

5. Peter's vision left him bewildered and pondering its meaning, but his confusion was short-lived; even as he stood contemplating what he had just seen, the Spirit spoke to him and told him that men had arrived at Simon's house looking for him. He was to go receive them and then return with them to Caesarea. Moreover, Peter was to go without any misgivings, for the One speaking to him had sent them Himself (10:17-20).

In that moment Peter discerned the meaning of the vision and the purpose for it: Without it and the Spirit's explanation, he'd have never accompanied these Gentiles back to Cornelius' house. But now he understood that the issue in the vision wasn't the cleanness or uncleanness of foods, but what God had accomplished through the atoning and reconciling work of His Son. No longer was the human race delineated along the lines of clean and unclean; no longer were God's people to think of their cleanness in terms of separation from certain men. Cleanness was now an issue of the purging of the heart by the Spirit, even as Jesus Himself had indicated (ref. again Mark 7:14-23).

- a. Peter followed the Spirit's instruction and went downstairs to meet the visitors. After identifying himself, he inquired concerning their reason for seeking him, and they explained that their master had dispatched them on the basis of a divine visitation. An angel of God had appeared to him and directed him to send for Peter who would have a message he and his household needed to hear (10:21-22).

Being late in the day, Peter invited them to remain with him that night. Given Cornelius' reputation among the Jews, Peter may possibly have heard of him, but he would have used the time that evening to learn more about this God-fearing Gentile. He may also have sent word to the believers there in Joppa to come meet these visitors and hear their story. Whatever the actual scenario, this remarkable situation was disclosed to some of the brethren, six of whom determined to accompany Peter when he departed the following day (10:23; cf. 11:12).

- b. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house he found a large group of people who had been awaiting his arrival with eager anticipation (10:24). The angel's visitation had convinced Cornelius that his men would both locate Peter and prevail upon him to accompany them back to Caesarea. And so he had used the intervening days to contact his relatives and close friends and assemble them in his home so that they, too, could hear Peter's message when he arrived.

As Peter entered Cornelius' home the centurion immediately fell prostrate before him. Being a follower of the God of Israel, Cornelius would have known the Law's prohibition of idolatry, and so his action should be viewed as a gesture of reverent honor and submission rather than an act of worship. It's also quite possible that the divine backdrop behind this encounter and the anticipation leading up to it caused Cornelius to be overcome when Peter finally arrived at his home. But whatever Peter's apostolic status and high calling that day, he was nothing but a man – a weak and impotent vessel, made suitable and effective only by the Lord's purpose and power (10:25-26).

Cornelius' instinctive regard for Peter was inappropriate, but the same had been true of Peter. Prior to his vision, he'd have regarded Cornelius as unclean and would have staunchly refused to enter his house; the man who had afforded him undue honor Peter would have held in contempt. But the heavenly ministration had accomplished its purpose. As shocking as it was, the Spirit's word to Peter had not been lost upon him; he was standing there before Cornelius precisely because he could no longer regard *any* man as unclean or unholy (10:28-29).

Peter had gotten this message, but Cornelius and his household and guests also needed to understand it. This assembly of God-fearing Gentiles was well aware of the dividing wall the Law raised between the sons of Israel and foreigners ("*You yourselves know...*"), and they were likely just as amazed by Peter's presence with them as he was. At that moment they couldn't have known exactly what God had in store for them, *but Peter's introductory words indicated that He had sent His apostle to make known to them a new paradigm of righteousness and relationship with Him that transcended the Law*. And so, after recounting to Peter the details of the angelic visitation four days earlier, Cornelius eagerly appealed to the apostle to share with them the message God had prepared for them (10:30-33).

- c. Peter prefaced his proclamation by affirming his own new-found conviction: God is not given to partiality, but receives any and all who call upon Him and come to Him in sincerity of heart and life (10:34-35). Two things are important to note with respect to this statement: First, Peter wasn't suggesting that there is a human righteousness that earns access to God. But neither was he implying that a "God-fearing" life is the ground of a person's salvation; God wasn't rewarding these men with salvation because they were living devout and disciplined lives. Both the immediate and canonical contexts point in a different direction.
- In this context, Peter was affirming that God *isn't* a respecter of persons – just the opposite of the two conclusions indicated above. People naturally believe that human piety and effort will gain God's approval and perhaps even compel His favorable response. But nothing could be further from the truth. When the angel declared to Cornelius that his prayers and alms had come before God (cf. 10:4, 30-31), he wasn't acknowledging an earned reward, but the fact that God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile when they call upon Him and seek to know Him. He hears and recognizes the one as readily and sincerely as He does the other.
  - This same understanding is supported by the overall biblical context. Peter's acknowledgment wasn't a new revelation, but one that Moses himself had promoted to the sons of Israel: The God of Israel is the Creator and Lord of *all*. He alone is God and so possesses heaven and earth and all that is in them. And being the singular, sovereign Lord, all men come under His lordship. But more than that, He also executes His rule in the same way for all; He treats every man the same regardless of who they are or what they can offer him (Deuteronomy 10:14-18).

This truth doesn't negate the fact that God chose Israel in Abraham to be His peculiar people; *rather, His impartiality is critical to that choice*, for it emphasizes that it had nothing to do with either Abraham or his descendents (cf. Genesis 12:1-3 with Joshua 24:2-3; Deuteronomy 7:1-8). Yahweh chose Israel because of His own self-originating, uncompelled love, but that same love extended the covenant and its blessings to individuals outside the patriarchal line. Nothing about the sons of Israel set them apart and provoked God's favor (quite the opposite, the nation was perpetually unfaithful and rebellious), *but that very lack of distinction explained why divine favor could reach beyond Abraham's offspring to other peoples and nations*. The uniform state of Adam's race together with God's righteous impartiality meant that He could be just as receptive and merciful to the brutal Assyrians who turned to Him as to the children of Abraham when they cried to Him in their bondage in Egypt (cf. Exodus 3:1-10; Jonah 3-4).

Throughout salvation history God's actions had revealed His unbiased character and orientation, but for that very reason they had also prophesied of the coming day of salvation. The Holy One of Israel who is no respecter of persons was going to send His Servant to secure cleansing, righteousness, reconciliation and peace on behalf of *all* of Adam's race. In that way He would stand as the rallying point and refuge for the nations as well as the sons of Israel (Isaiah 11:1ff, 49:1ff).

That day had come at last, so that Peter could declare to Cornelius and the gathered assembly that the peace promised by Yahweh in the Scriptures and now being proclaimed to the sons of Israel pertained to the whole world. The God who, through Moses, had declared Himself to be the Lord of all had now, in the fullness of the times, attested that truth in the most glorious manner: He displayed and exalted His lordship by becoming a sovereign *Savior* in His Servant Messiah (ref. Isaiah 43:1-21, 45:14-25). Peter's words highlighted that Yahweh's universal lordship has been fully realized in the redeeming lordship of Jesus Christ (10:36).

Peter declared to his hearers that God's impartiality had brought him to them, but that impartiality has its focal point in His provision of forgiveness and life in His Son (10:34-36). This was his point of departure for his proclamation of Jesus and His gospel. Cornelius and those with him were "God-fearing" men familiar with the Law of Moses and its prescriptions. Though not a proselyte to Judaism, Cornelius engaged in many of the Jews' pious practices, including prayers and alms-giving. These men knew the Law, but they also knew something of Jesus of Nazareth, His ministry and the events surrounding his death (10:37-38).

They had a certain knowledge of Jesus, but they lacked an understanding of the significance of His life and death; *they lacked an understanding of the gospel*. These men were devout, but as men who hadn't stepped across the threshold leading from the age of preparation into the age of fulfillment: They knew and worshipped God according to His Old Covenant revelation, and it was necessary that they become worshippers "in spirit and truth" – men who "*worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.*"

In His three years of ministry Jesus had become beloved and notorious in Israel, and so these Gentiles may well have heard of Him during that time. But even if that weren't the case, almost certainly they were aware of His crucifixion. Everyone in the vicinity of Jerusalem knew what happened that day and the news would have soon reached Caesarea. It is also quite possible they had heard stories concerning His resurrection from the dead, but one thing is certain: They didn't understand the monumental significance of that supernatural event (10:39-40).

So Peter appropriately made Jesus' resurrection a focal point of his message, noting that it had been attested by a group of witnesses to whom Jesus appeared for many days afterward. But these appearances were neither random nor intended to simply substantiate the fact of His resurrection; they were purposefully directed toward individuals previously chosen by God to be witnesses of His Son. So Jesus used His post-resurrection time with those men to instruct and prepare them to take His gospel to the sons of Israel and beyond to the ends of the earth (10:41-42; cf. 1:1-8). Peter was one of those chosen witnesses, and now the Spirit had led him to proclaim the gospel to this house full of Gentiles.

Doubtless Peter's message went beyond Luke's brief account, but he captured the summary components of it – the truths that are essential to any gospel proclamation: Jesus' substitutionary death (10:39; cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23), resurrection and exaltation to become Lord, Savior, and Judge of all men and the consequent universal obligation of repentance and faith in Him (10:40-42; cf. 2:22ff, 3:12-26, 4:5-12, 5:29-32, 7:1-53, 8:26-35, 13:14ff, 17:22ff).

Luke's concern wasn't to precisely recount Peter's sermon, but to show that his proclamation of Jesus and His gospel was according to divine purpose and his own calling as an apostle. The details of Peter's sermon weren't the issue, but the fact that he was carrying out Jesus' mandate of global witness in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit had prepared Peter and Cornelius for this meeting and brought them together; now He was going to fulfill His own role as the One who enables faith in Jesus, imparts His life to men and joins them to Him.

- d. Peter's words conveyed Jesus' gospel to his hearers, but it was the Spirit who made them *living* words. Luke recorded that, while Peter was still speaking, the Spirit came upon them all (10:44). God had sent Peter to preach Christ to these Gentiles, but with the predetermination that his words would bear the fruit of life. Peter's gospel was important to what transpired – faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ, but it was the Spirit's power, not a well-constructed and persuasive sermon, that brought life out of death (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

The Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household and guests, but in such a way that Peter and the brethren couldn't mistake what was happening. The Spirit's manifestation was palpable, and that alone was sufficient to provoke their amazement. But Luke tied their amazement to something more significant, namely the fact that this outpouring was occurring with Gentiles (10:45-46).

Peter and his associates were overcome with amazement because the phenomenon of Pentecost was recurring, this time in relation to a gathered group of individuals who were neither ethnic Jews nor Gentile proselytes. Peter had witnessed this outpouring in Samaria (8:14-17), but neither he nor any of the apostles or believers had experienced this with Gentiles. Other than the Ethiopian, Luke provides no indication that, to this point in time, any Gentiles had come to faith in Christ and been born of the Spirit (note that the believers with Peter were Jews – 10:45). If any other Gentile conversions had occurred, Luke is silent about it and the subsequent context shows that the Church and apostles were unaware of it.

Luke's intention was to show this episode to be a crucial milestone in the life and progress of the Church. Up until that day, Christ's Church was entirely *Jewish*, whether circumcised Jews, Samaritans who traced their descent to the ten tribes of Israel, or proselytes to Judaism. So Pentecost had been an exclusively Jewish phenomenon, but now the Spirit had orchestrated an encounter by which He would extend Pentecost to the Gentiles. When Peter and his associates witnessed this group of Gentiles – including a Roman centurion – speaking in tongues and proclaiming God's glory (10:46), they knew exactly what this meant; Peter had personally experienced the very same thing on the day of Pentecost (2:1-11).

Peter had come to Cornelius' house convinced by his vision that God is no respecter of persons and that He cleanses Gentile and Jew alike. Now he understood more fully what that implied: Yahweh's purpose in Christ wasn't merely to cleanse the Gentiles, but to bring them into His covenant household as equal members with the believing sons of Israel and as equal sharers in Christ's Spirit. *God's purpose was to make of Jew and Gentile one new man in Christ, the Last Adam* (Ephesians 2:11-22). This was a radical and profound development – one that the fledgling Jewish Church would scarcely be able to fathom. For that reason, it would surely be questioned and even resisted. If the Samaritan ingathering required apostolic attestation, the Gentile one did all the more. God knew this, and so sent *Peter* to Caesarea, but He also insured that Peter would have a multitude of corroborating witnesses when he gave his defense (11:12).

Jesus had commanded global mission, even as the prophets had promised global purging and ingathering. The messianic kingdom was to embrace the whole world, realizing God's ancient promise to Abraham that, in his seed, all the families of the earth would enter into His blessing. Now that day had come and the globalizing of the covenant community was underway. Only minutes earlier Peter had proclaimed to his Gentile audience that all the prophets spoke of forgiveness coming to everyone who receives Yahweh's Servant-Messiah (10:43); now that prophetic word was being fulfilled before his very eyes.

- e. Peter understood the meaning of what he was witnessing, and so commanded that these who had now been filled with the Spirit be baptized just as the Jewish believers had on Pentecost (10:47-48). God had baptized them with His Spirit; how could he possibly withhold from them the water baptism that attests it?