

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts9B & 10_Peter's Missionary Journeys & Cornelius)

Peter's Missionary Journeys (9:32-43)

Saul was briefly introduced at the beginning of chapter 8, a chapter which contains a major emphasis upon the results of Stephen's murder/martyrdom. Evidently, during the brief period of respite from persecution that the church experienced after Saul's conversion, Peter began to travel throughout Judea to visit his fellow Jewish believers. He had remembered the command of the resurrected Lord to "Feed My sheep" (Jn 21:15, 16, 17). We see in our passage (9:31-35) that Peter traveled about 40 miles to Lydda, another ten miles to Joppa on the coast and then to Caesarea which was another 45 miles north.

Israel's international airport is just north of where the ancient city of Lydda was located. Peter later carried on an extensive traveling ministry, implied in 1 Corinthians 9:5 and 1 Peter 1:1. Philip had preceded Peter to the area in and around Caesarea (Acts 8:40).¹

These were fairly significant journeys in those days. To travel 40 miles would have taken at least two days, if not three. There were no credit cards, no Travel Lodge hotels, and no Western Sizzlin' restaurants. For the most part food had to be carried for the journey and maybe some currency was taken to pay for additional provisions along the way. You might find someone willing to let you sleep in their livestock shelter or you just camped out somewhere. The roads were dusty, you didn't change clothes, you didn't get to bathe with deodorant soap and the latrine or restroom was the nearest tree with no such thing as toilet paper. In the eyes of the Roman officials, who had access to nicer amenities, you were just a dirty, peasant – a human, but to be tolerated, not respected. You were subject to attacks from robbers and thieves. (Remember the parable of the good Samaritan).

In Lydda, Peter healed a man (Aeneas) who had been bedridden for eight years. This miracle was enough to convert most, if not all, of the people who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon. The healing of one man physically led to many spiritual healings. While there is some dispute about the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20, there is considerable evidence that the passage is legitimate. If so, Peter's sign ministry of healings is compatible with that passage, especially verses 17-18.

At Joppa, a woman who was a disciple and evidently a believer, had died. She was loved by all of the other women there. Her name in Aramaic was Tabitha and in Greek, her name was Dorcas. Both names mean "gazelle" which is a reference to beauty in the Song of Solomon (see 2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:3). It was customary for Jews in a seaport town to have two names – one in Aramaic and one in Greek.²

The disciples in Joppa had heard that Peter was in Lydda; however, the passage does not reveal their exact thought process behind their request to have him come to Joppa after

¹ Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc. 1983, 1985), 379.

² Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 59.

Tabitha (Dorcas) had died. Certainly, they had heard of the miracle he had performed in Lydda by healing Aeneas. They also knew that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. It is very likely that they held hope that Peter could do the same. God worked through Peter to validate His message by raising Tabitha from the dead. The result was again a number of people believing in Jesus through Peter's message. "To avoid ceremonial defilement (cf. Lev. 21:1; Num. 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11), **Peter** did not touch her until after God restored her to life."³

While in Joppa, Peter stayed with a tanner named Simon. Among those who came to faith in both cities were a number of Gentiles – most likely those who were already proselytes to Judaism. Peter's stay with Simon is significant. Tanners were considered ceremonially unclean because they were constantly in contact with the skins of dead animals (Lev 11:40) even if Simon's home was separate from his place of business. God was preparing Peter for his experience with Cornelius.

Chapter 10 – Peter and Cornelius

Cornelius, the Man (10:1-2)

There were several types of proselytes to Judaism during this period of Jewish history. A "proselyte of the covenant" or "proselyte of righteousness" was a Gentile who had become circumcised and lived according to the customs and commands of the Mosaic Law. There was also the "proselyte of the gate" who attended the synagogue services and worshipped the God of Israel, but did not become circumcised. This proselyte did not enjoy the full privileges of the Jewish religion.⁴ The presence of Gentile proselytes who became believers in Jesus illustrates the teaching of Jesus Himself that "many will come from the east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Issac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven...but the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness...there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:11-12).

Evidently, Cornelius was a proselyte of the gate. He was not circumcised, yet he gave gifts to the Jewish people and prayed to God always. By this time, Cornelius was well aware of the events that had transpired in Jerusalem surrounding Jesus' death – most likely due to the Jews who had been scattered from Jerusalem and had testified in the synagogue where Cornelius attended.

Cornelius was a **centurion**, a Roman officer in charge of 100 soldiers, in **the Italian Regiment**, consisting of 600 soldiers. In the New Testament centurions are consistently viewed in a favorable light (cf. Matt. 8:5-10; 27:54; Mark 15:44-45; Acts 22:25-26; 23:17-18; 27:6, 43). Centurion Cornelius became one of the first Gentiles after Pentecost to hear the good news of Jesus Christ's forgiveness.⁵

Was Cornelius a believer prior to Peter's visit? Cornelius was a believer in the God of Israel and in the covenantal promises to the Jews through Abraham. Yet, he had not yet demonstrated faith in Jesus as the Messiah as he had not been told the whole story until Peter's visit. God saw Cornelius as a man who was very inclined to believe in Jesus as the Messiah

³ Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, 379.

⁴ Baker, *Acts*, 60.

⁵ Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, 379.

based upon the previous demonstrations of positive volition in his life. God was not going to allow this man to die prior to having heard the rest of the story and having had a chance to express his faith in Jesus. In Acts 11:4, we are told by Luke that he had to hear words by which he and his family might be saved.

The Vision & Instructions (10:3-6)

This appears to be the first time that an apostle was sent to the home of an uncircumcised Gentile to have fellowship and eat Gentile food – all considered unclean and unlawful by the Jews. This was the objection raised by the Jerusalem believers in Acts 11:3. This delay of several years (maybe 8 to 10 years) in going to the Gentiles since the “Great Commission” was given was not due to Jewish bigotry, rather it appears to be more of an issue of God’s timing. The fact that the Jewish believers rejoiced and glorified God when they learned of Gentile salvation is proof they were not prejudiced against the Gentiles. The circumstances surrounding Cornelius’ type of faith cannot be duplicated in the present dispensation; however, there is strong parallel to the manner in which the Lord will treat Gentiles at the end of the Tribulation who have acted favorably toward believing Jews (see Matthew 25:40).

Cornelius Responds to Commands (10:7-8)

Since Cornelius was a military man, an officer at that, he understood orders and authority. He immediately responded and executed the order he had been given by the angel. This is a sign of true humility – the acceptance of authority and willingness to submit.

In the Meantime – Peter’s Vision (10:9-16)

While Cornelius was receiving his vision, Peter also received a vision. It is very obvious from the text that Peter’s vision was one designed by God to prepare him for the events to follow. The vision clearly communicated to Peter the fact that God sanctioned ministry to Gentiles.

Paths Intersect (10:17-23)

There are several parallels between Peter’s experiences and ministry and Paul’s experiences and ministry. Paul was also worshipped (14:11-15). Both healed a lame man (3:2-7 cf. 14:8-10). Both had dealings with a sorcerer (8:9-24 cf. 13:6-11). Both imparted the Holy Spirit by the laying on of their hands (8:17 cf. 19:6). Both raised a person from the dead (9:36-41 cf. 20:9-10). Both healed people in a remote way (5:15 cf. 19:12). Both suffered imprisonment (12:3 and 16:23).

Peter & Cornelius Tell their Stories and Receive Affirmation That This is of the Lord (10:24-33)

The restriction on association with Gentiles was more a matter of Jewish religious tradition than anything specifically stated in Scripture. However, there were restrictions. A Gentile could not take part in Israel’s worship unless he was circumcised (Ex 12:43-49). The uncircumcised man was considered unclean (Isa 52:1). Jews were forbidden to eat many foods Gentiles could eat (Lev 11; Acts 15:20). The slightest infraction of the Law defiled the Jew (Lev 5:2; 7:19, 21; Num 19:16; Ezek 44:23).

Those restrictions were now being lifted in accordance with God’s timing. The delay in the fulfillment of the Great Commission was due to the fact that the Jews and Israel had to first receive their blessing and be filled in order to be the vehicle through which the Gentiles would be blessed. This is totally consistent with the Abrahamic Covenant and the gospel being preached

at this time, i.e. Jesus was and is the Messiah Who was Crucified, resurrected and ascended in fulfillment of Scripture.

Peter Preaches (10:34-43)

Was Peter saying in verse 35 that those who do works of righteousness will be saved – similar to a works based salvation? No – absolutely not. That would be contrary to all teaching in Scripture on the subject. The works of righteousness to which Peter refers are the acts of positive volition to which God responded with the message of salvation. If a person today or at any point in human history exhibits positive volition towards God and demonstrates a desire to satisfy God's righteousness, God will honor that positive volition by insuring that that individual has the opportunity to hear the Gospel prior to dying. Cornelius had demonstrated positive volition by his deeds and prayers and God had responded. To be "accepted" by God in this context is equivalent to God having acknowledged the positive volition of an individual and responding to that positive volition with an opportunity to hear an accurate presentation of the Gospel.

The Result – Gentile Receipt of the Holy Spirit (10:44-48)

At Pentecost, Peter had told the people to be baptized and they would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). However, these Gentiles in chapter 10 had received the Holy Spirit at the time they believed. They were later baptized in water. Baptism was not a pre-requisite for salvation – it was only a ceremonial ritual. It is possible that God reversed the order of baptizing and receiving the Spirit to convince Peter that a true work of salvation had occurred. Based upon the amazement of Peter at seeing Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues, it is perhaps doubtful that Peter would have baptized Cornelius unless God had given evidence Cornelius was saved. Nevertheless, Peter preached what was essentially the same message he had preached to the Jews.

Had a new dispensation begun at this point? Not necessarily. There is no doubt that Peter was sent to Gentiles in this passage and that he received revelation from God that confirmed to him that God wanted him to go to the Gentiles. However, even the Kingdom commission under which the apostles and believers operated at this time allowed for evangelization of Gentiles prior to the total conversion of the Jewish people. The fact that not all of Israel would believe was recognized by Jesus in His teaching where He made a clear distinction between believing Israel and unbelieving Israel that consisted principally of the religious leadership. The Hebrew Scriptures also have ample evidence that the message of salvation and of participation in the kingdom was a privilege that was to be and will be afforded to Gentiles, e.g. Isa. 53:11; Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:25-26. This is not inconsistent with Jesus' statement that "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). The Gentiles were to be blessed by association with the salvation of the Jews in spite of the fact that some in Israel would not believe.

It is also worth noting that Jesus warned His disciples that they would be persecuted by the leaders of Israel – "for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues" (Matt 10:17; Lk 21:12). He taught that during the Tribulation period, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all of the world for a witness to all nations [Gentiles]; and then shall the end [of the Age of Israel] come" (Matt 24:14). This teaching of Jesus reconciles with Revelation 7:9 & 14 where we are informed of a great multitude" of all nations, and people, and tongues," who are saved out of the great Tribulation as a result of the witness of the Jewish remnant of believing Israel.

This great harvest among the Gentiles takes place while Israel nationally is under the reign of the Anti-christ, when Jerusalem is referred to as “Sodom and Egypt, where our Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8). Thus it is evident that the Great Commission of the Gospel of the Kingdom was to be carried out before the whole nation of Israel is saved.⁶

Therefore, it is my opinion that Peter was still operating under a Kingdom program consistent with the prophetic timeline that had been previously revealed in Hebrew Scripture. This timeline would have allowed for there to have been a period of kingdom Gospel preaching after the Lord’s resurrection and ascension and in anticipation of His Second Coming to establish that Kingdom on earth. It is also clear in Scripture that Gentiles will have a part in that kingdom as a result of accepting the kingdom Gospel prior to the Lord’s Second Coming – to the Jew first, then the Gentile.

This is why Peter was not disobedient in his hesitancy to understand and accept the revelation he had been given. Peter had been totally consistent with the prophetic order with which he had been indoctrinated by Jesus (see Acts 1:3). However, in order to prepare the way for Paul’s coming Gentile ministry, He gave a special revelation to Peter to go to an uncircumcised Gentile so that the Jewish Apostles would be convinced that Paul’s ministry to Gentiles was according to the will of God.⁷ The unique age of the Body of Christ was not yet inaugurated; however, it was soon to be. We will soon see Paul separated for the work unto which God had called him (Acts 13:2). He is first called an apostle, begins to perform the signs of an apostle and the door of faith is opened to the Gentiles. It is Paul who receives revelation that through the fall and the temporary casting away of Israel that the new dispensation would be inaugurated (Rom 11:11, 15). The order of blessing would be reversed in this new dispensation. Jews would be blessed by association with Gentile believers.

⁶ Baker, *Acts*, 66.

⁷ *Ibid*, 67.