

GOD ACCEPTS EVERYONE WHO FEARS HIM

Acts 9:32-10:48

Key Verses: 10:34-35

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Last week, we learned that how God changed a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church to be his chosen instrument to deliver the gospel to the Gentiles. The conversion of Saul showed the broken heart of God toward the sinful world. In Acts 1:8, the Risen Christ said to his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." However, there was an internal barrier for the gospel to spread beyond Judea and Samaria. It was Judaism deeply embedded in the minds of the Jewish Christians. They considered Gentiles not worthy of saving. They had no desire to carry the gospel beyond Israel. Their Judaist pride would not allow them to reach out to the Gentiles. Peter, the top disciple of Jesus, was no exception. In today's passage, God changes Peter's view of the Gentile world. This was a historic event. Let us see how God helped him and what we should learn from this to apply to our life of mission today.

I. PETER'S MISSION TRIPS (9:32-43)

After the conversion of Paul, the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. The Holy Spirit was with them and the church grew in number (31). Peter in Jerusalem, however, did not become complacent. He traveled about the country, visiting scattered Christians to strengthen their faith.

In Lydda, which was located about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Peter found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord (35).

Then Peter went to Joppa. A disciple named Tabitha had just died. Her name, translated as Dorcas in Greek, means "gazelle." She moved around gracefully to help many people in the name of Jesus. She was especially mindful of the widows in the community and made beautiful dresses for them, spending many nights under candlelight. When she died, it was hard for them to say goodbye to her. They washed her body and placed it in a room. Then they sent two messengers to Peter, with the urgent message "Please come at once!" (38) When he arrived, many widows told Peter how Tabitha had loved them when she was alive. What did Peter do? He got down on his knees and prayed. Then, turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and sat up. Then Peter took her by the hand and presented her to the believers and the widows. The Lord did the extraordinary miracle through Peter. The

widows' sorrow was turned to joy. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord (42).

What can we learn from Peter's ministry? **First, Peter said to Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you."** He had faith in Jesus. Only Jesus, not he, has the power to heal the paralyzed man. So when the miracle happened, those who witnessed it turned to the Lord, not to Peter. **Second, Tabitha was a female disciple in the male-dominant society!** Her life was beautiful. She was always doing good and helping the poor. God is pleased when we do good and help the poor in his name. **Third, Peter got down on his knees and prayed.** Again Peter knew it was the Lord, not he, had the power to give life. So he prayed. When the miracle happened, many people in Joppa turned to the Lord and believed in him. All the credits went to the Lord!

Peter's mission trips were successful, but his heart was still not open to Gentiles. How did God help him?

II. GET UP, PETER, KILL AND EAT (10:1-23a)

Chapter 10 is a story of two men, Peter and Cornelius. One was a Jew and the other a Roman soldier. God gave both of them his vision. God moved Peter's heart to visit Cornelius. He also moved Cornelius' heart to welcome Peter. Let us think about how this happened and what God wants us to learn.

First, Cornelius, a God-fearing soldier (1-8). Look at verses 1-2. *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.* Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army stationed in Caesarea. He was a commander of the Italian Regiment. Roman soldiers were known for their cruelty. But Cornelius was different. He was one of the three Roman centurions in the New Testament that had faith in God (Mt 8:8; Mk 15:39). Why did God pay attention to this man? Verse 2 says that he and his family were devout and God-fearing. His life was dedicated to God. He was obedient to the Lord. God was at the center of his private and public life. What impresses me is that his family was devout and God-fearing. Even a soldier attending him was devout! (7) The entire community recognized him as a righteous, God-fearing man. He was respected by all the Jewish people (22). I respect a spiritual leader whose family is devout. It tells a lot about his life of faith at home. Cornelius also gave generously to those in need. Those who are stingy do not really know the grace of God. Tabitha's life was beautiful because she helped the poor and took care of widows. Most importantly, Cornelius prayed to God regularly. Prayer is the barometer of a person's faith. You would not pray to God if you don't trust him. Cornelius set aside his time to come to God in prayer. He didn't pray only when he needed something from God. He prayed regularly.

Look at verses 3-4. *One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God."* A vision of God came to him while he was praying. God sent an angel to tell him that he was pleased

with his prayers and gifts to the poor. God accepted them as a memorial offering. What a compliment from God! Let us remember this. Our prayers and gifts to the poor go up to God as a memorial offering.

So what was God's message to Cornelius? God told him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon Peter. God told him that Peter was staying with Simon the tanner whose house was by the sea (6). When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa (7-8).

Second, Peter's vision (9-23a). Meanwhile, God was preparing Peter for their meeting. Look at verses 9-11. *About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.* God's vision came to Peter when he was praying. Both Cornelius and Peter received God's vision while they were praying. God uses those who pray. Worldly leaders look for those who are smart and able. But God uses those who pray. Both Peter and Cornelius prayed regularly, setting aside specific time of the day (2; 3:1). God knew when to expect them to come to him. Having a set time to pray is also important for us. Let us set aside a time each day, perhaps an early morning time, to meet the Lord. May God bless our fellowship members to be men and women of prayer!

In his vision, Peter saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners (11). It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat!" Little did Peter realize that the command, "Kill and eat," was from God whose heart was broken for the people of the sinful world.

How did Peter react to the voice? "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (14). We can understand why Peter protested. He was brought up in a culture where the dietetic laws were strictly kept. According to Leviticus 11, the Jews could eat only the animals that chew the cud and have split hooves. For example, they could not eat rabbit, because though it chews the cud, it does not have a split hoof. The rabbit was unclean for the Jews (Lev 11:6). Peter had never dreamed of eating unclean animals such as pigs, lizards or squirrels. These dietetic laws were one standard that separated Jews and Gentiles. Jews despised Gentiles who ate unclean animals. They considered the Gentiles unclean because they ate all kinds of unclean animals including rabbits and pigs. They didn't want to come near Gentiles because of their way of eating.

The Jews also despised the Gentiles because they were not God's chosen people. They thought God's favor was not extended to the Gentiles. It was their misunderstanding. God loves all peoples of the world. He chose Israel to be a kingdom of priests to bless all peoples. Their prejudice did not come from God. Peter had to overcome the prejudice in order to carry the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. He had to kill and eat the unclean animals. But it was hard for him to go against the laws ingrained deeply in his mind. He cringed at the animals wiggling on the sheet.

What did God say to him? Look at verse 15. *The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”* This happened three times. God wanted make sure Peter’s got the message loud and clear. “Kill and eat,” meant, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15). World mission was impossible for Peter as long as he considered Gentiles as untouchables. He needed to change his view on them. He had to overcome his strong Judaist ideas so that he could rise above his own culture and traditions, and accept the universal nature of God’s love.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found Simon the tanner’s house. The Spirit told him to go downstairs to meet them, saying “Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them” (20). God gave his vision to both Cornelius and Peter to connect them. They were on the same page. What if God gave his vision to only one of them? I know a handsome and popular pastor who is single. He wants to remain single so that he can serve the Lord to the fullest. The trouble is that many women would approach him, saying, “Last night, God told me to marry you.” I don’t know what he says to them, but I think he should say something like, “Really? I am sorry, but I did not get the same memo from God.” Likewise, we may claim something is God’s will for us, when it is just what we desire to do. In the case of Peter and Cornelius, God showed visions while they were praying. In this way, Peter and the men from Cornelius met together at the house of Simon. It was against the law for him to let the Gentiles into the house (28). But the Holy Spirit helped Peter to overcome his prejudice. He obeyed the Holy Spirit. The three men spent the night at a Jewish home. It was a historic moment for Peter as well as the church.

III. PETER’S GOSPEL (23b-48)

The next day Peter started out his trip to Caesarea with the men. Some Jewish Christian brothers from Joppa accompanied them. When they arrived the following day, Cornelius was eagerly waiting for him. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence (26). Cornelius was a commander in the Roman army, but he was very humble before a servant of God. Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” As Peter entered the house, there was a large group of people waiting for him. Cornelius’ faith in God was amazing. He knew it was not easy for a Jewish man to come to his house. No Jewish man ever entered his home. But he had no doubt it would happen, because God said so. He was so sure that he called all his relatives and close friends. They were all gathered at his house to meet a servant of God and hear his message.

Peter said them, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean” (28). Then he explained in detail how God led him to come and speak to them the word of God (30-33). Then he said something that surely moved their hearts: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (34-35). Peter accepted that God is not only the God of the Jews but also the God of the Gentiles. A great change had taken place in his heart. With a new heart and a new attitude toward those who were

gathered there, Peter began to speak of the good news of Jesus Christ (36-48). Peter's message was focused on Jesus and reminds us of several things about Jesus.

First, Jesus is the Lord of all. Peter told them the good news came to the people of Israel first, but Jesus is the Lord of all (36). God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him (38). Jesus is the only one who can save all people who suffer under the power of the devil because he is the Messiah who was anointed by God.

Second, Jesus died on a cross but God raised him. Jesus was sent by God to save the mankind from sin and Satan. But evil men killed him by hanging him on a cross. Yet, Jesus was not a victim of their political intrigue. He died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). And God raised him from the dead on the third day (40). Through his resurrection, Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death. Now the final victory awaits for us, those who believe in him.

Third, God commanded us to preach. Look at verse 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.”* Jesus will return as the judge of the living and the dead. Death is not the end of everything, as some people believe. After death, each of us must stand before the Judge to be welcomed to heaven or to be sent to eternal hell. Meanwhile, we are to preach the good news that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins through his name (43). Everyone who believes in Jesus receives the grace of forgiveness. Peter had preached the same message in Jerusalem many times. He said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). This time, however, he was speaking to the Gentiles. “Everyone” included not only Jews but Gentiles!

What happened to the people as they listened to Peter's message about Jesus? While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God (44-46). Peter said to them: “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (47). Peter declared that, since the Holy Spirit accepted the Gentile believers, they had no right to reject them. He ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus (48).

In this passage, we learn that our God is a great God who accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. The good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone. We must know this heart of God so that we may overcome our prejudices and barriers. May God help us to break down all racial, cultural, and generational barriers so that we may share the gospel with everyone who does not know the Savior Jesus!