



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Sermon Notes

*The Spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles, Part IV*

*Peter Defends His Actions*

Acts 11:1-18

August 19, 2007

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- ❑ In today's Church, many, if not most, Christians believe that a direct correlation exists between one's actions and God's tangible 'blessings.' Therefore, [as this 'logic' goes] if one is obedient to God's will, God will tangibly bless him or her, and things will be 'good.' However, if the individual is, in some way outside of God's will, then they are outside the sphere of God's blessings, and will therefore experience suffering and difficulties.
- ❑ Thus, if someone suffers in any way, then it must be a result of God's curse due to the individual's disobedience.

- ❑ This was the logic of Job's friend in the Old Testament, and it is the logic of many Christians today [although, no doubt, few of us would admit it]. However, this is not the teaching of Scripture.

## I. The Setting: God's Will is Accomplished – the Gentiles Believe

- ❑ The greatest example in Scripture where obedience actually led to suffering was certainly in the life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, each of the apostles also suffered greatly for the cause of Christ. Far from being evidence of the cursing of God, the sufferings of Christ's followers actually is a sign that they are walking with their Lord.
- ❑ Peter was such an apostle. He obeyed the Lord's calling and proclaimed the Gospel [the 'keys of the kingdom'] to the Gentiles in Cornelius's home [Acts 10:34-43]. As a result, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles [Acts 10:44-47], and they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and were ushered into the New Community of faith through the work of Christ.

## II. The Protest: Professing Believers Challenge Peter's Actions

- ❑ In **Acts 11:1**, Luke writes that 'the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.'
- ❑ Then, in **11:2**, Luke states, 'when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'
  - Although Peter had obeyed God's commands, he had violated Jewish tradition.
  - According to F.F. Bruce, Peter's actions [of eating with Gentiles in the home of Cornelius] constituted 'revolutionary behavior.'
  - Eating with a Gentile, especially in a Gentile home, was strictly forbidden in Jewish tradition. The reason was because Gentiles were considered by Jews as unclean 'dogs' by nature of simply being non-Jewish. Further, their dietary practices violated the Levitical law and were therefore considered unclean and unholy as well. To dine with them would be nothing short [in the legalistic Jewish mind] of an act of desecration of one's self.
  - The phrase, 'those who were circumcised' likely refers to **Jewish Christians** in Jerusalem.
  - Thus, these new Christians still held to their traditions, expecting Gentile converts to undergo circumcision before they could be considered 'first-class' Christians. The reason for this was most likely because at this point in time, Christianity was considered a Jewish sect.
  - However, Peter's vision and subsequent leading by the Holy Spirit revealed to him that such man-made barriers were in violation of God's revealed will. Because of the

work of Christ, no man was to be considered ‘unclean’ or ‘unholy.’ Jewish Christians were to consider Gentile Christians as equals, brothers and sisters in Christ, saved by God in the same manner as themselves – by grace through faith in Christ.

- Furthermore, the scene at Cornelius’s home demonstrated that the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles in exactly the same manner as He had the Jews at Pentecost, thus revealing the equality of the two groups of people.
- Yet, this sort of ‘radical’ thinking [that Jews and Gentiles were equal] was something that was difficult for these Jerusalemite Christians.

E.M. Blaiklock writes:

‘[Peter’s actions] required...a major readjustment of all thinking for a people [the Jews], fiercely conscious of racial privilege and stirred anew by the thought that the Messiah of promise had appeared and spoken, readily to abandon the thought that a unique national destiny approached fulfillment. To accept a re-interpretation of ancient prophecies, to admit a spiritual rendering of old promises accepted and cherished as literal and material, to see Israel melt into the church, and the minority of the chosen lose identity, and privilege, and special place in a global organization, called for insight, faith, self-abnegation, magnanimity, and a transcendent view of God rarely found in any but the most enlightened souls.’

### **III. The Explanation: Peter Explains His Actions to his Fellow Jews**

- After being challenged by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Peter explained his actions ‘in orderly sequence...’ [**Verse 4**]

#### **a. Peter was Praying**

- The first part of Peter’s defense included the fact that he was praying [**Verse 5**], ‘in the city of Joppa.’
  - One of the primary reasons why we are to pray is that it is an act of humility where by we commit ourselves to the will and purposes of God.
  - Prayer is one of the primary ways that God has given us to align our wills with His. It is our way of speaking to Him, proclaiming His greatness and laying our supplications before Him.
  - We are not told the ‘substance’ of Peter’s prayer in Joppa in the home of Simon the tanner; however, we can most certainly deduce it was through his prayer that the Lord prepared him for his vision.
  - When seeking to determine the will of God, we should always begin with through prayer and a humble, contrite heart.

**b. Peter Received a Revelation and a Command**

- Next, Peter describes his vision from God [**Verses 5-10**]:

I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’

This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.’

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- The modern reader must not forget, when reading the Book of Acts, that the events chronicled, here, by Luke are once-for-all events in redemption history. As such, they are never-to-be-repeated milestones in the initial spread of the God. Therefore, they do not serve as normative examples to the modern-day believer.
- However, this account does serve as God’s revelation of Himself to us today.
- What Peter received was revelation. What we have in the Scriptures today – all 66 books – is God’s fully, completed revelation.
- Thus, just as Peter received his guidance, in his mission, through revelation [that is, the Old Testament, as well as visions like this one], so we receive our authoritative and sufficient guidance through God’s revelation as well, that is the Bible.

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- Peter proceeds to give his listeners a summary of the events of Acts 10:9-48.
  - He begins by describing the object ‘like a great sheet’ that lowered from the sky [**Verse 5**].
    - According to one scholar [Rackham], ‘the sheet is the church’, which will ‘contain all races and classes without any distinction at all.’
  - Then, Peter speaks of the different animals, both clean and unclean [**Verse 6**], as well as the voice which said, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ [**Verse 7**]
  - Peter concludes his description of the vision by emphasizing his objection to the vision, and the Lord’s response [‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’] [**Verses 8-9**]

- It seems as though Peter is saying to his ‘circumcised’ audience that ‘I used to think the same way you did until God spoke to me.’
- This was, indeed, a personal testimony of a personal encounter that Peter had with the living God.

### c. The Spirit Led Peter [in accordance with His Word]

- Following his description of his vision, Peter said [**Verse 11**], ‘And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.
- He continued, [**Verse 12**], ‘The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings...’
  - In accordance with the revelation that Peter received, the Holy Spirit commanded Peter to go with the men from Caesarea ‘without misgivings.’
  - Once again, the Holy Spirit always acts, as is clear here, in perfect accordance with the Word of God and the will of the Father.

### d. Peter Obeyed the LORD

- Then, in **Verse 12**, Peter said, ‘...These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.’
  - Along with Peter, therefore, there were seven men who went from Joppa to Caesarea [this is the first time that the reader knows this].
  - According to William Barclay, the number seven was significant because ‘in Egyptian law, which the Jews would know well, seven witnesses were necessary completely to prove a case’, while ‘in Roman law, which they would also know well, seven seals were necessary to authenticate a really important document like a will.’
  - Yet, the significance that Luke is conveying in this passage is that, although his tradition said another thing, Peter obeyed the will of the Lord as revealed in his vision, and well as through the Person of the Holy Spirit.

### e. The LORD Honored the Proclamation of the Gospel

- Then, in **Verses 13-14** Peter described the circumstances surrounding Cornelius’s vision, and how the LORD had sovereignly prepared the Centurion for Peter’s visit and the proclamation of the Gospel message.

- Following this, Peter said [in **Verse 15**], ‘And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.’
  - In other words, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles in perfect concert with the proclamation of the Gospel message by Peter.
  - Yet, Peter’s emphasis, here, to his skeptical audience is simply: **the same Holy Spirit who descended upon the Jews at Pentecost descended upon the Gentiles in Cornelius’s home. Furthermore, the manner in which the Holy Spirit descended in both the cases was the same [the event was marked through the manifestation of tongue-speaking].**

#### f. The LORD Confirmed His Actions through the Scriptures

- Then, in **Verse 16**, Peter said, ‘And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’
  - These words echo **Acts 1:5**, ‘for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’
  - As F.F. Bruce writes, ‘The words of the risen Christ to his disciples...were quickly fulfilled in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, but as Peter saw what took place in the house of Cornelius, and heard those Gentiles speak with tongues and magnify God, the words came afresh to his mind, and he recognized that now they were being fulfilled anew.’
  - The experience of Peter also brings to mind the words of Jesus in **John 14:26**: ‘But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.’
  - Just as He does today, the LORD confirmed His will to Peter through the remembrance of Scripture.

#### IV. The Outcome: The Jewish Believers are Silenced...and Glorify God

- Peter concluded his defense with the following logic [**Verse 17**]: ‘Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’
- Then, Luke writes **Verse 18**, ‘When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.’
  - God mightily used the testimony of both the Scriptures and Peter to ‘convert’ the minds of these already-converted Jews in Jerusalem.
  - In fact, Luke says that they ‘quieted down’ in the face of the truth of Scripture.

- This, once again, brings to mind Romans 3:19: ‘Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God...’
- Yet, tragically, the former favoritism of these circumcised believers in Jerusalem still exists in the church today. As John Stott writes:

‘Even after that, the same ugly sin of discrimination has kept reappearing in the church, in the form of racism (color prejudice), nationalism (‘my country, right or wrong’), tribalism..., casteism..., social and cultural snobbery, or sexism. All such discrimination is inexcusable even in non-Christian society; in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because offensive to human dignity) and a blasphemy (because offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like Peter, we have to lean that ‘God does not show favoritism’ (10:34).

## V. Application: How do believers know the will of God today?

- Several truths are clear about Peter’s experience in Acts 10, as revealed in Chapter 11.
- First, is that he was clearly in the will of the Lord. Secondly, however, was that, initially, he was challenged, and no doubt, even persecuted, by his fellow Jews for breaking with long-standing tradition.
- Yet, it is from this passage in Acts 11:1-18, causes the modern-day reader to ponder the question, ‘How does one know the will of God today?’ If the events in Acts 10 were once-for-all, never-to-be-repeated events in redemption history, then what type of application does it have to the modern believer?

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- Quite possibly, the most common question among *believing* high school and college age students in this country is: What is the will of God for my life?
- In fact, it is a very common question for older adults as well.
- Sadly, however, the manner in which most Christians seek the will of God today more closely resembles Eastern Mysticism and pagan superstition than it does historical orthodox Christianity.
- Furthermore, it seems that the teachings of the church only serve to perpetuate this ‘mystical’ understanding of God’s will.
- When I was a child, I used to enjoy watching game shows. One of my favorite shows to watch was re-runs of *Let’s Make a Deal*. In this show, the host, Monte Hall, would ask contestants to choose what was hidden behind either Door 1, Door 2, or Door 3. If they chose the right door, they would win a great price, such as kitchen appliances. However, if they did not, they would receive something less desirable, such as a goat.
- Yet, this is how we see God’s will in the life of a Christian.

□ The common belief, it seems, among most Christians is that there is one will that God has for our lives, and it is our responsibility to discover it. It is a 'journey' that involves hidden clues, signs, and occasional pitfalls. We are often told of certain 'checklists' that we must use to better discern what God's will is in a given situation. We must walk through life very carefully, keeping watch for certain clues such as confirmation from fellow Christians, an understanding of where God is working, and multiple other 'extra-biblical' 'confirmations.' If we are not careful, we could [so the logic goes] in some way 'miss' God's will for our lives. If this occurs, then, the consequences could be significant. We may miss God's blessing or find ourselves in a place where God never intended for us to be.

- Yet, finding the will of God is **not complicated at all**, in fact, it is **quite simple**. It does not take a 13-week course to 'discover' how to know the will of God.
- The first and primary principle that we must understand is that **the Scriptures are authoritative and sufficient. God has revealed Himself in the Bible and this is what we are to follow.**
  - The Scriptures will certainly not address every circumstance in our lives; however, it is then that we are **free to choose**. We are, then, to **walk in faith**, making our decision on the basis of wisdom and common sense. Such a 'process' may not seem 'spiritual', but it is certainly biblical.
  - **However, we have placed ourselves in bondage and created a 'hedge' concerning the issue of 'Knowing the Will of God'.**
  - Many well-meaning Christians, although claiming that they believe that God's Word is His final and complete revelation, believe that when it comes to 'finding and knowing' God's will, that He in some way, speaks authoritatively through multiple other means.
  - Because of this, Christians are often spiritually paralyzed – unable and unwilling to make decisions for fear that they may be 'outside' of God's will.
- In his book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Garry Friesen defines what he calls *Steps in Paul's Decision Making Process*. They were:
  - **Purposes:** Paul adopted spiritual goals that were based on divine revelation.
  - **Priorities:** He arranged his goals into wise priorities determining what should be done first, second, third, and so on.
  - **Plans:** Next, he devised a strategy for accomplishing his objectives.
  - **Prayer:** Through prayer, he submitted himself and his plans to the sovereign will of God. (No doubt, he also prayed for wisdom in the formulation of his plans, though not mentioned in this context.)

- **Perseverance:** When providentially hindered from accomplishing his plans, he assumed that the delay was God's sovereign will. This conviction freed him from discouragement. Since his plans were sound, the only thing he adjusted was his timetable.
  - **Presentation:** Paul explained his decisions on the basis of God's moral will and his personal application of wisdom.
- Thus, knowing the will of God is quite simple for the believer:
1. Is the choice you are looking to make 'Moral' in nature? If it is, then the Bible will address it. Obey what the Bible says.
    - In other words, if you are angry with someone, some form of retaliation is not an option that is within God's revealed will.
  2. However, most choices in life do not fall into this category. Choices such as, 'Who should I marry?' or 'Where should I go to college?' In these situations, we should simply: a.) submit ourselves, through prayer, to God; b.) pray for wisdom; c.) use our brain, and d.) freely choose.
    - James 1:5 states, 'But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.'
    - Also, Psalm 37:4, 'Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.'
    - Circumstances will often eliminate certain choices [although, once again, circumstance do not constitute God's 'authoritative' counsel. In other words, if a high school senior wants to go to a college that is \$30,000 a year, yet, the family does not have the money, then that is likely not the best college to choose [although it is not necessarily the 'wrong one' either].
    - Another common decision that individuals struggle with is who to marry. This, too, is a rather simple process. Is the potential future mate a Christian? If the answer is no, then the Bible has already addressed it: you should not marry him or her. However, if the answer is yes, the next answer is also simple: Do you love him or her? If the answer is yes, then you are free to marry.

**NOTE:** There are consequences to every action we choose. Some consequences are good. Some are bad. Good decisions often have bad consequences, and vice versa. However, we do not determine whether or not we are in God's will on the sole basis of our circumstances. We must seek wisdom and act on it. This, we must walk in faith.

- Also, it is important to realize that we are not authorized to use our freedom in such a way that it causes another brother or sister in Christ to sin [Yet, this 'warning' is a COMMAND in Scripture].

- ❑ People often ask Kimberly and me, ‘Why do you want to adopt?’ Are answer is simple: God has revealed that He loves adoption [James 1:27: ‘Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father...’], and we have a desire to do so.
  - Then, almost inevitably, the next question is, why Ethiopia? Our answer again is, we have prayed about it, and we want to. We know that such a decision is fully consistent with the will of God, as He has revealed it in Scripture, and we are, therefore, confident that we are **free in Christ** to pursue this decision, ultimately, **for His glory**.
  - It is that simple. However, to many Christians, this does not seem ‘spiritual’ enough. It seems rather clear that, when asked, we are expected to give some answer that includes either a ‘vision’, a miraculous ‘sign’ or some combination of both. Yet, our response remains: God loves adoption and God loves the nations.

### **COMMON, YET NOTORIOUSLY UNRELIABLE WAYS TO KNOW THE WILL OF GOD**

- ❖ NOTE: Several of these ways of knowing God’s will are helpful, **as long as they are understood as subordinate and subjected to the authority and sufficiency of God’s Word**.

#### **1. Visions and ‘Signs’**

- ❖ As has been stated earlier, visions and ‘signs’ were revelatory in the Old and New Testament before they had the full revelation of God. Today, visions and ‘signs’ are no longer necessary as they were then, as God speaks authoritatively through the Scriptures alone.
- ❖ We should not be looking for a ‘fleece’ as Gideon did, as we will be looking for a long time.

#### **2. Circumstances**

- ❖ Although our circumstances are useful and it is wise to consider them, we should not think of them as ‘authoritative.’
- ❖ I often hear, ‘Maybe God is trying to tell me something’ with respect to our circumstances. Unfortunately, such a statement seems to indicate that we have elevated the ‘revelation’ of our circumstances to that of Scripture.

#### **3. You have a ‘Peace’ about it**

- ❖ People often ask one other, concerning various decisions, ‘Do you have a peace?’

- ❖ Justification for such a ‘feeling’ of ‘peace’ is nowhere to be found in Scripture. The ‘peace which passes all understanding’ is something much more significant than an emotional, circumstantial ‘peace’ that can even be manufactured.

**4. A ‘Word’ from the LORD / The Lord ‘Spoke’ to me...**

- ❖ People often speak of having a ‘Word from the LORD’ which is independent of Scripture.
- ❖ Yet, if the Scriptures are the all-sufficient authority of God, then who can this be?

**5. Tradition – ‘It’s the way we have always done things’**

- ❖ Tradition is another unreliable ‘metric’ for determining the will of God.
- ❖ The reason for this is that many traditions are not even biblical.
- ❖ If Peter, in Acts 10, used this as a metric, he would have never gone to Cornelius’s home – as God had commanded him.

**6. ‘The Holy Spirit [or simply ‘God’] led me...’**

- ❖ Once again, such a statement, *independent of the Scripture*, often reveals a lack of trust in the sufficiency of God’s Word.

Again, in *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Gary Friessen addresses the question of a reader:

*Question:* Our pastor recently presented his ministry plans. He has resigned to accept a position in another church. His explanation to the congregation sounded spiritual, but vague: ‘God is leading me to another ministry.’ I wonder what his real reasons were.

*Response:* The brief, cryptic explanation has some advantages – to the minister. The biggest one is the implication that this was not a personal choice. ‘God is responsible, so direct any further questions to Him, not me.’ But if you hide under the refreshment table at a pastors’ conference, you will hear no such euphemisms. This same pastor will share with fellow shepherds the specific reasons not spelled out in the resignation letter.

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- ❖ In this entire process of ‘knowing the will of God’, the central question is, ‘Is God’s revelation of Himself truly sufficient?’ If the answer to the question is ‘Yes,’ then we must live like it is.
- ❖ This is what Peter did; it is what we should do as well.
- ❖ We live in a ‘spiritual’ culture where individuals often seek to justify their actions through ‘spiritual’ language. May we not buy into that lie and seek authenticity that glorifies our Sovereign LORD who so often works through the most common of circumstances.