

The Salvation of the Gentiles, Part 1

Acts 10:1-20

1734

INTRODUCTION

A. God's Design for the Church

The tenth chapter of Acts should be a prime consideration when emphasizing missions because it deals with a great missionary principle. Historically, the gospel had been first committed to the people in Jerusalem. Then it spread to Judea and Samaria. Finally, God's design was to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. Our Lord laid out that master plan of evangelism in Acts 1:8. The Great Commission is recorded in Matthew 28:19: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations" The Apostles were to start in Jerusalem, move to Judea and Samaria, and then go to Gentile lands.

Initially, the church was entirely Jewish. It took a great deal of stretching on their part to reach out to the Samaritans, whom they despised. It would be an even greater step to reach the Gentiles. If they despised Samaritans, then they doubly despised Gentiles. In Acts 10 the Word of God describes how God opened the church to the Gentiles. He did it through Jewish vehicles.

B. God's Design for Peter

The key man in the early days of the church was Peter. The church was officially founded on the day of Pentecost. It exploded in Jerusalem, and then spread throughout Judea and Samaria. Thousands of people were being saved. Great revivals were breaking out under the ministries of Peter, John, and the other Apostles. Many were saved in Samaria under the ministry of Philip. Peter was a preacher to the unsaved and a teacher of the saints. He was the dominant figure in those early days. He was continually available to God as he moved about from place to place.

1. His Specific Call

Peter had been given a very special commission. His ministry was the result of his specific calling. In the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord had said to Peter, "... I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven ..." (16:19). He intended for Peter to unlock the doors in the expansion of the church. He was to be the point of contact between the Spirit of God and the church. On the day of Pentecost, Peter was in Jerusalem when the church began. He preached to the people of Jerusalem after the Spirit had come upon the believers (Ac. 2:140). He was present when three thousand people were baptized and added to the body of believers (v. 41). The gospel then spread to Samaria as believers were scattered under the persecution led by Saul of Tarsus. As they went into Samaria, people were

saved (Ac. 8:38, 12:13). But they had not yet been added to the body by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John arrived in Samaria, Peter laid his hands on them and they received the Spirit (vv. 14:17). Once again Peter was the point of contact for the opening of the church to the halfbreed Samaritans (who were half Jew and half Gentile).

There was one other key that Peter had not yet used—the one that would open the church to the Gentiles. Peter is about to unlock the last door, but it is going to be hard for him to turn the key. His life had been ingrained with Jewish traditions, legalism, and nationalism. There was a certain amount of intolerance in his upbringing—there was no room for Samaritans and Gentiles in the Jewish view of life.

2. His Special Preparation

The Spirit of God had already begun to prepare Peter before we come to Acts 10.

a. Acceptance of a Despised People

He had accepted the Samaritans, which was a monumental step for him. The Samaritans were a despised people. From the time of the separation of the kingdom of Israel, they had been disliked by the Southern kingdom. When the people of the Northern kingdom were taken into captivity by Assyria, they eventually intermarried with the Assyrians. They were despised by the Jews of the Southern kingdom who maintained that their national existence was a gift of God and should never be polluted. The Samaritans were hated because they were halfbreeds. But Peter had been able to accept them when he had seen what Philip had accomplished through the Spirit of God. When Peter laid hands on those who had believed, and the Spirit came upon them, he was shocked. They received the same gift that the Jewish believers had received at Pentecost. The two races were now in one body together, and Peter was beginning to accept that reality.

b. Acceptance of a Despised Trade

Another tradition for Peter had also been broken down. While he was in Joppa, he stayed in the house of Simon, a tanner (Ac. 9:43). The Jews despised that trade because tanners handled the flesh of dead animals. No self-respecting Jew would have anything to do with such a man. But Peter may have stayed in his house for as long as two years. His prejudices were being melted down by the Lord.

C. God's Design for Jew and Gentile

There was still one tough barrier that had to be knocked down: the barrier between Jew and Gentile. It had to happen because God's design in the New Covenant is to make the two into one new man. That was Paul's great definition of the church in Ephesians 2. Verse 11 says, "... remember that ye, being in time past Gentiles in the flesh" Then he goes on to discuss what that means: "... ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye who once were far off are made near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (vv. 12:14). In verses 15:16 Paul goes on to say that Christ made one new man by reconciling both Jew and Gentile to God. In Ephesians 3 Paul says that Jews and Gentiles together in one body was a mystery to the previous ages (vv. 36). That reconciliation was a difficult thing for a Jew to understand after centuries of exclusivity. In Galatians 3:28 Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." That was a new concept for the Jew. Peter would need to have some preparation before he would be able to unlock the door to the Gentiles.

The Mutual Scorn Between Jew and Gentile

A strict Jew wouldn't allow himself to be a guest in a Gentile house, neither would he invite one to be a guest in his own home. A scribal law said that the dwelling places of Gentiles were unclean.

The dirt from a Gentile country was also considered unclean. If anyone happened to track some Gentile dirt into Israel, the dirt remained defiled; it never mingled with Israel's soil; it just continually defiled the dirt of Israel. Consequently, whenever travelers left a Gentile country, they would always shake the dust off their feet, so they wouldn't bring Gentile pollution into Israel. When Jesus sent out the seventy to preach the gospel, He told them that if anyone didn't hear their words, they were to shake the dust off their feet (Mt. 10:14). In other words, they were to treat him as a Gentile.

The Jews viewed Gentiles as unclean, and that had great ramifications. For example, milk that was drawn from a cow by Gentile hands was not allowed to be consumed by Jews. Bread and oil prepared by a Gentile could be sold to a stranger, but could never be used by a Jew. No Jew would ever eat with a Gentile. If a Gentile was ever invited to a Jewish house, he couldn't be left in the room lest he defile all the food in the room. If cooking utensils were bought from a Gentile, they had to be purified by fire and water.

The Gentiles retaliated. They scorned the Jews. Circumcision, the Sabbath day rest, worship of an invisible God, abstinence from certain foods, and all other aspects of the Jewish lifestyle were points of mockery for the Gentiles.

Jews and Gentiles had been butting heads for centuries. Then came Christ, intending to make them one new man. In theory, that was an easy thing to accomplish, but it was a difficult thing for the Jew to practice. Peter had success in Acts 10, even though he experienced a few relapses later in his life (e.g. Gal. 2:11-14). For God to turn the dichotomy of Jew and Gentile into unity, He needed to make some preparations.

I. SOVEREIGN CALL (vv. 120)

Verses 120 introduce the confrontation that resulted in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. God prepares two people: He first prepares a Gentile, and then prepares a Jew. The Gentile is Cornelius, and the Jew is Peter. He gives each one a special vision that serves as preparation. Before the two could ever come together, God had to change their attitudes. In verses 18 we will see the vision given to Cornelius, and in verses 9-20 we will see the vision given to Peter. So begins the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. By the time of Acts 11, the gospel spread to Antioch and many Gentiles were being saved. In Acts 13 the ministry of the Apostle Paul would be aimed at the Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles were coming together in Christ. In Acts 11 Peter reported to the leaders in Jerusalem that the Gentiles received the same gift of the Spirit that they had received on the day of Pentecost (v. 17). Finally, in Acts 15 the Jerusalem council was held. The Jewish believers came to the conclusion that they would accept Gentile believers as those who belong to Jesus Christ. But it all began in Acts 10. And I'm glad it did because I'm a Gentile.

As we see what God does with Cornelius and with Peter, we will see principles that God uses when He deals with everyone in an evangelistic situation. We will see how God prepares the receiver of

the gospel (Cornelius), and the messenger of the gospel (Peter). At the perfect time, God brings the two together. These principles are important for our own understanding of how God prepares His messengers (Christians) to communicate the gospel to prepared receivers at a divinely prepared moment. Let's first look at ...

A. The Preparation of Cornelius (vv. 18)

1. God Chooses the Receiver (v. 1)

"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band"

The first thing we learn about God's preparation of the receiver is that God chooses him. God singled out Cornelius. There were many Gentiles who could have been saved and become the first Gentile to officially be introduced into the church, but God chose Cornelius. God is as involved in choosing the one to receive the gospel as He is in choosing the one to present it.

a. The Plan

1) John 6:37 "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." In verse 44 Jesus said, "No man can come to Me, except the Father, who hath sent Me, draw him" God is in the business of choosing.

2) Ephesians 1:4 "... He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world"

3) Acts 13:48 "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." God had already determined who would be redeemed.

4) Acts 15:14 "Symeon [Peter] hath declared how God first did visit the nations, to take out of them a people for His name."

5) John 10:16 Jesus said, "And other sheep I have, that are not of this fold; them also I must bring"

6) Romans 10:20 Paul is chastising Israel for their failure to believe when he says, "But Isaiah is very bold, and saith, I was found by them that sought Me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after Me." That verse is referring specifically to Gentiles. God sought them out before they ever asked for Him.

God initially chooses the receiver. That is His plan. He is building His body by calling out His sheep. But God's choice is never against the will of the one chosen. Added to the sovereign election of God is the choice of man. Both sides of salvation are expressed in Scripture. We may not understand exactly how they fit together, but we do know that they belong to God's plan of salvation.

b. The Man

1) His City

Cornelius lived in Caesarea, one of the most beautiful places I've ever visited. That spot of land juts out into the Mediterranean Sea. Today, there is nothing left but ruins. Caesarea was also the location of a military garrison. Pontius Pilate, and all the other procurators of Palestine made their home there because the headquarters of the Roman government was located there. The population was dominated by Gentiles with a minimum number of Jews. Caesarea was located about thirty miles north of Joppa (which is known today as Tel Aviv). The Roman Emperor Augustus had given the city to Herod the Great as a gift. Consequently a fortune was spent to make it into a beautiful city.

2) His Occupation

Cornelius was the centurion of an Italian band. He was quite possibly of Italian extraction. The word "band" refers to a cohort. A centurion commanded a hundred men. A Roman legion had six thousand men and was divided into ten cohorts. Each cohort contained six hundred men, and each cohort had

six centuries. Josephus indicates that five cohorts were stationed at Caesarea (The Wars of the Jews, II.xv).

Jesus selected Cornelius as His man. He didn't choose him against his will; he had a mind to know God he had a seeking heart. Cornelius had lived up to the light that he had, so God moved to give him more light. That is the balance of volition and sovereignty.

2. God Responds to the Seeking Heart (v. 2)

"A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always."

God responds to the willing, open heart. Election never violates volition; they always go together. I don't know how they do, but God knows. Cornelius was sovereignly chosen by God, but he also had a searching heart. God reached down and gave him the disposition to turn and seek Him even when he was dead in his trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1)

What about the heathen?

There are some people who will inevitably ask, "What about the heathen? Will they all die and go to hell without ever having heard the gospel?" That question has become a straw man that unbelievers continually present to Christians. I think the answer to that is graphically illustrated in Acts 10. If an individual lives up to the light that he has been given, God will give him more light. Cornelius was a devout man who feared God and gave his money to the people. The word "people" (Gk. laos) is often used in Acts to speak of the Jews. Cornelius was giving money to the Jews. He also prayed all the time. In his own heart and mind, Cornelius had come to an understanding of the true God. He had a certain amount of light, and he lived to the full capacity of what He knew. So God moves in to show him the full light the light of the world, Jesus Christ (Jn. 8:12).

I don't believe for one moment that God will ever keep the truth from someone who wants to know it. For example:

1. John 7:17 "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" If anyone really wants to do what God wants him to, God will give him sufficient light to fulfill that desire.

2. Jeremiah 29:13 "And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart." God never frustrates the one with a true seeking heart. The sad thing is that men in our world don't seek Him. But the seeking heart is fulfilled when God touches it. God did that in the case of Cornelius.

3. Matthew 7:7 "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

God never restricts His full light from the one who seeks it. So don't worry about the heathen. God is too just to ever make a mistake and too loving to ever be unnecessarily judgmental. God always gives more light to the one who lives up to the light that he has.

The Three Kinds of Gentiles

Cornelius was "a devout man" (Ac. 10:2). That means he was pious and honestly religious he feared God. The phrase "feared God" became a technical term for Gentiles. There were three kinds of Gentiles in the mind of a Jew.

1. A Gentile

2. A GodFearer

A Gentile who had become sick of his own religion of its immoralities and idolatries and had come to the conclusion that the God of Israel is the true God, was termed "a God fearer." This type of Gentile began to pray to God, and perhaps became involved in the worship at a synagogue (e.g. the eunuch whom Philip met in Acts 8:26-39). The Godfearer believed in the ethics of the Old Testament, but had never been circumcised. He was not a full proselyte.

3. A Proselyte

The third level of Gentile was the proselyte who had come all the way to Judaism. He had actually gone through the act of circumcision and become fully identified with Israel. He was considered a Jew in a spiritual sense.

a. Cornelius Was a GodFearer

He was not a full Jew, so he was considered a Gentile. Cornelius was sick of the immorality and emptiness of his own religion, and had attached himself to the Jewish religion. He probably didn't accept the ceremonial laws and circumcision, but there is no doubt that he often attended worship. He believed in one God and in the ethics of the Old Testament.

When Paul went into the synagogues of the Gentile cities he journeyed to, he usually would lead the Godfearers to Christ first. They were the people who had lived up to the light that they had been given. When Paul arrived, they received more light and were saved. As Paul moved from city to city, small groups of Godfearers were saved. They became a terrible threat to the Jews in each city.

b. Cornelius Was Not Saved

Cornelius was a very religious man, yet someone can be very religious and not be saved. In Acts 11:14 Peter later related that the angel in Cornelius's vision said this: "[Peter] shall tell thee [Cornelius] words, by which thou and all thy house shall be saved." Cornelius was not saved he was not a Christian. He did not know Jesus Christ. He did not belong to the body of Christ. But he was living up to the light that he did have, and God was moving to give him more light. Until he heard the gospel from Peter, he did not have enough information to be saved. There are many unsaved religious people involved in many religious activities who aren't seeking God. But Cornelius's religion was honest He was seeking the true God with a true heart. God always honors that.

3. God Prepares the Receiver (v. 3)

"He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius."

Verse 2 says that Cornelius "prayed to God always." In my study of the Bible, it seems to me that great things happen when people pray. God moved on Cornelius when he was in prayer. The same thing was true of Peter (v. 9). It is good to be on your knees before God. Cornelius saw the vision about the ninth hour. That would be around three o'clock in the afternoon, the normal time of evening prayers for the Jews. Since he was a Godfearer, Cornelius may have followed that custom and was praying when he saw the vision. God moves in response to prayer.

You say, "What was Cornelius praying about?" I don't know, but I can make a good guess. I think he was praying, "God, I want to know more about You." I believe he was searching for more light, and God was about to present him with it.

4. God Promises More Light (v. 4)

"And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God."

In the darkest corner of the world, God sees and reads the heart of every single individual. Don't believe for one minute that God doesn't know what is going on in the breast of every man. If a man is truly living up to the light that he has been given, God will give him more information. The angel was saying to Cornelius, "Like smoke ascending from a fire, your prayers and good deeds have risen to the nostrils of God. He considers them a sweetsmelling savor, and He is moving in response to you." Cornelius had accepted God, and God had accepted Cornelius. But He couldn't save him apart from true information. God not only moved in response to Cornelius's seeking heart, but He also had to give him the right information. Cornelius's prayers, devotion, faith, and goodness had risen to heaven like a fragrant offering and entered the nostrils of God. In response God said, "Cornelius is living up to the light he has. I'm going to move on his behalf." Whenever someone lives up to the light he has, God will respond to him.

5. God Asks for Obedience (vv. 58)

a. Specific Instructions (vv. 56)

"And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter. He lodgeth with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside; he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do." Here is another principle: God gives the receiver the opportunity to actively respond. God could have had the angel say, "Cornelius, all you have to do is these steps." The angel could have presented gospel, and Cornelius would have believed. But God didn't do that. Paul said that he was sent for the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5); God wants to connect faith with an act of obedience because that's what the Christian life is all about. Romans 10:9 says, "... if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." God wants an act of obedience to verify salvation. So He gives Cornelius the opportunity to be obedient.

If I were Cornelius, my reaction would have been: "Why can't I go myself? Why do I have to send my men? That will take too much time." But Cornelius didn't respond that way. Praise the Lord, he was obedient! You say, "Why would God take so long?" I think there are two reasons: First, I think that God wanted Peter to go to Cornelius's house strictly on faith. Having three Gentiles arrive at his door saying, "We have come to take you to a man who wants to see you," was a little scary. Second, I think the Lord wanted Peter to lead Cornelius to Christ in Cornelius's house, something that no self-respecting Jew would ever enter. That would help break down the barriers between Jew and Gentile.

God's plan was laid out, and Cornelius didn't argue; He believed and obeyed. The angel said, "... now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter. He lodgeth with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside ..." (Ac. 10:56). Tanners had their homes by the seaside because they needed salt water for the tanning process. Verse 6 continues, "... he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do." Cornelius must have been on pins and needles waiting for everything to unfold!

b. Immediate Obedience (vv. 78)

"And when the angel who spoke unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of those that waited on him continually; and when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa."

Immediately after seeing the vision, Cornelius sent his men to Joppa. I love his immediate obedience! A man of less faith would have said to the angel, "Are you real? Are you really from God? Why can't you tell me now? Why do I have to send for some guy in Joppa? Isn't there someone in Caesarea who knows the facts? Why can't I go? Why do I have to wait here?" But Cornelius was a man of true faith, and God gave him the opportunity to prove his obedience. God is forever doing that to people. I hope you're learning never to be impatient with God when He's trying to teach you how to be obedient. It is exciting to see God use human instruments. He could have said to Cornelius, "You're saved!" But He wanted to use Peter. Acts 1:8 says, "But ye shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto Me [Gk. mou martures]" That's our job.

What have we seen in the preparation of the receiver? God chose him, responded to his open heart, prepared him with proper information and instruction, promised Him more light, and asked for obedience.

B. The Preparation of Peter (vv. 920)

1. God Chooses the Messenger (v. 9)

"On the next day, as they went on their journey [the two servants and the soldier], and drew near unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour."

It was noon, so Peter went up on the roof to pray. In those days, the people did many things on the roof. It was a place for recreation, rest, and meditation. It was time for Peter to be made ready. God had a lot of work to do because Peter was a very sincere bigot. God had to break him of his prejudice, and so far He was being successful. Periodically, Peter had been troublesome to the Lord during the days of His tenure on earth, but his focus was shifting. But he needed a specific vision to get him over the hump in his dealings with Gentiles. Now we will see that the work of the Holy Spirit on the messenger is like His work on the receiver.

God calls out special people for special jobs. He did that with the prophets: The Bible often records different prophets saying, "The word of the Lord came unto me and said" The Apostle Paul describes himself as "an apostle (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1).

a. John the Baptist

In Luke 1 an angel appeared to an old priest named Zacharias. Through an angel God said, ". . . thy wife, Elisabeth, shall bear thee a son [John the Baptist] . . . he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to

the Lord, their God" (vv. 13, 15, 16). Zacharias said, "I am very old" (v. 18). But the angel affirmed that what he had said would be fulfilled (v. 20). Even though John was not yet conceived, God had chosen him.

b. The Disciples

In John 15:16 Jesus says, "Ye [the disciples] have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit" They weren't wandering along the seashore seeking the Messiah. Jesus said, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt. 4:19).

God is in the business of not only choosing the receivers, but also choosing the messengers. There's no greater thrill in the world than to know that you are a chosen messenger of God. What a joy! Peter was God's chosen messenger. All his rough edges were being smoothed out.

2. God Prepares the Messenger (vv. 10-16)

a. The Manifestation of the Vision

1) The Trance (v. 10)"And he became very hungry, and would have eaten, but while they made ready, he fell into a trance"

Cornelius was fasting at the time he had his vision; maybe Peter was doing the same thing. The Greek word for "trance" is ekstasis. Peter's external senses were suspended. He could not comprehend what was going on around him. At that point, God invaded his consciousness with a vision regarding food. God related the vision to his hunger.

2) The Tarp (vv. 11-12)

a) Its Characteristics (v. 11)

"And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth"The "vessel" wasn't a literal sheet, but appeared to be like a sheet. It was probably like a tarp pulled together at the four corners, and tied with a rope that extended into heaven. That was what was being lowered.

b) Its Contents (v. 12)"In which were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. "

The tarp was full of a conglomeration of animals. The key point of the vision was that those animals were both clean and unclean.

Israel's Absolute Diet

In Leviticus 11 God laid down absolute standards regarding the diet of the people of Israel: ". . . These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is cloven-footed, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, that shall ye eat. Nevertheless these shall ye not eat of them that chew the cud, or of them that divide the hoof: the camel, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you" (vv. 2-4) Included in the list of animals that they couldn't eat were the rock badger, an undetermined animal called the arnebeth, and pigs (vv. 5-7). It was an abomination if they ate anything out of the sea that didn't have scales or fins (v. 10). There were certain birds that they could eat and couldn't eat. All those dietary laws were given to Israel. Consequently, there was a division between clean and unclean animals in the minds of the Jews. No self-respecting Jew would ever eat anything but clean animals. That included Peter.

You say, "Why did God make the distinction between clean and unclean animals?"

1. A Safeguard from Epidemic Diseases

There are some animals that are more liable to carry epidemic diseases. Since the preparation of food in those days wasn't anything like it is now, God was purifying Israel from the threat of epidemic. The people lived in a close community. They moved in the wilderness as an army of people jammed together. If an epidemic ever broke out, it would have wiped them out. God preserved their existence. But that was a minor reason because He could have kept diseases from them by His sovereign power.

2. A Separation from Other Nations

The major reason is this: God had the people eat certain animals to distinguish them from other peoples. In those days, social intercourse mainly occurred at banquets. Their primary source of entertainment was feasts. So feasting was their primary means for developing relationships. But God gave the Jews distinct dietary laws so they couldn't mix socially with Gentiles. That was the main reason for the dietary laws. When they did enter the land of Canaan, it was still easy for them to become intermingled with the Gentiles. God drew lines so that they would not be able to have social relationships with Gentiles--if they were obedient to those standards. The Gentiles were idolatrous neighbors.

Leviticus 20:25-26 says, "Ye shall therefore put difference between clean beasts and unclean, and between unclean fowls and clean; and ye shall not make your souls abominable by beast, or by fowl, or by any manner of living thing that creepeth on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. And ye shall be holy unto Me; for I, the LORD, am holy, and have separated you from other people, that ye should be Mine. " God was saying, "I don't want you getting involved with Gentiles. I don't want you acting like they act. " The banquets of the Gentiles would often turn into orgies. So God drew the lines. Peter had followed those lines all his life. It must have been difficult for him to see clean and unclean animals mixed together.

3) The Task (vv. 13-16)

a) Peter's Refusal (vv. 13-14)"And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter

said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. "

When the Lord was on earth, Peter made a career out of rebuking Him. This occasion was no different. Peter was zealous for the standards that God had set up. He had never touched anything common. The word "common" means "defiled. " The Lord knows that we learn best line upon line, precept upon precept (Isa. 28:10).

b) God's Repetition (vv. 15-16)"And the voice spoke unto him again a second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice; and the vessel was received up again into heaven. "

b. The Meaning of the Vision

You say, "What does it mean?" Let me give you the specific meaning and then the general meaning.

1) The Specific Meaning

I believe God was abolishing the Old Testament dietary laws. Why? Because they were designed to separate the Jew from the Gentile. But what is the body of Christ designed to do? Unite them. Therefore, the social barrier had to be removed for them to come together. Both groups had to learn to socialize around the table together because they were now one.

a) Eliminating the Problem

In the early years of the church, a problem kept coming up: The Jews and the Gentiles who were in the church wouldn't eat together. Paul dealt with that problem in Romans 14. The Gentiles were abusing their privileges. They would invite Jewish Christians for dinner and serve ham. Paul told the Gentiles, "You're free, and no food is unclean, but you don't need to purposely offend the Jew who doesn't yet understand his liberties in Christ" (vv. 13-15). But Paul also told the Jew, "Don't try to make the Gentiles conform to dietary laws that God has set aside" (v. 3). God wanted to remove the barrier so that both groups could be one in Christ. So I believe that Paul's teaching in Romans 14 verifies that God had abolished the Old Testament dietary laws.

The abolishment of those laws doesn't mean that we should eat everything. We should have some discretion regarding what we eat. But there are no ceremonial dietary laws to keep people apart because God wants us together. The early church finally found the beauty of that unity expressed in their "love feasts" (Jd. 12). They came together to eat.

b) Elucidating the Teaching

(1) Mark 7:14-23--"And when He had called all the people unto Him, He said unto them, Hearken unto Me, every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from outside of a man that, entering into him, can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man" (vv. 14-15). He was talking about spiritual things, not ceremonial things. Then Jesus said, "Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatever thing from outside entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into his stomach, and goeth out

into the draught, purging all foods [lit. `making all meats clean]" (vv. 18-19). When you eat something, it goes through the bodily processes and is eliminated. Then He says, "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (vv. 21-23). Jesus is saying, "I'm not concerned anymore about what you're putting in your mouth; I'm concerned about what's coming out of it. "

(2) 1 Timothy 4:3-4--False teachers will teach people "to abstain from foods, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving by them who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused, if it is received with thanksgiving. " Paul knew that Judaizers were trying to force dietary laws on Gentiles. Paul identifies them as false teachers because there were no more dietary laws.

2) The General Meaning

In Peter's vision, the clean animals represent the Jews, and the unclean animals represent the Gentiles. God was indicating that Jew and Gentile would be mixed together in the church. The tarp, or sheet, is the church. In the mind of God, the church was born in heaven. It then came down to earth and includes both Jew and Gentile. Significantly, at the end of the vision, the sheet was received up into heaven. How will the church leave this world? By the Rapture. God accepts the church mixed with Jew and Gentile into heaven.

Peter had learned that there was no more barrier regarding diet between himself and the Gentiles. He had learned that God accepts both Jew and Gentile in His Church. If God could receive that mixture, then Peter should be able to as well. God was preparing Peter's heart for His work.

3. God Ordains the Timing (vv. 17-18)"Now while Peter was perplexed what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men who were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate, and called, and asked whether Simon, who was surnamed Peter, was lodged there. "

Before Peter had a chance to act, the men arrived. The mathematical probability that those men would knock on the door just after Peter had the vision but before he woke up must be astronomical. God not only prepares the receiver and the messenger, but also ordains the divine timing.

4. God Asks for Obedience (vv. 19-20)"While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise, therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them. "

The Lord wanted active faith from Peter, just like He wanted from Cornelius. God could have sent Cornelius to Peter, but He wanted Peter to exercise his faith. God had planned everything.

The Apostle Paul was obedient to the Lord. Acts 18:9-11 says, "Then spoke the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace; for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee; for I have many people in this city. And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. " Paul was the prepared messenger, God had

prepared the receivers, and then He said, "Now is the right time to teach them." God is in the business of doing that. I pray that we are available for those divine times.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What race of people was the church initially made up of?
2. What was the specific calling that the Lord had given to Peter in Matthew 16:19? In what ways had he fulfilled that calling (Ac. 2:1-40; 8:14-17)?
3. In what ways had God already begun to prepare Peter before the events of Acts 10?
4. What is God's New Covenant design for Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:11-16; 3:3-6)?
5. Describe the mutual scorn that existed between Jew and Gentile.
6. Who were the two people that God prepared as His receiver and messenger of the gospel? What would be the result of their confrontation?
7. Give some verses indicating that God chooses the receiver of the gospel.
8. What is the one thing that God's choice is never opposed to?
9. What was Cornelius's responsibility in Caesarea?
10. Fill in the blank: Election never violates _____.
11. In what way does Acts 10 illustrate that all people have an opportunity to hear the gospel?
12. What were the three distinctions of Gentiles to the Jews? What kind was Cornelius?
13. What group of Gentiles did Paul usually lead to Christ first? Why?
14. How do we know that Cornelius was not saved?
15. What was Cornelius doing when God gave him more information?
16. What did God give Cornelius the opportunity to do?
17. How did Cornelius respond to the instructions that the angel gave him (Ac. 10:7-8)?
18. What special job did God call John the Baptist to accomplish? Why did He call the disciples (Lk. 1:16; Jn. 15:16)?

19. What was the distinction between the animals that Peter saw in his vision? Why did God make that distinction (Ac. 10:12)?

20. In the days when God called out the nation of Israel as His people, what was the primary means of social intercourse? How did God seek to keep the Jews separate from the Gentiles (Lev. 20:25-26)?

21. What is the specific meaning of the vision that God gave to Peter?

22. What problem kept coming up in the early days of the church? How did Paul deal with that problem (Rom. 14:1-15)?

23. What is the general meaning of the vision that God gave to Peter?

Pondering the Principles

1. Read Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11. There are several barriers listed in those verses: racial (Jew and Greek), religious (circumcised and uncircumcised), social (bond and free), cultural (barbarians and Scythians), and sexual (male and female). Examine your attitude with regard to those different barriers. Which ones are you guilty of maintaining? According to those verses, what happened to those barriers? Be sure that you treat everyone equally. Memorize James 2:1: "My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism" (NASB).

2. Look up the following verses: John 15:16; 17:6; Ephesians 1:4; 2:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:13. What do those verses indicate about your salvation? Thank God for what He has done for you. According to Ephesians 2:10, how should you respond to God's sovereign election?

3. According to Romans 1:7, obedience is linked to faith. Read James 2:14-26. Describe the relation of obedience to faith in those verses. What does your obedience to God reveal about your faith in Him? According to Acts 10:7-8, what opportunity did God provide for Cornelius to demonstrate his faith? (see p. 10) Since God gave Cornelius that opportunity, what do you think God gives you the opportunity to do? Be faithful to continually prove your faith.

4. According to Acts 10:17-20, God ordained the time that Cornelius's men would arrive at Peter's door. In the same way, God causes events around you to take place at just the right time. Give some examples from your experience of occasions when God has chosen the perfect time for something to happen. Thank Him for those events. Thank Him for your future, knowing that everything is ordained by Him.

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