

Acts

Lesson #9

St. Peter and Cornelius

(9: 32 – 11: 18)

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Review

Lesson #8 offered an excursus on St. Paul. Next to Jesus himself, St. Paul is the towering figure in the New Testament. Raised in Tarsus, son of a wealthy and privileged family, Saul was destined for greatness from the beginning. Having a superb classical and religious education, Saul relocated to Jerusalem to study under the foremost rabbi of his century, the great Gamaliel. Groomed for leadership at the highest echelon of Judaism, Saul led the persecution against the emerging Church, convinced that “the Way”—this radical, splinter movement of Christians—threatened the very existence of the nation itself.

Saul’s dramatic experience on the Road to Damascus changed everything, transforming Saul of Tarsus from the “greatest of sinners,” into St. Paul, the greatest of saints.

Preview

In Lesson #9 we leave Paul and rejoin St. Peter as he travels along the coast to Lydda and Joppa, where he heals Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, and where he raises Tabitha from the dead. Meanwhile at Caesarea Maritima, an angel has visited Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who tells him to send messengers to Joppa to bring Peter to Caesarea. St. Peter was staying at the home of Simon the tanner, and around noontime Peter had a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven, containing a collection of both clean and unclean animals. What could all this mean?

When Peter arrives at Caesarea, Cornelius greets him, tells him about the angel visiting him, and Peter proclaims the gospel to Cornelius and his family. They become believers as a result, and they receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized.

No one in the Church ever imagined that the gospel had anything whatever to do with the Gentiles; it was purely an internal Jewish movement. With the conversion of Cornelius and his family, everything changes. No longer is the Church limited to being a minor reform movement within Judaism; with Gentiles becoming believers, the Church gains the potential to become a global enterprise, embracing *all* of humanity.

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Having sent Saul home to Tarsus in 9: 30, our narrative now turns to St. Peter, who has traveled down from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean coast, to Lydda and Joppa.





•Lydda (Λύδδα) is the Greek name for the village of Lod (1 Chronicles 8: 12). Lydda sits about 10 miles southeast of Joppa on the rich and fertile plain of Sharon, known in New Testament times for its smiths and craftsmen.

•Joppa was the oldest deep-water port of ancient Israel, the port from which Jonah sailed when he ran away from God, sailing for Tarshish. On the journey he was tossed overboard and swallowed by a big fish (Jonah 1: 3)! Today Jaffa is an old neighborhood, the southern-most suburb of Tel Aviv.

“As Peter was passing through every region, he went down to the holy ones living in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been confined to bed for eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed.’ He got up at once. And all the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.”

(9: 32-35)

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**Masolino da Panicale. *St. Peter Healing Aeneas* (fresco, detail), 1425.
Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.**

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St. Peter said to Aeneas,

“Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed.”

That seems like an odd thing for St. Peter to say to Aeneas! It recalls Admiral William H. McRaven, commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), in his 2014 commencement address at the University of Texas at Austin, giving UT’s new graduates “10 Lessons in Life.”

The 1st lesson is: make your bed!

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Admiral William H. McRaven, Commander,
Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

“If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can’t do the little things right, you will never do the big things right.

And, if by chance you have a miserable day, you will come home to a bed that is made—that you made—and a made bed gives you encouragement that tomorrow will be better.”



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From Lydda Peter moves on to Joppa, where he raises Tabitha from the dead!

“Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated means Dorcas). She was completely occupied with good deeds and almsgiving. Now during those days she fell sick and died, so after washing her, they laid [her] out in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, ‘Please come to us without delay.’ So Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs where all the widows came to him weeping and showing him the tunics and cloaks that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to her body and said, ‘Tabitha, rise up.’ She opened her eyes, saw Peter . . .

and sat up. He gave her his hand and raised her up, and when he had called the holy ones and the widows, he presented her alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many came to believe in the Lord. And he stayed a long time in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.”

(9: 36-43)

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St. Peter healing Aeneas

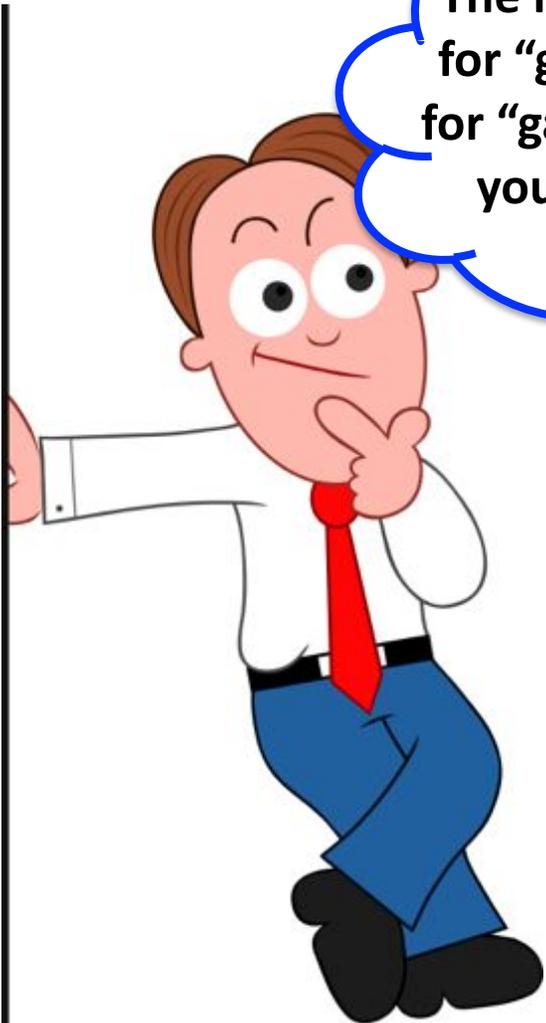
St. Peter raising Tabitha

**Masolino da Panicale. *St. Peter Healing Aeneas and Raising Tabatha* (fresco), 1425.
Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.**

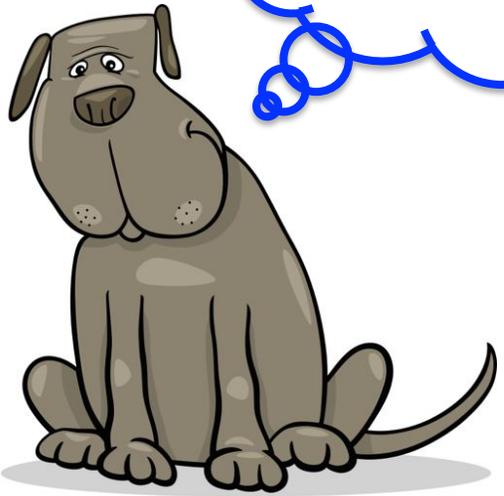
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St. Peter heals Aeneas, and now he raises Tabitha from the dead! Recall, no person can perform a miracle; only God can, and God is using St. Peter mightily in these early days of the Church, the miracles validating Peter and the Apostles' authority for the Gospel message they are proclaiming.



The name Tabitha is Aramaic for "gazelle"; Dorcas is Greek for "gazelle." Nice name, once you know what it means!



I think I'll stick with Tabitha. The other is a too little dorkey!

Ha, ha, ha!





The scene now cuts 30 miles north to Caesarea Maritima, the artificial deep water port built by Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.). Pontius Pilate and his Roman legionnaires lived here (A.D. 26-36), and Cornelius, the Roman centurion, lives here, as well.





Herod's artificial deep water port at Caesarea.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Caesarea's hippodrome, home to epic chariot races.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“Footprint” of Herod’s palace, home of Pontius Pilate, A.D. 26-36.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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The theater at Caesarea faces west and seats 4,000, suggesting a population during New Testament times of roughly 40,000.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Flying in the face of convention, Caesarea had no natural fresh water source, so Herod brought fresh water via a 4.5-mile, gravity-fed aqueduct from Mt. Carmel.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“Now in Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Cohort called the Italica, devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly. One afternoon about three o’clock, he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God come in to him and say to him, ‘Cornelius.’ He looked intently at him and, seized with fear, said, ‘What is it, sir?’ He said to him, ‘Your prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a memorial offering before God. Now send some men to Joppa and summon one Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with another Simon, a tanner, who has a house by the sea.’ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from his staff, explained everything to them, and sent them to Joppa.”

(10: 1-8)

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**Gerbrand van den Eeckhout. *Vision of Cornelius the Centurion* (oil on canvas), 1664.
Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland.**

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Cornelius, the Roman centurion



A Roman Legion consisted of 6,000 men and was divided into ten Regiments, each having a name. Cornelius is a member of the Italian Regiment, or the “Cohort called the Italica.” Each Regiment consisted of 600 men. A centurion commanded a 100-man unit in a Regiment. Although not exactly analogous, a centurion was similar in rank to a career mid-level officer, a Captain or a Major, in today’s Army or Marine Corps.

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So, Cornelius' men head south to Joppa, a one day, 30-mile journey.

Meanwhile, the next day about noon, Peter is on the roof terrace of Simon the tanner's house, praying with his eyes closed, listening to the surf and getting hungry, as lunch cooks in the kitchen below.

“The next day, while they were on their way and nearing the city, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime. He was hungry and wished to eat, and while they were making preparations he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all the earth’s four-legged animals and reptiles and the birds of the sky. A voice said to him, ‘Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Certainly not, sir. For never have I eaten anything profane and unclean.’ The voice spoke to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you are not to call profane.’ This happened three times, and then the object was taken up into the sky.”

(10: 9-16)

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**Domenico Fetti. *Vision of Peter and the Sheet with Animals* (oil on poplar), c. 1619.
Museum of Art History, Vienna, Austria.**

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• Peter fell into a “trance.” The Greek word is ἔκστασις [EK-stas-is], and it suggests “amazement” or “astonishment.” The English word “trance” is a little too creepy! It is more like a “reverie,” accompanied by *astonishment*. Luke uses the word in his Gospel, when Jesus heals the paralytic lowered down through the roof of Peter’s home in Capernaum:

“Then astonishment [ἔκστασις] seized them all and they glorified God, and, struck with awe, they said, ‘We have seen incredible things today.’”

(Luke 5: 26)

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• In the sheet Peter sees clean and unclean animals gathered together as one: cattle, donkeys, sheep, pigs, ducks, vultures, snakes and so on.

• Recall our study of Leviticus 11, and the dietary laws regarding what may and may not be eaten:

1. Land animals (2b-8)
2. Water animals (9-12)
3. Birds (13-19)
4. Winged insects (20-23)
5. Dead animals (24-28)
6. Dead swarming creatures (29-40)
7. Swarming creatures (41-45)

Peter's vision of the sheet eliminates the distinctions.

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So, what's the meaning of the vision? Is it simply a message affirming what Jesus said in Mark 7: 19 when he "declared all foods clean?" Or is it something more?

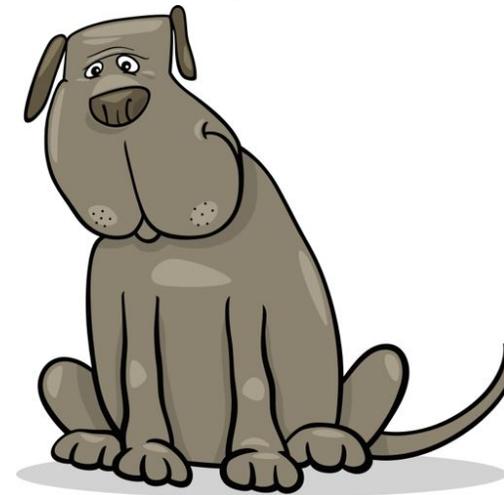
I think God's removing the distinction between Jews (clean) and Gentiles (unclean).

Smarty pants!

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“While Peter was in doubt about the meaning of the vision he had seen, the men sent by Cornelius asked for Simon’s house and arrived at the entrance. They called out inquiring whether Simon, who is called Peter, was staying there. As Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said [to him], ‘So get up, go downstairs, and accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them.’ Then Peter went down to the men and said, ‘I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your being here?’ They answered, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say.’ So he invited them in and showed them hospitality.”

(10: 17-23a)



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“The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him. On the following day he entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. Peter, however, raised him up, saying, ‘Get up. I myself am also a human being.’ While he conversed with him, he went in and found many people gathered together and said to them, ‘You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit, a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean. And that is why I came without objection when sent for. May I ask, then, why you summoned me?’”

(10: 23b-29)

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- Peter and six of his friends from Joppa (11: 12) make the 30-mile journey to Caesarea and meet Cornelius, who has gathered his entire family and his friends together for the meeting.
- Showing great respect, Cornelius kneels before Peter, but Peter—recalling the sheet with the clean and unclean animals all together—raises him up and addresses him as an equal.
- Socializing with Gentiles was not categorically forbidden by the Mosaic law, but given the Jewish dietary laws and the possibility of assimilation, mingling with Gentiles was taboo. Recall that when the Jewish leaders take Jesus to Pilate at the Antonia Fortress, they refuse to enter for fear of becoming “unclean” (John 18: 28).
- In light of the “sheet vision,” Peter graciously visits with Cornelius and his friends.

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“Cornelius replied, ‘Four days ago at this hour, three o’clock in the afternoon, I was at prayer in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling white robes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your almsgiving remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter. He is a guest in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and you were kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to listen to all that you have been commanded by the Lord.’”

(10: 30-33)

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Peter responds, saying:

“In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.”

(10: 34-35)

Peter, fully understanding the vision of the sheet, then continues, proclaiming the Gospel to Cornelius, his family and his friends.

And then an extraordinary thing happens . . .

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“While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?’ He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for a few days.”

(10: 44-49)



**Pietro Paolo Cristofari. *Baptism of the Centurion Cornelius* (mosaic), 1736.
Chapel of the Baptistery, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.**

[The mosaic is after a painting of the same name by Andrea Procaccini, 1711, currently in a private collection.]



- The Holy Spirit coming upon Cornelius, his family and his friends astounded Peter and the six Jewish believers who were with him.
- No one ever imagined that Jesus and the Church had anything whatever to do with Gentiles—“The Way” was simply a minor movement within Judaism itself.
- Given the anointing by the Holy Spirit, Peter baptizes Cornelius, his family and his friends, and they become the first Gentiles to enter into the Church.

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When Peter returns to Jerusalem he has some “splanin” to do!

“Now the apostles and the brothers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles too had accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem the circumcised believers confronted him, saying, ‘You entered the house of uncircumcised people and ate with them[!]’ Peter began and explained it to them step by step . . .”

(11: 1-3)

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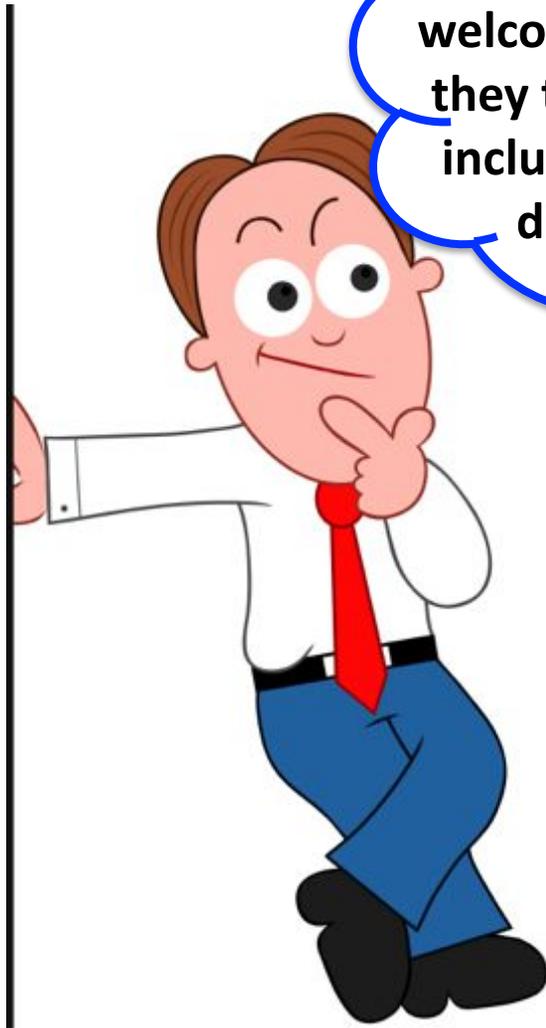
Holy Cow!!!!



After the stoning of Stephen we saw the Gospel expanding outward *geographically* from Jerusalem to Samaria and on into the greater Roman Empire.

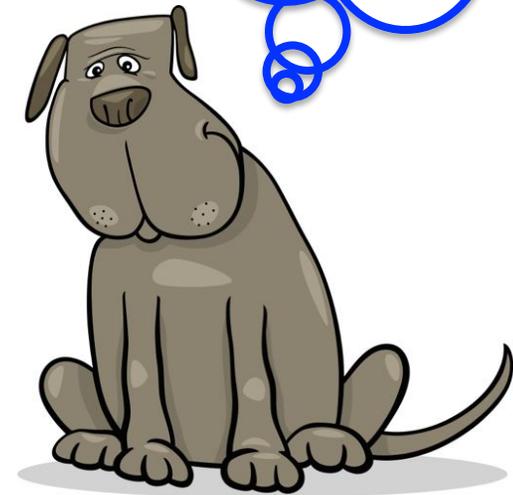
We also witnessed the Gospel expanding outward *theologically* from a core group of pious Jewish believers in Jerusalem to those on the fringes of Judaism, the Samaritans and a black Ethiopian eunuch.

Now the *theological* expansion is complete, with Gentiles embracing the faith, moving the Church from a minor movement within Judaism to a potential global enterprise, embracing all of humanity.



But that's sure to create controversy. If Gentiles are welcomed into the Church, must they then obey the Mosaic law, including circumcision and the dietary and ritual laws?

If Gentiles have to be circumcised, there won't be many takers! I hated being "fixed."



Questions for discussion and thought

1. When St. Peter travels to Lydda and Joppa he heals Aeneas and raises Tabitha. What function do these miracles play in Luke's ongoing narrative?
2. Cornelius is a Roman centurion who is a "God-fearer"; that is, a Gentile drawn to Judaism. Have we previously met any other Gentiles like him?
3. When Peter is at the home of Simon the tanner, what experience does he have while praying?
4. Do you think Peter had any reservations about accompanying to Caesarea the men sent by Cornelius?
5. With Cornelius and his family and friends now believers, what are the implications for the Church?

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