

## Lesson 6

### Broadening Horizons (Acts 10-12)

#### ***Theme Verse***

"Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right'" (Acts 10:34-35).

#### ***Goal***

In this lesson we will observe the sovereignty of God in the affairs of His church as He (1) opens the door of the Gospel to the Gentile world and (2) perpetuates the spread of the Gospel despite violent political attack. We will also learn from this that God is equally sovereign in the church today.

#### ***What's Going On Here?***

Chapter 9 of Acts concluded with the report that "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon." This seemingly commonplace detail foreshadows the monumental change in attitude which was to take place within the church. The occupation of the tanner, who handled the "unclean" bodies of dead animals, was contemptible to the Jews. The tanner was required to build his home 75 feet outside the city. Peter's willingness to lodge with a man of this despised trade signals a breaking down of deeply ingrained religious prejudices.

The extension of the Gospel to Samaritans, who were despised by the Jews, and to the Ethiopian, who was a convert to Judaism, was surprising enough to the early church leaders. The general acceptance of Gentile converts would be a far more drastic step which would rock the church to the center and even threaten to split it in two.

Undoubtedly Peter and the other leaders expected Christianity to remain within the confines of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, His apostles were Jews, and His earthly ministry had been directed to Jews. His followers, even though they now believed in Him as Savior, still observed Jewish worship and ceremonial customs. To the apostles, Gentiles were still "unclean." Nothing apart from aggressive divine intervention would alter these deeply entrenched habits of thinking.

As the Lord ushered His church into this new phase, two other important shifts took place.

1. The Gentile city of Antioch replaced Jerusalem as the center of Gospel preaching. Located 300 miles north of Jerusalem, Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and was the Mediterranean doorway to the great eastern highways. It was a city of unspeakable moral decadence and rampant idol worship—quite a training ground for fledgling missionaries.
2. Peter, the apostle of the circumcision, passed from the scene in Luke's account, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, took over. Peter, of course was still active, but he is mentioned only one more time in Acts 15.

## Searching the Scriptures

1. Read Acts 10-12. Note that 11:1-18 is a recapitulation of the account in chapter 10.
2. List the character traits and habitual activities of Cornelius in 10:1-8. What do these tell you about the condition of his heart? How did Cornelius apparently influence those around him (vv. 7-8).
3. In what respect is Cornelius like the Ethiopian eunuch? What was God's attitude toward Cornelius? See John 1:4, Luke 8:15. Was Cornelius saved at this point?
4. Review the details of Peter's trance (vv. 9-16). What does it mean? What effect would the threefold repetition have (Matt. 26:69-75; John 21:15-19)? Why did God have to be so emphatic? How does Peter's exclamation in verse 14 indicate that this new idea seems preposterous to him? When does Peter fully understand the vision?
5. Note the precise timing of these remarkable events (vv. 17-23). Who was orchestrating this whole affair (vv. 19-20)? Would Peter have gone to the Gentiles without divine intervention (vv. 28-29)? What action in verse 23 shows that Peter's prejudice against the Gentiles was beginning to break down?
6. Summarize Peter's message to the Gentiles in vv. 36-43.
7. What finally and fully convinced Peter that God intended Gentiles to be a part of the body of Christ (vv. 44-48)? Who else obeyed this phenomenon (v. 45)? How did this evidence prove indispensable in convincing Jewish Christians in Jerusalem when they challenged Peter's conduct (11:15-18)? If Peter and the Jewish leaders refused to accept the Gentiles, whom would they be opposing (v. 17)?
8. Review 11:19-30. How did the church of Antioch come into being? What group made up a large part of its constituency (v. 20)? Who was sent to check on this new ministry and what did he observe (v. 22-24)?
9. As you study the Antioch church, list elements of vital Christian fellowship which you find expressed there. How was the new church strengthened (v. 26)? The label *Christian* means belonging to Christ. What are the responsibilities of bearing this name? How is the unity of the body beautifully evidenced in this account of the church at Antioch?

10. How did the tragic event in 12:1-2 fulfill what Jesus prophesied to James in Matthew 20:22-23? Why would news of the tragedy be particularly disturbing to the church? How did this bolt generate or intensify the activity reported in Acts 12:5? How may the intensified prayers of the church be connected with Peter's incredible composure in v. 6? When have you experienced a similar inexplicable peace as a result of the prayers of Christian friends? Share.
  
11. Note the ministry of the angel in Peter's deliverance from prison (vv. 6-10). Was Peter aware of what was happening (v. 9)? When did the matter become clear in his mind (vv. 10-11)? Do angels still minister to believers (Hebrews 1:14)?
  
12. We are told of the earnest prayers of the church. How would you describe these prayers (vv. 15-16)? What challenge for your own prayer life do you see in this (James 1:6)? Even though these Christians doubted that their prayers would be answered how did God graciously respond?
  
13. The Herod of chapter 12 is Herod Agrippa I, a nephew of Herod Antipas, who had beheaded John, and grandson of Herod the Great, who had ordered the slaughter of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Agrippa's sudden death is corroborated by the historian Josephus.  
What effect did Peter's escape have on Herod? How does this show the condition of his heart? How is this attitude further evidenced in the circumstances surrounding Herod's death?
  
14. How does the simple report in verse 24 stand in sharp contrast to what Herod, with all his power and the intense evil of his nature, had tried to accomplish? See verses 1-2. What message do we get concerning God's power as opposed to all human resources and authority?

### ***The Word for Us***

1. The story of Cornelius' conversion is an exciting example of the way in which God supplies truth to those who trust Him. How is this a fulfillment of God's promises in Deut. 4:29 and Hebrews 11:6?

We often are faced with the question, "What about those who have never heard of Christ? Will they too be condemned?" How does the story of Cornelius shed light on this issue? Use Romans 1:18-20 in your discussion.

2. Peter's presentation of the Gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 10:34-43 is far more brief than his previous two sermons to Jewish audiences (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26). What elements does he leave out in addressing Cornelius and his family? What elements remain constant?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and list the essential ingredients of the Gospel.

How do Acts 10:44 and 11:15 indicate that Peter had only begun his sermon to the Gentiles? Who interrupts him (10:44)? Who alone can bring people to the point of conversion? By what means does He do so?

3. Even though he was an apostle who was born again and filled with the Spirit, Peter harbored a great deal of prejudice. What areas of your life so easily remain closed to the will and the grace of God? How can bigotry imbedded in your own heart be removed?

Discuss racial, social, intellectual, cultural, and other sorts of prejudice which may creep into our fellowship. How can we be more open to the Spirit of God in our congregation?

4. James was put to death while Peter was miraculously delivered. Why did God not protect James as well as Peter? Why does God allow such things to happen? See Isaiah 55:8-9.

You may even now be experiencing distressing circumstances in which you question, "What is God doing?" How does Paul in Romans 8:28 strengthen us? Name the great resource available to the Christian in the face of such mysteries (Acts 12:5).

With all its tremendous spiritual power, the early church did not believe its prayers had been answered; Peter's deliverance came as a shock. This is a common attitude in the church today—we pray, but we really don't believe our prayers make any difference. Prayer can easily become a meaningless spiritual exercise. Allow this study to reaffirm your conviction that prayer links you to the power of God.

### ***To Do This Week***

Read Acts 13-15 in preparation for the next class session.