



Walking Through the Scripture Together

June 1 - 7, 2008

Acts 10:17-48

Tear down the wall

Text Acts 10:17-48 (TNIV)

17 While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. **18** They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. **19** While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. **20** So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." **21** Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" **22** The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." **23** Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. **24** The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. **26** But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only human myself." **27** While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. **28** He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. **29** So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" **30** Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me **31** and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. **32** Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' **33** So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism **35** but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right. **36** You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. **37** You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— **38** how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who

were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. **39** We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, **40** but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. **41** He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. **42** He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. **43** All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. **45** The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. **46** For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, **47** "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." **48** So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Thought

It would be all too easy, following our own late-Western, post-modern prejudices, to imagine that the whole episode with Cornelius was simply about getting rid of all distinctions and being "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 himself and Peter himself would have been shocked at any such suggestion. The reason Cornelius was a devout worshipper of Israel's God was precisely that he was fed up with the normal Roman gods and eager to follow what seemed to him to be 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.

What is at stake here is not the 18th century principle of 'tolerance,' but the glorious 1st century truth that, in Jesus the Messiah of Israel, God has broken down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, humiliating both categories — Jews, because they apparently lose their privileged position; gentiles because they have to acknowledge the Jewish Messiah — in order to reveal God's mercy to both.

Acts for Everyone

Small Group Discussion Guide

Lean In

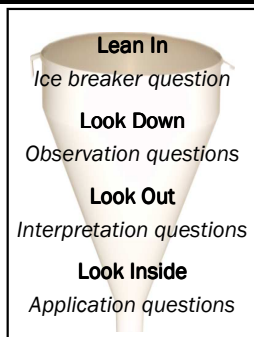
- What is the biggest “cultural barrier” you have ever had to cross? Describe the experience — it’s challenges, rewards, pitfalls, etc.

Look Down / Look Out

- Take a moment and reread Acts 10:1-16 if you can. In what state had the vision left Peter? Why was he having such a hard time with this lesson?
- What does the Holy Spirit instruct him to do now? What might Peter’s first thought have been when he was told that men from a Roman centurion were looking for him? What does Peter do?
- How does Cornelius greet Peter, and how does Peter respond? What does this exchange tell you about each of them? After being puzzled and perplexed, what does Peter now see very clearly?
- How does Peter summarize the message and ministry of Jesus? What were the key ingredients of Jesus’ ministry?
- How does the Holy Spirit interrupt Peter’s presentation? How does this impact the Jewish believers present? What does Peter say and do?

Look Inside

- How attuned would you say you are to the voice and movements of the Holy Spirit? Why do you think God speaks and “falls” on some and not to others? How much of this depends on our readiness to hear/receive? On God’s initiative to speak?



details, details...

Accompanied by some of the brothers

The conversation in the tanner’s house that evening must have been a lively one, with many of the Joppa believers joining in the discussion of the strange visions. Six of the Joppa believers accompanied Peter to Caesarea the next day (cf. 11:12), a wise action in view of the questions that would later be raised at Jerusalem.

Cornelius fell at his feet

As Peter was brought into the centurion’s home past the gatehouse and then into the courtyard, Cornelius came from his living quarters to meet him. He fell at Peter’s feet and offered him “reverence.” This was actually fairly typical behavior for a host welcoming a guest in that culture. And what a picture! The powerful Roman bowing before a Galilean peasant. Peter saw something more in it than hospitality and refused to accept any semblance of honor that belonged to God only (see 14:14-15; Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9).

Peter opened his mouth

Okay, this seems obvious. Opening your mouth is a good thing to do when you are about to speak — at least if you want to boost the comprehension factor in your audience. Actually, “he opened his mouth” is the Bible way of saying that something momentous is about to be said. And this is a very momentous speech. What’s interesting is that there is no mention here, as at other times, of Peter being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” And the Greek is a bit choppy according to those who know about such things. Which perhaps gives us a picture of Peter being a bit nervous and “off his game” as he started in, but warming to his theme as we approach what turned out to be the end of his talk in verse 43. Interesting also that it was upon the phrase “everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name” that the Holy Spirit — and all the gentile audience — were uncorked.

Family Discussion Guide

Day One Acts 10:17-23

What is the weirdest dream you ever had? Do you feel like God has ever spoken to you through a dream or vision like Peter had? What are some different ways you have heard God’s voice?

Day Two Acts 10:24-33

Why does Cornelius bow down before Peter? What do you learn about Peter from how he responds to Cornelius? What are some good ways you can honor people around you?

Day Three Acts 10:34-38

How does Peter describe the message and ministry of Jesus? What did Jesus do? How can you join with Jesus in doing the same work right where you are?

Day Four Acts 10:39-43

Peter was just telling others about what he had seen and heard in his experience with Jesus. What experiences with God can you share with other people?

Day Five Acts 10:44-48

Does the idea of the Holy Spirit “falling” on people strike you as cool, weird, scary or what? What do you think about the Holy Spirit? Do you think God still does stuff like this today, or was this just for Bible times? Why?

Bible Life and Times

Cornelius

Cornelius is identified as an army man, a centurion in the Italian Regiment or “cohort.” A centurion was a noncommissioned officer. He had worked his way up through the ranks to take command of a group of soldiers within a Roman legion. A comparable rank in the American military would be captain. When a cohort was at full strength, a centurion was in command of a hundred men. William Barclay gave the following description of Rome’s military units:



In the Roman military set-up there was first of all the *legion*. It was a force of six thousand men and therefore was roughly equal to a division. In every legion there were ten *cohorts*. A cohort therefore had six hundred men and comes near to being the equivalent of a battalion. The cohort was divided into *centuries* and over each century there was a *centurion*. The century is therefore roughly the equivalent of a company. (*The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, page 79)

The above would apply to regular legions of the Roman army. However, it is thought that there were no such legionary troops in Judea between A.D. 6 and 66. Roman governors in Judea would have commanded auxiliary forces, and its cohorts would have had somewhat smaller numbers. The Italian Cohort (Regiment) to which Cornelius belonged would then have been an auxiliary unit.

The historian Polybius described the qualifications of a centurion: “Centurions are required not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their post” (*History* 6.24).

Cornelius may have been a descendant of one of the freedman of a man named Cornelius Sulla. In 82 B.C. He is said to have liberated ten thousand slaves. As was the common practice, the freed slaves would have taken their patron’s name.