

Peter remained in Joppa for several days after travelling there at the disciples' urging (9:43). Perhaps his intention was to rest and reflect on what had transpired; perhaps it was to visit the saints in that city and spend time with his new friend and brother Simon. Whatever Peter's personal reasons for lingering in Joppa, the Spirit had His own purpose in it – a purpose of monumental significance for the Church. The Father, in His Son and by the Spirit, had determined to reveal Himself to a Roman Gentile residing in Caesarea, and Peter was His chosen instrument for that encounter (10:1ff).

These two men had radically different backgrounds and no prior knowledge of one another; indeed, in the natural realm, any contact they'd have had would have been minimal and passing. Beyond the culture divide, the Law of Moses had erected a wall of separation between Peter and Cornelius, so that nothing short of divine intervention would bring them together. But this is exactly what God had in store: *He was going to bring this Jew and Roman together in the same place by means of a supernatural vision; He would then unite them as "one new man" by His Spirit.* This true, spiritual union of Jew and Gentile – which Luke first indicated by a remote encounter on a desert road – was to serve as the foundational paradigm for Yahweh's new household of faith: the fulfilled Israel promised by all the prophets.

3. God had appointed a day of salvation for Cornelius, and that day had been long in the making. Luke's account seems to suggest that Cornelius' prayers had provoked God's attention in the first instance (10:1-4), but a closer consideration reveals divine initiative and action from first to last.

a. First of all, Luke doesn't say that God was answering a particular petition; the angel simply affirms to Cornelius that his devotion hadn't been lost upon the Lord. He had indeed taken note of his continual prayers and pious deeds.

b. Cornelius' piety was sincere and substantial, being of such a character as to influence his whole household (10:2). Luke described him as a "God-fearing" man, which implies that he was well familiar with the God of Israel. At the same time, Cornelius was a member of the Italian cohort (regiment) of Caesar's army, and his Roman name points to his being Roman by birth. He probably grew up in Italy without any close exposure to Judaism, but God's hand had brought him to Palestine where he became familiar with the Jewish people, the Law of Moses, and the God they worshipped.

Cornelius was a devout man, but not a proselyte; *indeed, had this been the case, the whole episode with Peter would have been incoherent and unsuited to Luke's purpose, which was demonstrating that God was now beginning to fulfill His ancient promise to gather the Gentiles into His household along with the sons of Israel.* Cornelius was about to be joined to Christ and His Church as a Gentile, which represented a monumental shift in the nature and constitution of God's covenant people. Non-descendants coming into the Abrahamic household was nothing new, but such individuals were included on the basis of their physical alignment with the covenant people through circumcision (ref. Genesis 17:9-13) and, during the theocracy, their commitment to the Law of Moses.

In a word, Gentiles entered the covenant household by becoming proselytes to Judaism. But now that was all changing; God was going to fill His house with Gentiles as well as Jews – not Gentile proselytes, but Gentiles in their own right. This may appear to be a departure from the previous requirements for participating in the covenant and its blessings, but those same demands continue on in the composite Church, only now as *Christified*.

- Every member of the covenant household had to be circumcised because this was the sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:1ff). In this regard, Abrahamic descent was completely irrelevant; natural son or not, no one could obtain a share in the Abrahamic Covenant without sharing in the covenant sign (cf. Exodus 4:19-26, 12:43-49; Joshua 5:1ff).

The same requirement continues on in the age of fulfillment: Every member of the covenant must still be circumcised, but with the true circumcision of the inner man done by Christ through His Spirit (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 with Romans 2:28-29; Colossians 2:9-12).

- Likewise, every member of the covenant house of Israel was obligated to embrace the Law of Moses. The reason is that the Mosaic Law was the covenantal contract by which Yahweh fulfilled – at the corporate level of the nation of Israel – His promise to be the God of Abraham’s descendants. In effect, Yahweh had promised to be a Father to Abraham’s offspring, even as they would be His sons, and the covenant at Sinai formalized that arrangement. Therefore, no one – Jew or Gentile – could enjoy that privileged Abrahamic status without binding himself to the covenant by which the Father-son relationship was established (cf. Exodus 4:22-23 with 24:1-11; cf. also Isaiah 1:1-4, 30:8-9, 63:7-9; Hosea 11:1).

As with circumcision, the obligation of covenant fidelity has not been altered or abrogated. Membership in the covenant community still demands “keeping the covenant,” but the covenant that Christ has ratified in His own blood (2 Corinthians 3:1ff). *That covenant doesn’t abrogate the Sinai Covenant, but neither does it clarify or in any way perpetuate it.*

Even while the Sinai Covenant stood intact, Yahweh promised a day in which it would yield to a “new covenant” – a covenant crucially different from its predecessor (Jeremiah 31:31ff). The Sinai Covenant portrayed and prescribed an intimate relationship between Yahweh and His covenant “sons,” but it was unable to effect it. God had fulfilled His commitment to be a Father and Husband to Israel, but they had proven to be incorrigibly wayward sons and perpetual adulteresses (Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1-2).

Jew and proselyte had become covenant sons by embracing the Law of Moses, but that sonship was merely outward. Now sonship *in truth* was being realized by entering into Christ’s everlasting, effectual covenant.

- c. The day of salvation had arrived for Cornelius, and this involved coming to know Jesus Christ. Like the sons of Israel, Cornelius knew Yahweh as the God of Israel revealed in the Old Covenant definition and prescription, but that was insufficient. Now that the “fullness of the times” had come and the Spirit of Christ had been poured out upon the world, Cornelius – as every human being, Jew as well as Gentile – needed to know God *in Christ*. Up until that time, Cornelius had honored God and sought to enlarge his knowledge of Him through prayer and pious deeds; now God was about to grant that desire through Peter’s gospel.
4. God sent His angel to Cornelius and instructed him to dispatch messengers to Joppa to find Peter and return with him. When the angel departed, Cornelius immediately called for two of his servants and a soldier under his command and sent them on their way (10:3-8). The Lord’s preparation of Cornelius was complete; now He needed to prepare Peter for what was to come. And so, while Cornelius waited anxiously in Caesarea and his messengers travelled along the road to Joppa, the Spirit went ahead of them to get Peter ready for their arrival. A divine intervention moved Cornelius to send for Peter, and another one would convince Peter to answer that summons (ref. 10:17-20).

The following day, as Cornelius’ men were drawing near to Joppa, Peter was ascending the stairs to the roof of Simon’s house to pray. And as he was praying, Peter began to overcome with hunger and found his thoughts turning to the preparations for the evening meal. Distracted by the sudden urges of his empty stomach, Peter’s attention was focused on food, but the Spirit had a different purpose for those hunger pangs; He was going to use them as the backdrop for the vision and instruction to come.

While he sat thinking about food, the Spirit brought Peter into a trance state and began to unfold His vision to him. The vision consisted of a visual manifestation accompanied by a directive and subsequent explanation – words that would have to be repeated three times to break through Peter’s entrenched convictions. *Supernatural intervention was needed to get Cornelius past his Old Covenant understanding and mindset, and the same was true with Peter*. This pillar of the Church who had so boldly preached Christ and His gospel was himself in need of instruction. For all his insight and the power of the Spirit in him, Peter had not yet come to recognize the fullness and impact of Jesus’ work for the kingdom He had inaugurated; he did not yet have a vision for Christ’s composite Church.

- a. Peter’s vision consisted of what appeared to be a large sheet descending from the sky filled with every sort of four-footed, winged and crawling creature. Most importantly – and evident from the accompanying command – these creatures included ones which the Law of Moses declared to be unclean (10:10-12).
- b. While Peter looked on, dumbfounded and wondering what this vision might mean, he heard a voice from heaven ordering him to arise and prepare a meal from the creatures presented before him (10:13).
- c. Peter knew the Mosaic Law and its prescription, and believing this vision to be of God, his first thought was likely that he was being tested.

But Peter wasn't about to fail the test; nothing unclean or unholy had ever passed through his lips, and that wasn't going to change now (10:14). How shocked he must have been by the divine response to his refusal; he thought he was being tested, but now he realized the command to kill and eat was sincere.

- d. Peter was left totally bewildered (10:17); for fifteen hundred years Yahweh had demanded that His people distinguish between the clean and unclean. Going far beyond the issue of acceptable foods, this distinction was woven into every aspect of Israel's existence and life with God, from the sacrifices they offered to all sorts of practices, conditions and circumstances by which a person was rendered defiled or left/made ceremonially "clean" (ref. Leviticus 11-15).

The matter of purity was at the very heart of the covenant; how could God now set its definition aside? Viewing the situation in terms of the Law's categories of clean and unclean, Peter couldn't imagine eating the things presented before him. But his understanding also left him no avenue or resource for processing what he was being directed to do. The God who had given the Law would never call a man to violate it, and this dilemma must have suggested to Peter that perhaps God wasn't the source of the vision after all.

The Spirit knew the quandary in Peter's mind and answered it directly. He wasn't calling Peter to violate the Law, but neither was He contradicting His long-standing demand to keep back from what is unclean. The pure and impeccable God could never set aside such a requirement; what He *can* do – what Peter needed to recognize – is that He is able to make clean that which formerly was unclean. Jesus Himself had declared all foods clean (Mark 7:14-19), and that declaration pointed forward to the larger significance of His messianic work.

- Food is a physical commodity that only speaks symbolically to the issue of defilement. Everything God has made is good and was intended by Him to be received and enjoyed. He established a comprehensive system of "clean" and "unclean" solely to teach the sons of Israel crucial truths about Himself and what is required of those who will dwell with Him.
- God demands purity of His people, but in the pedagogical era when the covenant "sons" remained defiled in their alienation, that prescription and obligation could go no further than external considerations. Nevertheless, the issue was always purity of heart and mind – a concern that external behaviors and rituals could never address (ref. Hebrews 9:1-10).

Under the Sinai Covenant, "cleanness" was tied to certain conditions and behaviors and was therefore confined to the covenant community of Israel. Gentiles were unclean because they operated outside the covenant's prescription. But, in truth, Jew and Gentile were alike unclean, but now God had brought purging and restoration in His Son. Symbol had yielded to substance: Israel's ceremonial cleanness was now the inward, authentic purity of Adam's race.

- e. Peter, like the community of Jewish believers that comprised the early Church, recognized that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised in all the Scriptures. He understood that God had sent Him as His Servant to accomplish the redemption of the sons of Israel and that, as the promised Son of David, He had taken His throne at the right hand of Yahweh. His enthronement meant the inauguration of the messianic kingdom – a fact further substantiated by the outpouring of the Spirit. God had indeed fulfilled His promises to Israel; *what Peter failed to understand was how that fulfillment implicated the Gentiles.*

Peter's citation of Joel's prophecy on the day of Pentecost suggests that he understood God's purpose to save the Gentiles (ref. 2:17). That conclusion is further reinforced by his summary explanation and exhortation (2:39). At the same time, it is at least possible that Peter conceived of the "all flesh" and "all who are far off" designations in terms of *all Israel*, and that would certainly explain his attitude toward the Gentiles and the need of this vision to redirect his thinking (cf. 10:28-29, 11:12). *But a better explanation is that, while Peter had some sense that the Gentiles were to have a share in Christ, he still perceived that participation through "Old Covenant eyes."*

This misperception can best be explained by considering Paul's assertion that God's revelation during the time of preparation didn't fully disclose the Church of the New Covenant. This "mystery of Christ" which was formerly hidden is the fact that the Gentiles are "*fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus*" (ref. Ephesians 3:1-6).

This obscurity has led some to go so far as to say that the Church cannot be discerned from the Old Testament scriptures. The truth is that the Old Testament explicitly and broadly speaks of the salvation/ingathering of the Gentiles along with Israel and Judah (cf. Isaiah 11:1ff, 19:19-25, 49:1ff; Amos 9:11-12; Micah 4:1-5; etc.). *The "mystery" in the Old Testament's revelation pertains to the **new nature and unifying principle** of the people of God in the messianic age.*

Again, the covenant community always included non-Israelites, but only as proselytes to Judaism. Gentiles entered God's household by adopting Jewish identity in circumcision and fidelity to the Mosaic Law. They became Jewish in practice, though not in physical genealogy. *The natural assumption for the early Jewish Christians was that the Gentile ingathering into Christ's Church would take the same form.* From this vantage point, the Jewish Christian community would have embraced Gentile converts to Christ as long as they became "clean" by adopting the Jewish practices prescribed by the Law of Moses.

What Paul recognized was that God was now constructing a composite household comprised of Jews and Gentiles *as such*. Both groups were made clean by Christ, but also rendered "one new man" in Him (Ephesians 2:11ff). The mystery of the Church was that the unifying principle of the people of God in the messianic age is no longer Jewishness, but *Christiformity*: Abrahamic sonship in truth.