



ACTS 9-10 CORNELIUS CONVERTED; PETER'S VISION

After Paul returned to Damascus from Arabia, Luke records, "...the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket" (Acts 9:23-25). This is the first time Paul would be threatened by the Jews with death, but by no means the last.

From Damascus, he goes to Jerusalem to meet the Church and its leaders. Luke writes, "And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied" (Acts 9:26-31).

It was natural for the brethren to be wary of Paul, for they thought he was posturing so he could infiltrate the Church. But it was Barnabas, called the Son of Consolation, or the encourager, who believed in Paul and fully backed him.

Barclay explains, "When Paul arrived in Jerusalem he found himself regarded with the gravest suspicion. How could it be otherwise? It was in that very city that he had made havoc of the Church and had dragged men and women to prison...When everyone else was steering clear of him, Barnabas took him by the hand and stood sponsor for him...In this passage we see Paul taking characteristic action; he disputed with the Greek-speaking Jews. Stephen had been one of these Hellenists and in all probability Paul went to the very synagogues where once he had opposed Stephen in order to witness to the fact that his life was changed.

"Here again we see Paul in peril of his life. For him life had become a thing of hairbreadth escapes. Out of Jerusalem he was smuggled to Caesarea and thence to Tarsus. Once again he is following the consistent policy of his life, for he goes back to his native city to tell them that he is a changed man and that the one who changed him is Jesus Christ" (notes on Acts 9:26).

This narrative is the last we hear of Paul for many years. Now the focus changes to Peter where God intervenes in an incident that will change the history of the Church. Before this event, Peter does two powerful miracles--the healing of the paralytic Aeneas and the resurrection of Dorcas, or Tabitha. As a result, many Jews believed and were baptized in those regions of Lydda and Joppa.

Then comes the great landmark event--the conversion of the first Gentile--Cornelius.

Luke writes, "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!' And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, 'What is it, lord?' So he said to him, 'Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do.' And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa" (10:1-8).

In Caesarea, the Roman headquarters in Israel, the centurion Cornelius, in charge of a hundred soldiers, was a "God fearer," or a Gentile who kept many of God's commandments (such as the Sabbath and food laws) and fellowshiped at the synagogue, although he was not circumcised.

The New International Commentary mentions, "Peter and Cornelius were each prepared by a vision for their interview. The whole story of this chapter...is of great importance not only because it

tells how the 'door of faith' was opened to Gentiles, but also because it introduces the questions of the social intercourse of Jewish Christians with Gentiles and of the admission of Gentiles to the church without circumcision. These questions were later debated at the Council of Jerusalem, and the Cornelius episode was there adduced as a test case...It is further important to observe that Cornelius was one of those Gentiles who are commonly classed as 'God fearers,' that is, from a Jewish point of view. Many Gentiles in those days, while not prepared to enter this Jewish community as full proselytes, were attracted by the simple monotheism of Jewish synagogue worship and by the ethical standard of the Jewish way of life...some observed with more or less scrupulosity such distinctive Jewish practices as Sabbath observance and abstinence from certain kinds of food. Cornelius' attachment to the Jewish religion appeared particularly [firm] in his regular prayer to the God of Israel and acts of charity to the people of Israel. We may indeed say he had *every qualification*, short of circumcision, which could satisfy Jewish requirements" (p. 216).

Also mentioned was that not only Cornelius, but "all of his household" participated in this religious worship. What does this mean?

The IVP Background Commentary states, "It was considered proper for a wife to share her husband's religion, so if he was married, her shared devotion here would be natural. But the term translated 'household' could include servants or freed persons; although a cheap slave would cost about one-third of a regular soldier's annual pay, centurions received fifteen times the pay of rank-and-file soldiers. 'Household' here may just mean 'servants'" (Notes on Acts 10:7).

Cornelius was praying, when in a vision, an angel told him he was greatly favored and to send men to Joppa to bring a person called Peter to him. He obeyed and sent three of his men to fetch Peter.

Luke relates, "The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-

footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.' And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.' Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, 'Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?' And they said, 'Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.' Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him" (Acts 10:9-23).

This section has been used by some scholars to justify eating unclean foods. Yet, what the account says is that Peter only "wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant." Next came the men from Cornelius and God through His spirit revealed to Peter not to doubt going with them, although they were uncircumcised Gentiles.

The New International Commentary mentions, "Intercourse with Gentiles was not categorically forbidden; but it did render a Jew ceremonially unclean, as did entering a Gentile building [or home]. The most ordinary kinds of food...coming from Gentiles, might not be eaten by strict Jews...Hence, to accept their hospitality and sit at table with them was most intolerable" (p. 222).

Regarding the Spirit speaking to Peter, *Expositor's Commentary* says, "A question naturally arises about the relation of the 'angel of God' that appeared to Cornelius, 'the 'voice' that spoke to Peter, and 'the Spirit' who urges him to go with the messengers from Cornelius. But the question,

though legitimate, is almost unanswerable because it is *by the Holy Spirit* that *the ascended Christ* manifests *his presence* to his own."

So Peter goes with these Gentile men and takes six brethren from Joppa as well. They would later be important witnesses of what had happened.

Luke now explains what that vision meant, "And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, 'You know how *unlawful* it is for a Jewish man *to keep company with or go to one of another nation*. But God has shown me that I should *not* call any man *common or unclean*. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?' So Cornelius said, 'Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you. So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.'

"Then Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth *I perceive* that God shows *no partiality*. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people,

but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.' While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been *poured out* on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days" (Acts 10:24-48).

So now the issue is resolved. It wasn't about eating or not eating of unclean meats, but that now, required rituals, such as circumcision and the purification laws, were no longer necessary to become a member of the Church and receive the Holy Spirit. Thus, circumcision and the ritual law would no longer be a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14). Indeed, nowhere in the New Testament do we find the food laws being abolished, which would have been very easy to mention in that way but never are. On the other hand, a more minor issue such as food offered to idols is dealt with numerous times in the Epistles.

Luke adds, "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went *in* to uncircumcised men and *ate* with them!'" (11:1-3).

If Peter would have eaten unclean foods, this would have been included in the accusation, but it isn't. Also, Cornelius, already a "God-fearer" would not have been eating pork with Peter, and eating unclean foods would have caused a far greater uproar, yet this is never brought up. So the real issue was Cornelius and the other Gentiles being considered uncircumcised and ritually impure. Thus, brethren, don't ever be persuaded that this section deals with the abolishing of the food laws!