

Learning to change  
Acts 9:35-10:48

Learning to be like Jesus means showing no partiality toward people – no prejudice or racism.

The gospel message began to spread in an ever-widening circle as the church scattered from Jerusalem. The church, founded by Jewish believers, began to include faithful Jews beyond Jerusalem and Galilee. All of Palestine was wrestling with the greatness of Jesus. God's people were on the brink of fulfilling their purpose in the world, the promise given to Abraham that through them the world would be blessed. Peter was a leading ambassador in the missionary adventure of the early church. But he still had some "stretching" to do as he learned to cross cultures for the sake of the gospel.

Peter is introduced as engaged in an itinerant ministry: he traveled around the country. This was possible because the church was engaged in a time of peace (9:31). The purpose of his trip was to visit the saints.

In this passage we find Peter participating in three miracles: the healing of the body, the raising of the dead, and the conversion of a lost sinner. The greatest miracle was the conversion of a lost sinner.

Question 1) Peter interacts with several different people in 9:36-43. Who were they and what were they like?

These miracles portrayed Peter as an authentic apostle of Jesus. Both miracles followed the example of Jesus

The first miracle is the healing of Aeneas, a man paralyzed for eight years.

In the healing of a paralytic in Mark 2:22, Jesus said to him, "Get up, take your bed and go home." Peter uses the words "Get up" in healing Aeneas.

The second miracle is raising Dorcas from the dead.

In Mark 5:41 Jesus sends the mourners out before raising the girl from the dead, saying to the girl: "Get up." Peter also sent the mourners away before healing the girl with the words, "Get up."

Notice that Peter stayed at the house of a tanner while residing in Joppa. A tanner treated the skins of dead animals to make leather goods and was considered unclean in the Jewish community.

It was considered "unclean" to touch a dead person or animal if you were a Jewish man. Contact with a tanner without elaborate cleansing rituals would have been prohibited. The fact that Scripture records where Peter stayed in a city was rare, and its significance can be considered.

Question 2) How could Peter's stay with Simon the tanner in Joppa be related to his future interaction with Cornelius?

Question 3) How is Cornelius described both at the beginning of Acts 10 and by his servants in 10:22?

Cornelius and all his family were devout and God-fearing. Their godliness was expressed both in generosity to the needy and in regular prayer to God.

It is impossible for us to grasp the gulf between Jews and Gentiles in those days. This was not taught in the Old Testament. On the contrary, the Old Testament taught that God intended to bless all the families of the earth. The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred. This was the extended prejudice which had to be overcome before Gentiles could be admitted into the Christian community. God is at work in Acts to ensure that the church would become a truly multi-social, multi-cultural community. Peter is to become God's instrument to overcome any Jewish-Gentile division in the church.

But before Cornelius is converted and becomes a believer, God would have to break down Peter's racial intolerance.

Peter has responded boldly to the challenge of sickness and death. Now he is asked to respond to the challenge of racial and religious discrimination.

Matthew told us that Jesus gave to the disciples the keys of the kingdom (Mt. 16:19; 18:18). We have already seen Peter use those keys effectively, opening the kingdom to Jews on the day of Pentecost. Now he is to use them again to open the kingdom to the Gentiles, by evangelizing and baptizing Cornelius, the first Gentile convert.

Question 4) What did the vision mean (10:9-16, 34-35)?

The vision challenged the basic distinction between clean and unclean foods, which Peter had made. The Spirit related the vision to the distinction between clean and unclean people, and told him to stop making it (10:19,20; 34-35). The word "hesitate" can also mean "do not make distinction between Jew and Gentile, (11:12)).

Question 5) Note that Cornelius' servants stopped at the front gate (10:18) and called out for information. Why are they so cautious?

Joppa was considered a "free city" in Roman-occupied Palestine. No Roman garrison was stationed there. Prejudice against Romans and Gentiles was high in this proud Jewish city. Note that the messengers inquired about Peter at the outer gate, not venturing beyond that point. Take careful note of verse 22 and the words used to deliver the message. Ethnically, culturally, and racially this encounter was unique.

Question 6) Describe Peter's journey to Caesarea, his greeting by Cornelius, and the scene in the home (10:23-27).

Question 7) What are the main points of Peter's address to Cornelius and his friends (10:34-43)? His sermon begins with a personal statement of what he had learned through his experience of the previous day (vv.34-35). The context of his sermon is the same as what he had been preaching to Jews (v.36).

First, Peter alluded to Jesus' life and ministry (vv.37-38).

Next, Peter said that we are witnesses of everything Jesus did, and his death (v.39).

Then, they were witnesses to his resurrection (v.40).

This was the gospel – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – the witnesses were commanded to preach (vv.41-42).

Finally, Jesus will judge the living and the dead, but we do not need to fear the judgment of Christ because he grants forgiveness of sins (salvation) to those who believe in him (v.43).

The Holy Spirit came on all who believed the message, and they began speaking in tongues and praising God. Then, they were baptized with water. They had already been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Question 8) It is important to note that Peter crossed the barrier from his side. What boundaries can you cross to better understand the “turf” of other people?

Question 9) How does this story speak to the church today?

- The unity of the church. Since God does not make distinction in his new community, we have no liberty to make them either. Yet, tragic as it is the church has never learned this lesson of the equality of the members of Christ.
- The gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion. No two stage post-conversion baptism of the Spirit.
- The status of non-Christian religions. Cornelius was a God-fearing man who gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. The emphasis is that God accepts whoever fears him and does what is right, irrespective of their race. Though Cornelius was acceptable to God in a comparative sense, God prefers righteousness to unrighteousness. This does not mean he was justified. He still needed to hear the gospel, repent, and believe in Jesus (Acts 15:7-9)

The essence of the story is that God shows no favorites, makes no distinction between races, and he gives the same Spirit to all alike, irrespective of their race.

The power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16,17)