



'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #12

Acts 10:1–48 (NASB)

Pages 155-170 in 'Acts For Everyone' (Part 1) by N. T. Wright

Acts 10:1-16

*Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, ² a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" ⁴ And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ "Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; ⁶ he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, ⁸ and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. ⁹ On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he *saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." ¹⁵ Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.*

Q: What makes Cornelius such a special person?

- He was a centurion in the Roman army, which means he would have been a mid-ranking officer with 100 men under his command.
 - He was from the "Italian cohort", which means he would have been recruited for the Roman army from Italy.
 - In [Acts 1:8](#) Jesus commanded the apostles to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

- Rome would have been seen as the hub that gave access to the ends of the earth; so Cornelius, in some sense, is the first expansion of the Gospel into those areas.
- The book of Acts details how the Gospel spread in exactly the progression Jesus commanded in [Acts 1:8](#).

- Cornelius was not a proselyte (a convert to Judaism), since he was still uncircumcised (Acts 11:3), but he was a devout God-fearer.
 - Rather than worshiping Roman Gods, which would have been expected and even necessary for political reasons, Cornelius was a devout worshiper of God.
 - Cornelius not only feared God but he "prayed to God continually" and gave money to Jewish people as if they were his own.

Q: What can we learn from Cornelius' prayers and alms?

- Memorials are like statues, parks, and signs that serve as a reminder and never go away.
 - People often forget the prayers they pray, but God doesn't!
 - God never fails to notice our charity; and He never forgets it either.
- Through prayer and charity we can fill God's space with memorials of our love and devotion to Him.

Q: Why would God use a vision of unclean food as a symbol to teach Peter?

- First, it is possible that God had to use symbols to bypass Peter's natural objections.
- Second, [Lev. 11](#) detailed all the foods God's people couldn't eat, but in a larger sense, who you could have "table fellowship" with.
 - "Table fellowship was reserved for those whom you considered "family."
 - God wanted His people marked out as different from everyone else—a family set apart to bear witness to His love and grace to the rest of the world.
- The symbols of unclean food and the command to eat them would have opened Peter's mind to what was about to happen next.
 - God was about to add Gentiles into 'the family that has been set apart to bear witness of His Love and Grace to the rest of the world'!

Acts 10:17-33

Now **while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be**, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate;¹⁸ and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there.¹⁹ While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you."²⁰ "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself."²¹ Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?"²² They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you."²³ So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ On the following day he entered Caesarea. **Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends.**

²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him.²⁶ But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man."²⁷ As he talked with him, he entered and *found many people assembled.²⁸ And he said to them, "**You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.**"²⁹ "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."³⁰ Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments,³¹ and he *said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.'³² Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.'³³ "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Q: Why were the Jews so prejudiced against the Gentiles, that it was considered unlawful to even enter their homes?

- "Many Jews could tell stories about the wicked things that Gentiles got up to. One of the reasons some Jews gave for not going into Gentile houses and eating with them was that the houses were polluted because Gentiles forced their womenfolk to have abortions and then put the dead fetuses down the drains or under the floor-boards." P. 162
 - [Numbers 19:11](#) and [Lev. 21:1](#) prohibited God's people from touching a dead body, not because it was a sin, but because it would make them ceremonially unclean.
 - The Jews often made up extra rules intended to keep people from breaking God's rules.
 - Refusing to enter the home of a Gentile was likely one of these extra rules intended to prevent breaking the ceremonial cleanness laws.
 - It was also a convenient excuse to discriminate against and dismiss Gentiles, rather than accurately represent God's love and grace to them.

Q: Why were the Gentiles prejudiced against the Jews?

- "In the same sort of way, some Gentiles were taught that Jews were stuck-up, unsociable people, because they wouldn't eat pork (which was the cheapest meat available in most places), because they insisted on having a day off work each week, and because they wouldn't join in with normal social activities like the parties that went on around pagan temples, and the great games which celebrated the gods, or sometimes the emperors. A particularly interesting slur was that Jewish people robbed pagan temples, presumably because, since they didn't regard the pagan divinities as real, nobody actually owned what was in their shrines, so they might as well help themselves." P. 162

Q: What is the problem with being prejudiced?

- "The point about a prejudice is that it's what you have done when you are 'pre-judging' a case: making your mind up before you know the facts." P. 162
- "Frequently, we back up our prejudices by finding out just enough facts that support our case, and conveniently ignoring the rest. Bad historians, clever politicians, and lazy theologians do that all the time." P. 162

Q: Is the lesson we are to learn from Peter and Cornelius that we are to get rid of all distinctions and be tolerant of everyone?

- “That would be a bad mistake. If what Peter had discovered was that God simply accepts everyone the way they are, what was the fuss for Cornelius to be devout and god-fearing? Why bother sending for Peter to come and tell him about Jesus? Why not just stay as he was? People today sometimes refer to this present story as a sign that, within the New Testament, there is a recognition that ‘all religions lead to God’, or even that all religions are basically the same. That is certainly not what Luke intends, and both Cornelius and himself, and Peter himself, would have been shocked at any such suggestion. The reason Cornelius was a devout worshiper of Israel’s God was precisely that he was fed up with the normal Roman gods, and eager to follow what seemed, to him, the real one. It is not the case, then, that God simply ‘accepts us as we are’. He invites us as we are; but responding to that invitation always involves the complete transformation which is acted out in repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and receiving the spirit.” P. 164

Acts 10:34-48

*Opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality,³⁵ but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.³⁶ “The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) —³⁷ you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed.³⁸ “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.³⁹ “We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross.⁴⁰ “God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible,⁴¹ not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.⁴² “And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”⁴⁴ **While Peter was still speaking***

these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,⁴⁷ “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Q: “So why did this message, about the mission of Jesus to Israel, have the effect it did on Cornelius and his family and friends?”

- “In other words, Peter is saying: ‘Cornelius: the God whom you have worshiped from afar has done all this **as part of his global plan to set everything right at last; and, at every stage, Jesus is in the middle of it all!** God has thus fulfilled the purposes for which he called Israel in the first place; and you Cornelius, and everyone everywhere who believes this message, will receive a welcome at once, without more ado, into the family whose home has written in shining letters above the door, the wonderful word “forgiven.”’ P. 169-170

Q: What is so significant about the Holy Spirit falling on these Romans?

- “This is, though, a moment we have been waiting for since the first two chapters. Jesus told His followers that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth; and the Holy Spirit had fallen on the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and in Samaria (Acts 8). Now at last, the Spirit comes on the Gentiles as well. Granted, Caesarea is hardly ‘the ends of the earth’, but the message has now reached out to embrace not only Gentiles but Romans. From here, it may be a long step, geographically, but it’s only a short step culturally to everywhere else in the then known world, from Britain and Spain in the west, to Parthia, India, and Egypt in the east.” P. 167
- “Here the purpose is clear: Peter and those with him (circumcised, that is, Jewish, men) need to know that these uncircumcised people have been regarded by the Holy Spirit as fit vessels to be filled with his presence and voice. And if that is so, there can be no barriers to baptism.” P. 170

Follow Up Assignment

Q: Like Cornelius, your prayers and generosity toward God's family are memorials before God. What do your prayers and generosity remind God of?

Q: Have you ever had anyone "pre-judge" you? Explain.

- When have you pre-judged someone else?
- Has your prejudice ever prevented you from fellowship with another believer?

Q: When you tell others the Gospel, do you tell the same story Peter told to Cornelius?

- If not, how is your story different?
- What effect has the story you've been telling had?