabrics, which are things Christians do not follow. The charge is that Christians are picking and choosing which laws they want to follow. But this passage in Acts is the reason there is no contradiction. The command against homosexual behavior is a moral law (which is reiterated in the New Testament), and the others are ceremonial laws intended for the people of Israel but are no longer binding because they have served their purpose.

Peter may not have understood this fully yet, but he was beginning to get the message.

## **Aftermath**

Luke records what happened after they left.

<sup>24</sup> They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. <sup>26</sup> But Peter pulled him up and said, “Stand up! I’m a human being just like you!” <sup>27</sup> So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled. <sup>28</sup> Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.”

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius replied, “Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o’clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. <sup>31</sup> He told me, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! <sup>32</sup> Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.’ <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you.” (Acts 10:24-33, NLT)

We know from chapter 11 that Peter took 6 others with him from Joppa. They arrived in Caesarea the next day, where Cornelius was waiting for them with all his relatives and close friends. He knew God had set up this meeting, so he was eager to hear what Peter had to say. He brought everyone close to him to hear the man God had sent.

When Peter arrived, Cornelius bowed low, as one would to worship a deity. This would have been a common and appropriate practice for a Roman, but Peter would have none of it. He corrected Cornelius explaining that he was a human being, just as he was, and therefore was not worthy of worship.

Peter explained that while it would normally be wholly inappropriate for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this, or even to associate with someone like him, God had shown him that he should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. Peter had gotten the message! So he stood in the home of Cornelius, in front of all his family and friends. He asked Cornelius to tell him his story once more. Cornelius did and explained that they were eager to hear the message God had for them.

## Conclusion

We'll get into Peter's message to these Gentiles and their response next week, but I think there is much for us to learn from what we have seen in today's passage as well.

**First, we see the importance of prayer.** Both Peter and Cornelius heard from God when they spent time in prayer with Him. Often our prayer lives are simply us listing the requests we have for God (if we even do that!) But prayer is supposed to be a conversation with the Lord. Peter and Cornelius both seemed to understand the vital importance of prayer in the life of a Christian. When we spend time with God in prayer and reading His word, we should be attentive to what He is saying to us as well. If we will listen, we will often sense His leading. But like Cornelius and Peter, He will often ask us to do something that will stretch us. When we listen, He gives us opportunities to grow, just as He did for these men.

**Second, the gospel is for all.** We understand that it's because of this event that we, as Gentiles, are able to come to Christ. We understand that this is the reason we don't need to follow Jewish laws anymore. But sometimes we fail to see how this principle continues to apply today. We like to imagine that we have no prejudices against anyone. We find it easy to say that anyone is welcome to come to Christ. But we all probably have people we would struggle to accept as believers. That's what Peter was up against in this story, but God was showing him he was wrong. Who would you struggle to welcome into the church: a person of a different race or ethnic background, a person at the opposite end of the political spectrum, a person who had been convicted of a violent crime, a person who had previously hurt you? The list could go on and on. But the point is this, the gospel is for people on your list. We must work to give up our prejudices and recognize that *everyone* can be made clean through Christ.

**Finally, God often calls us to things that seem impossible to us.** Neither the instructions to Cornelius nor Peter made a lot of sense. God didn't give either one a bunch of details. He simply called them to obedience. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that God was working in Cornelius and was preparing Peter for what was about to happen. When God asks you to do something that seems crazy or impossible, remember that He may be working in ways you can't see. He is probably preparing things for exactly what He's called you to do. That should embolden us to be obedient, even when we don't have all the details.

This passage is wonderful because it marks a new chapter in the church and opens the door to you and me to receive the gospel. Our challenge today is to wrestle with the ways we might be trying to serve as gatekeepers to the gospel message. How do we directly or indirectly communicate to people that "the gospel is not for you?" That is the challenge we must continue to face head-on, because with God, all things are possible. We just need to live like that's true.

© July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Acts