

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 9

Day One: The Conversion of the Gentiles

Nearly ten years had passed since Pentecost. Peter had been God's instrument in opening the door of salvation for the Jews (Acts 2) and also the Samaritans (Acts 8). Now God would use him to open the same door for the Gentiles in Acts 10. But before God could use Peter, He would have to do a work in Peter's heart. After all, a ranking officer in the Italian Regiment of the Roman Army would not have been the evangelistic target of a card-carrying proper Jewish Christian like Peter.

Cornelius belonged in the category of what the Jews referred to as God-fearers. These Gentiles loved the God of Israel and were supportive of the Jewish faith, but they stopped short of becoming Jews in lifestyle and circumcision. And because Cornelius was a loyal servant of Israel's oppressors, any Jew of that day would have been automatically prejudiced against him. This moment would become not only the turning point for Peter, but also for church history as well.

Read all of Acts 10–11.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Record your initial impressions of the gospel message being offered to the Gentiles. Be prepared to share your findings with your group.

Memory verse: Acts 10:43 Write out the verse; repeating it daily to commit it to memory.

*To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him
will receive remission of sins.*

Day Two:

Read Acts 10:1–48 for review.

In Acts 10, we have the contrast of two “religious” men: Peter who had lived all his life as an Orthodox Jew before becoming a follower of Jesus Christ; and Cornelius who was religiously devoted to God, but it was not enough to save him. He undoubtedly had a limited understanding of his sinfulness and God’s holiness, but he was not able to bridge that gap, bringing the two together on his own. God sent an angel to instruct Cornelius and, being the compliant military officer that he was, he readily obeyed. Peter, however, was a different story. God would use a vision of food to reinforce to Peter that a Gentile did not have to first become a Jew before becoming a Christian.

1. What do we know about Cornelius’ belief in God? Vv. 2–8

As God was speaking to Cornelius, He was also speaking to Peter. Miles apart, God would bring them together to fulfill His plan. While on the housetop praying, Peter became hungry (something not at all unusual when believers try to pray). God would use this distraction to get Peter’s attention and speak to him.

2. Briefly recap what Peter saw in his vision and his response. Vv. 9–16

3. Peter had a habit of telling the Lord “no” (Matthew 16:22; John 13:8). Compare Peter’s response: “Not so, Lord!” with Cornelius’: “What is it, Lord?” Who was more open to hearing the word of God? What do you think hindered Peter?

In the Old Testament way of looking at things, there was *holy* and there was *common*. That which was holy was made common when it came into contact with something common. It could then only be made holy again through a ritual cleansing. When something was holy, it was deemed *consecrated*; when it was made common, it became *desecrated*.

For emphasis and so that Peter would get the point, God repeated the vision three times. While Peter wondered within himself what the vision meant, the men from Cornelius' house arrived at the front gate. Notice that Acts 10:13 and 15 both state that a *voice* had spoken to Peter. But in verse 20, we are told that it was God the Holy Spirit speaking to Peter. He was already saved, filled with the Spirit, and mightily used by God, but he was still Peter. God needed to shake him out of his comfort zone in order to use him effectively.

4. Personal: Has God ever had to shake *you* out of your comfort zone in order to get your attention? Briefly state the facts below.

At this point, God had not yet told Peter that his visitors were Gentiles. Normally Jews would not keep company with them. All Peter needed to know was (v. 20): “Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.” Peter responded by extending hospitality to them and going with them the next day.

5. What did Peter find when he arrived in Joppa and met Cornelius? Vv. 24–33

6. What in Peter's message reveals that God had changed his heart? Vv. 34–43

Cornelius prayed and God heard and answered! The result: “Whoever believes!” There was no longer Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, black nor white; all were made one in Christ.

7. While Peter was still speaking, what took place confirming that it was the work of God? What did Peter command to happen? Vv. 44–48

The addition of Gentiles was not a new plan, rather a long-awaited promise fulfilled (Isaiah 60:1–3). Jesus also spoke of the promise of “other sheep, not of this fold” (John 10:16). And He said, “If I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself (John 12:32).

Selah ~

Centuries earlier another Jew named Jonah came to Joppa with a message from God to evangelize the Gentiles. But this prophet of God took a ship in the other direction and refused obedience to the divine call until he was thrown overboard in a violent storm, swallowed by a whale and remained in its belly for the duration of three days before being spat upon the land. Jonah indeed had to learn his lesson the hard way—that it is better to obey the first time. Peter was willing to re-examine his heart and his beliefs and change them to reflect God's heart for the lost. Are you a *Jonah* or a *Peter*? What adjustments do *you* perhaps need to make to be used by God in a greater way?

Day Three: Peter Defends God's Grace

Read Acts 11:1–30 for review.

Acts 11 recounts the acceptance of the gospel by the Gentiles. Now Jews and Gentiles were united and equal in the eyes of God (Gal. 3:26–28). But no sooner did Peter return to Jerusalem than he was met by strong rebuke from the Christians there for eating and fellowshiping with Gentiles. And before we judge them for their response, let's remember that they did not have the letters of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Hebrews that we do to help us understand God's big picture of salvation. Many Jews still believed that in order to be a good Christian they still had to be a good Jew living by the law. It was not just a matter of religious faith but also of cultural habits that would take time to change.

Peter was becoming the "rock" Jesus required him to be. He had nothing to fear in following God's command. As he recapped the entire experience for the believers in Jerusalem, those critical of him changed their heart attitude. In his personal defense, Peter offered three distinct points. Look at the references to follow, summarizing them in your own words.

1. Acts 11:5–11 _____

2. Acts 11:12–15 _____

3. Acts 11:16–17 _____

The conclusion of the matter in chapter 11 is critically important (v. 17): The Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles just as He did upon the Jews at the beginning, revealing God's approval of Peter's ministry to them. Peter had spiritually discerned God's leading and he obediently followed. If God was moving the ministry out to the Gentiles, then who was he that he could withstand God? The lesson here is that any action taken on behalf of God must be in line with the Word of God before we have the assurance of God. In this case it passed the litmus test!

Deeper Discoveries ~

Look at the remainder of the text to understand the responses of the Jewish believers towards the Gentile Christians. Look for a lesson and a personal application. As you do, think about how *you as a believer* ought to relate to others who may differ from you but who are also of the family of God. If you have ever had to defend the grace of God, you know you can only do it by obeying Him.

- a. Acts 11:17–18 *Accepting the Gentiles*: _____

- b. Acts 11:19–26 *Encouraging the Gentiles*: _____

- c. Acts 11:27–30 *Receiving Help from the Gentiles*: _____

Day Four:

Christians: *Jesus People*

The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (11:26b). How did the name *Christian* ever become the title which identified the followers of Jesus? Up to this point in time the believers referred to their teaching as *the Way*, but they did not have an official name for themselves other than that of disciples. But at the time of the first century, there may have been a couple of factors that resulted in the title.

The ending *ian* literally meant “the party of.” So a *Christ-ian* was therefore “of the party of Jesus.” It was tantamount to saying “Jesus-ites” or “Jesus People”—those belonging to the group that followed Jesus. Since the Greeks in Antioch were known for using satirical statements when sneering or heckling people they did not approve of, they no doubt used the name to mock the followers of Jesus. But the “Jesus People” appreciated the title enough that they put a positive spin on it and embraced it.

The name *Christian* appears only twice in the New Testament in addition to Acts 11:26. Look up the other references and in your own words, note what is associated the name . . .

- a. Acts 26:28

- b. 1 Peter 4:16

The title *Christian* is an appropriate one, as the very essence of the gospel is the presentation of Christ to men. Believers have not only accepted a principle or some truth *about* Christ; rather we have received the person of Christ into our hearts. When we bear the name we also bear the identity and responsibility that accompanies it as well. It represents a converted lifestyle involving an inward spiritual transformation that bears witness of our eternal destiny. It is not merely what we are called—it is what and who we are!

- c. Personal: Are *you* willing to be called a *Christian*—one of the “Jesus People”? What does the name represent to you?

- d. Define the responsibility that accompanies representing Christ to others.

“A Christian is a CHRIST-ian. The *ian* stands for **I AM NOTHING**, and all that remains is CHRIST. The container by itself is nothing; it is only precious for what it contains. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7). Happy are those who are daily being transformed into the Lord’s likeness!

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Compose a prayer asking God to show you how *you* are becoming more like your Lord.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
