

LESSON SIX:

The First Spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:32-11:18)

Introduction:

We can see how the effects of the persecution of the church were felt in all parts of Judea and beyond. Christians were now living in various parts of Judea. This kept the apostles quite busy travelling throughout the area, teaching and encouraging the saints in every place where they were found (9:32).

In Lydda (see the map, p.8), Peter found a man, whether a believer or not we do not know, whom he healed in the name of Christ. The effect of that sign through Peter and the occasion it gave to him to proclaim the gospel to the people of that town and the entire area of Sharon (see the map, p.8) must have been typical of the work of the Holy Spirit in those days (9:33-35).

But though the ministry of the gospel was still being directed to the Jews alone, that condition was not to continue very much longer. We can see in this section (9:32-43) the way in which the Lord was leading Peter gradually toward an encounter with a Gentile, so that shortly he would be witnessing to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

God had His eye on a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea and purposed for Peter to witness to him. To that end, He led Peter first to Lydda and next to Joppa, ever closer to Caesarea.

At Joppa, an even greater sign was worked through Peter: a devout lady was raised from the dead (9:36-43). Luke, ever conscious of his chiefly Greek-speaking audience, explains that the woman's name, Tabitha (an Aramaic word), means, in the Greek, "Dorcas," or "gazelle." The deed became known throughout Joppa and was the occasion for many to hear the Word of God and believe (v.42)

Peter's good reception occasioned his stay in Joppa for some time. We know nothing more about Simon, his host, except that he was a tanner.

Presumably, he was also a believer in Christ Jesus (v.43).

Thus, the circumstances were right, in accord with God's own sovereign plan, to bring together Jew and Gentile and to break down the middle wall that separated the two from one another. This wall had existed since the call of Abraham to leave his home and his people and come and follow the Lord.

What Do We Learn in This Passage Concerning the First Spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles?

A. The Preparation of Peter (Acts 10:1-23)

1. *Cornelius' need (Acts 10:1-8)*. Caesarea was a seaport city of Palestine. It was not an old city, like Joppa, but one recently built by Herod the Great. It took twelve years to build the city. Having no natural port, the harbor had to be built of stones. Eventually, the city became the Roman capital of Palestine and thus a key city for reaching out to the Gentiles of the world.

There was a Roman garrison at Caesarea, and Cornelius was a centurion in that garrison. He is further described by Luke as a devout man who feared God with all of his house. The depth of his piety was seen in the fact that he gave much alms to the people and prayed continually to God.

The term used to describe Cornelius is rarely used in the New Testament. It may mean "devout" or "religious." It also is the word used to describe Cornelius' soldier (v.7) and Ananias, who first came to Saul at Damascus (Acts 22:12). Peter later writes that the Lord knows how to deliver the devout (II Peter 2:9). The passage we are studying underlines the truth of that statement!

Cornelius was apparently not a Jewish proselyte, but he was acquainted with Judaism. He was, in some sense, not unlike the Jews of that day who had knowledge of God and who looked to the Lord to deliver them and who needed only to believe that Jesus Christ had come to be their Saviour. Without doubt, the Lord had already begun to work His work of grace in the heart of Cornelius, which is evidenced by the work and prayer of the man.

Thus, Cornelius was like Job, not a Jew nor part of the Jewish background, nevertheless one in whom the Lord brought salvation. But while Job was the *exception* among the Gentiles in his day, Cornelius was soon to become the rule, as the gospel broke forth fully upon the Gentiles in those days.

The Lord was clearly at work in Cornelius' heart. Nevertheless, Cornelius lacked what all devout Jews of the days when Christ came lacked: a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Therefore, the Lord moved to remedy that situation (v.5).

Again we see the readiness of Cornelius as he immediately obeys the Lord's command, much as Abraham had obeyed the Lord when he was commanded to leave his home and follow the Lord (Gen. 12). In both cases, there is evidence of the grace of God working in the heart of the man, enabling him to believe in God and to show that faith by his obedience (v.8).

2. *Peter's need (Acts 10:9-23)*. If Cornelius needed to know about Jesus Christ — that He was the God whom Cornelius sought to serve and that He was the Saviour of all who believe in Him Peter, on the other hand, needed to have his heart changed so that he could be God's vessel for bringing that good news to this Gentile. At this time, Peter viewed all Gentiles to be unclean and off limits, so far as the sharing of the gospel was concerned.

The same God who worked in Cornelius to cause him to send for Peter was, at the same time, working in the heart of Peter to prepare him for his next assignment from the Lord.

Peter was praying on the housetop at noon (v.9). Since it was time for his midday meal, Peter waited for food and suddenly fell into a trance. The word used here for "trance," in the Greek, is the word from which our word "ecstasy" comes. Literally, it means "to stand outside of one's self" (to be beside oneself). Sometimes the word is translated simply "amazement." But in Acts, it is used to describe unusual experiences, such as Peter's here (compare also 11:5) or Paul's later (Acts 22:17).

The vision Peter saw while in this trance was clearly designed to change his attitude about the clean and the unclean (10:11-16). Understandably, Peter, like all Jews, had a keen sense of what was clean and what was unclean, so far as the food he ate was concerned. God Himself had impressed this upon His people in the Old Testament, as we read particularly in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

We pointed out at the time we studied these portions of Scripture that the Lord sought by this visible distinction to teach them the difference between the holy and the unholy. They were called to be a holy people. In order to impress this upon them, the Lord designated some of the creatures He had made "clean" and others He designated "unclean." As the Israelites' eating habits, therefore, were different from those around them, so they would be continually reminded that they, too, were called to be different, to be separated unto the Lord, a holy people.

But as the time of the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell in every believer, drew near. Jesus began to teach the people that they no longer needed to regard some foods as clean and others as unclean (Mark 7:19). The presence of the Holy Spirit in His children would continually remind them that they were the children of God.

The Jews, however, preferring the outward symbol to the inner truth, applied the principle of clean and unclean to their own relationships with Gentiles. There was built up over the years prejudice against the Gentiles. They were regarded as unclean and outside the realm of salvation which only Jews were privileged to have.

The Lord, this day, showed to Peter that he could no longer continue to think of meats as "clean" and "unclean." What God had made could no longer be viewed by him as unclean (v.15). The fact that the vision was repeated twice more brings to mind the prominence of the number *three* in Peter's experience: *three* denials of Christ, *three* confessions that he loves Christ, and now, *three* times, the vision that obliterates the distinction between the clean and the unclean (v.16).

Now, *three* men were at the door seeking Peter, while he pondered the meaning of that vision (v.17). Led by the Spirit, he was prepared to receive and to follow the three men even before he knew that they were Gentiles (vs.19,20). When he understood what the men wanted, he began to realize the reason for the dream. Up until now, it had not entered the mind of Peter to share the gospel with a Gentile. Suddenly, he saw that was exactly what the Lord expected him to do; and without further prejudice, he was willing to go (v.23).

In this section, we have seen both *Cornelius' need* for more truth so that he could come to be complete in the Lord and *Peter's need* for the removal of a long standing prejudice in his heart, which was present in the hearts of all Jews of that time.

God, in His sovereign will, was moving to meet both of those needs as the meeting between Peter and Cornelius drew nearer.

B. The First Witness to the Gentiles (Acts 10:23-43)

1. *Peter's readiness to witness (10:23-29)*. Peter apparently wished to be accompanied by some of the brethren in Joppa (v.23). This was wise, since what he was about to do was bound to cause controversy in the church. He anticipated criticism of his going to speak to a Gentile about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was well to have witnesses to everything that happened.

Peter departed readily to Caesarea with the messenger from Cornelius. And Cornelius was waiting for them eagerly.

It should not surprise us that Cornelius fell down before Peter to worship him (v.25). Remember that Cornelius was a man who had been surrounded by paganism all of his life and who had just been told that God was pleased with him and would send to him a man called Peter. He would assume that this Peter, whoever he was, was one in great favor with the God he desired to please.

Peter assured him that he, also, was a mere man and not an object of worship. Peter undoubtedly

expected the man to behave as a pagan and was not surprised by his behaviour.

Peter, with some sign of misapprehension, began to speak, reminding Cornelius and those gathered with him that what he (Peter) was doing was unlawful for a Jew to do (v.28). Yet, Peter showed here the same boldness that he had shown earlier. When confronted by Jewish unbelievers. He must obey God rather than man (v.28).

Peter was still not certain just why he was there and inquired what Cornelius had in mind in sending for him (v.29).

2. *Cornelius' readiness to listen (10:30-33)*. Cornelius evidently did not know, either, just what was to be done (vs.30-33).

Here stood *Peter*, never before having even dreamed of standing before Gentiles to witness to them and *Cornelius*, knowing only that God wanted him to hear what Peter had to say. It was one of those momentous events in history that was to change the direction of the gospel and of the history of the church radically. Before now, the Word of God had been proclaimed only among a very small group of people in the whole earth. Now, it was about to break those ancient bounds and spread to the nations of the world. Doubtlessly, few, if any of those standing there that day, realized what a moment they were witnessing. Cornelius was ready, Peter was ready, and the witness to the Gentiles began.

3. *Peter's witness given (10:34-43)*. We listen closely to hear every word of Peter. What would he say? Would the message he brought be any different?

Peter first declared what he had learned in this experience (vs.34-35). His mind may well have returned to Deuteronomy, where God had declared Himself to be one who does not regard persons (show favors; Deut. 10:17). Now, the significance of that suddenly broke upon Peter.

Peter was able to draw from this truth a conclusion that God was determined to save out of all nations those who pleased Him. This was nothing new; it had been said hundreds of times in Scripture, but it was a truth which was generally ignored by Jews, until

this moment (v.35). We can learn from this that God does, indeed, know those who trust in Him, in whose hearts He has worked; and He will see to it that they *all* come to a saving knowledge of Him through Jesus Christ. Not one will fall, as Jesus knew, when He spoke of those whom the Father had given to Him.

Peter assumed that those before him had heard about Jesus of Nazareth. He did *not* assume that they believed in Jesus but that they had heard about Him and His message (vs.36-38).

Peter's own description of the message Jesus bore is interesting. He affirmed, first of all, that Jesus is Lord of all (v.36). He is God, the God Cornelius worshipped. Jesus' message was *good tidings of peace*. That message of peace was first brought by the angels, when Jesus was born; but, as we noted then, it was based on the very title given to Jesus in the Old Testament: the Prince of Peace (v.36).

He described Jesus in terms of how he and the others had first come to know Him. He was *Jesus of Nazareth*, showing evidence that God had sent Him, by His *power* and the *presence* of the *Holy Spirit* with Him (v.38).

He described Jesus as *one going about doing good*, healing many (v.38). He had evident *power over the devil* and showed clearly that *God was with Him* (v.38). Peter is describing how it came to be that he and the others viewed Jesus and ultimately came to believe that He was indeed the Christ, as Peter himself had confessed in Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16).

Next, Peter explained how it is that he now stands before Cornelius witnessing to these things. Peter explains that he and the other apostles were witnesses of all that Jesus did during His earthly ministry (v.39). They were also witnesses of His death at the hands of the Jews (note that Peter does not implicate the Romans at all in this crime).

He moves swiftly on to assure Cornelius that Jesus, whom the Jews killed, rose on the third day and appeared not to all men but to those through whom God had chosen to work (vs.40,41).

That same Jesus charged the apostles to preach to the people and to declare that Jesus is the one

ordained to be the Judge of the living and the dead (v.42). Here, Peter may have had in mind the words of Psalm 2, which record this ordination of the Son by the Father.

Finally, Peter assured Cornelius and those with him that the prophets of Israel had declared beforehand that through Jesus' name, *all* who believe on Him will be forgiven their sins (v.43). He certainly could have in mind such passages as Isaiah 53; Micah 5,6; Zechariah 12,13, and many more.

He had done it. He had said to this Gentile that Jesus Christ came to save Gentiles as well as Jews. And while we have seen in our Old Testament studies many passages that say the same thing, here, for the first time, a witness for Jesus Christ declares it directly to a Gentile. The door was opening. The tents of Shem were about to be spread wide to receive a multitude of others who would now come to God through Jesus Christ (compare Isaiah 54:2,3; Gen. 9:27).

C. The Evidence of Gentile Conversion (Acts 10:44-48)

There can be no doubt that Cornelius experienced a true conversion that day, just as sure as the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, some years before. The evidence of the conversion is shown to the disciples of Christ in no uncertain terms.

1. The baptism of the Holy Spirit (10:44-46). Even while Peter was speaking, and without giving any kind of invitation or challenge to Cornelius to believe, faith toward Jesus Christ came into his heart. The evidence of that faith was the coming of the Holy Spirit not only upon Cornelius but also upon the rest who heard (v.44). It was the Holy Spirit, who, through that Word proclaimed by Peter, worked the work of grace in the heart of Cornelius, enabling him and the others to believe in the Lord Jesus.

The response of the Jewish Christians was the same that Peter experienced when he was in his trance. The same Greek word is used here and translated "amazed." They were beside themselves, sensing something momentous. The same Holy Spirit who had been poured out upon believing Jews was now clearly

seen to have been poured out upon Gentiles as well. God showed, indeed, that He is no respecter of persons (v.45).

The witnesses with Peter that day knew that the Spirit had come upon the Gentiles by the speaking in tongues, as they magnified the Lord (v.46). We noted earlier, in connection with the conversion of the Samaritans, that whenever the Lord brought the gospel to a new kind of people, He did so with visible signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. Each new group: Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile, was to experience the same kind of coming of the Holy Spirit upon them, accompanied with visible signs, so that they who already possessed the gospel might know that it was now properly and fully passed on to others. But this was the exception and not the norm. Most conversions recorded in Acts do not mention a visible coming of the Holy Spirit accompanied by signs such as speaking in tongues. Ordinarily, believers receive the Holy Spirit, simultaneously with their conversion.

2. The baptism in the name of Jesus (10:46-48). Peter challenged the Jewish Christians who were there to forbid that these should be baptized (v.46). After all, they had received the Holy Spirit, which water baptism simply symbolized. The sacrament of baptism pointed to man's need for the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, which only God could perform. Obviously, since the Holy Spirit was now dwelling in these Gentiles, they had clearly been cleansed by the Spirit's application of the blood of Jesus to their hearts.

Thus they were baptized in the name of Jesus, sealing outwardly what the Holy Spirit had already sealed in their hearts: that they were believers in Jesus Christ. Since the Holy Spirit was *poured out upon* those people, it is probable that they were baptized with water by *pouring or sprinkling* (v.45).

D. The Church's Realization of the Genuineness of Gentile Conversion (Acts 11:1-18)

Peter was right in his caution, when he went to Cornelius. He was wise in bringing others with him to witness what was to happen there. For as soon as news

of what had happened there reached Jerusalem, there was trouble.

1. Peter challenged (11:1-3). Both the apostles and the other believers in Jerusalem and Judea heard what had happened in Caesarea, though it is not certain that they got the whole truth. They did hear rightly that the Gentiles both heard and received the Word of God (v.1).

They waited for Peter; and some of those, described as "of the circumcision," began to contend with Peter. Actually, the word used to describe their contention with Peter is the word which is often translated "to doubt" or "be hesitant." They were very unsettled by what they heard. Had Peter actually gone into the house of uncircumcised men and eaten with them (v.3)?

The Jewish Christians were very strong on the view that one could not become a Christian until he had been circumcised. This suggests that they viewed the Samaritans and the proselytes as approved for conversion because they were circumcised. They had outwardly conformed to the Jewish law. Had not God told Abraham that only those who were circumcised would be fit for God's family (Gen. 17:14)?

Here, as elsewhere, the Jews were very concerned primarily with the outward versus the inward. They viewed the outward circumcision as that which was chiefly important. To conform to that, therefore, made one eligible to be God's child. But from the beginning, the Lord had given circumcision as a sacrament, an outward sign of an internal need: the circumcision (cleansing) of their hearts. God rejected Israel because, though the people were circumcised outwardly (in the flesh), inwardly, they were as uncircumcised as the pagans (Hab. 2:16; Jer. 9:26).

2. Peter defends his actions (11:4-17). Peter's method for defending himself was to brace himself with the six men who had witnessed all that happened, men from Joppa who had accompanied him to Caesarea and now, evidently, to Jerusalem (v.12).

He then related exactly how it had come to pass that he had gone to the Gentile's house, witnessed to

him and his family and baptized them, thus bringing them into full fellowship with other believers (vs.4-15).

He tells us that when these things were happening, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them as he spoke, he thought of the words regarding John the Baptist. Jesus had contrasted His own baptism to John's. Jesus' baptism was to be of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; compare Matt. 3:11).

Furthermore, Peter acknowledged that the Lord gave to the Gentiles a gift like He gave the disciples at Pentecost: the ability to speak in tongues. This would seem to indicate that the gift of speaking in tongues was the gift of speaking in *known* tongues (languages) of the world (v.17). This further strengthens the concept that the gift of speaking in tongues never was a gift of speaking in meaningless syllables but always in a known tongue. It was therefore a symbolic sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in giving to the church gifts to proclaim God's message to all the nations and tongues of the world.

Peter now reasoned with his hearers in Jerusalem, as he had once reasoned with the Jewish persecutors of the faith: Who was I to withstand God (v.17; compare 4:19,20)?

Peter's defense, therefore, was that the Lord had prepared his heart to do what he had done. He did not run ahead of the Lord but was always following God's lead, responding to each new situation as the Lord had taught him to do prior to that experience.

3. *The church convinced of the Gentiles' inclusion in the gospel (Acts 11:18).* The "convincing" has to be viewed as qualified. The initial response to Peter's argument was that the Christians of the circumcision group held their peace. It does not imply that they were in complete agreement with Peter. They *did* glorify the Lord for what He was doing in their presence and seemed, almost reluctantly, to acknowledge that God was granting repentance and eternal life to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

They could not at that time realize what this would all mean. In the latter part of that century, it would become apparent that as more Gentiles believed, the Jews less and less came to believe in Jesus. By the

end of the century, the church was almost completely a Gentile church.

Nor were the theological arguments in the church over. Paul and Barnabas, after their first missionary journey, would have to go to Jerusalem and face this issue all over again. And Paul would be plagued by Jews who tried to preach a compromising "other" gospel in Galatia and elsewhere. But we shall see to those matters later.

The important thing to see now is that God used Peter to open the door to the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles, but it would be Saul (Paul) who walked through that door to a full life of service as the apostle to the Gentiles, as Peter and John were apostles chiefly to the Jews.

The History and Progress of Missions in the First Quarter of the Third Century (201-225):

The third century of the church began with a severe persecution of the Christians under the authority of *Septimius Severus*, the emperor of Rome at that time. He sent forth an edict against both Christians and Jews.

It was this persecution that forced *Clement of Alexandria*, one of the last of the apologists of the second century, to leave his work at the catechetical school in Alexandria. Though most of his greatest work was done in the second century, we mention him here. He did much to bring about the marriage between Greek philosophy and Mosaic law. This would set the course of theological thought in the church for more than a millennium.

In Alexandria, where he had been converted by the head of the Christian catechetical school, he succeeded the head of that school and taught there from 180 until the persecutions of Severus. He appealed particularly to the intellectuals and favored the concept of two levels of Christians: those who live on the level of the Law of God and those who live on the level of the gospel. He paved the way, along with others, for the rise of monasticism, a view that the higher level of Christianity draws away from the world and meditates on the gospel and the holy life.

When he left Alexandria, his pupil, Origen, took his place as head of the catechetical school. We will mention him further in the next lesson.

Another notable figure in the early formation of the church was Tertullian. He was born in Carthage and given an excellent education in that city, second only to Rome in the Empire. Though there was a strong church there, *Tertullian* did not become a Christian until he had first gone to Rome to further his education and then returned to his home. He soon came to be a leading member of the church in Carthage.

Most of the rest of his life was dedicated to writing as an apologist and defender of Christianity. Among his accomplishments in writing were the first book on baptism and a work against Marcionism.

He took an opposite position to Clement of Alexandria, seeing little in common between Christianity and Greek philosophy.

Tragically, in his later years, Tertullian left the church and joined a heretical movement known as Montanism, a group that declared the end of the world to be very near and that stressed a strict moral code, condemning the church. Later he left that group and formed his own sect.

Tertullian apparently left the orthodox church to join the Montanists primarily as a protest to the lax morals he saw in the church and even in the clergy. But the church never forgave him for his departure.

Septimius Severus died in 211 and was succeeded by *Caracalla*, and the persecutions were relaxed for a time. Caracalla granted full Roman citizenship to all in the Roman Empire, in 212.

During this period, God was preparing further for the expansion of the church, as we can see by the birth of *Gregory Thaumaturgus*, who would be a notable missionary to Pontus, later in the century.

By the end of this period, in 225, there is evidence of some 20 or more bishops established in Mesopotamia, expanding and expounding the Word there. But in the same period, in 216, a man named Mani was born who would establish a sect that would oppose Christianity vehemently in Persia.

Meditation on and Application of the Scripture Lesson:

1. Am I being led by the Holy Spirit? What does God's Spirit lead us to do? How does He lead us?
2. Are there prejudices in my heart that prevent my witnessing to or seeking to win certain peoples to Christ?
3. Have I ever opened my house to a minister of the Word or to one traveling through on some mission for Christ?
4. Do I think some people today are beyond the reach of the gospel?
5. Have I known one like Cornelius who seemed to be very devout and religious, but who did not know Jesus Christ as his Saviour? How should I respond to this person?
6. Do I have regular times set for prayer? Do I view them as particular meeting times with the Lord?
7. Do I have a sense of the holy and the unholy? Do I consider all unbelievers to be unholy? If so, does this mean that I have nothing to do with them? What would be the proper attitude toward unbelievers? Toward things that are unholy?
8. Do I view some foods as unclean and avoid them?
9. Have I ever looked back on a meeting I had with another, in which I was able to witness to that individual, and see that God's hand had been leading that person and me to the meeting?
10. How does the knowledge that God is no respecter of persons affect me?
11. Have I considered the testimony of Peter to Cornelius as a good model for witnessing to others?
12. Have I ever been amazed at the conversion of one I did not expect to be converted? Has it caused any doubt in me about the reality of that conversion?
13. Can I defend my actions and behaviour as obedience to the Lord? Do I daily search His Word for His leadership in my life?

Peter's Evangelistic Travels

