

## Session #10: Acts Chapter 10

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It is the ambiguity of how to live the faith is what most people struggle with. We want hard and fast rules and guidelines that define for us just what is expected for us. But to paraphrase Isaiah – God’s ways are not our ways. (Isaiah 55:8-9). For about three years the Apostles and disciples of Jesus sat at his feet and listened, observed and took in his message. Now that Jesus has ascended they must discern for themselves how they are meant to live out the good news that Jesus brought. Just as you and I must figure out what it means to be a follower of Jesus in our present circumstances. In this chapter we will look at a question that the Apostles and disciples must have been asking themselves and would be an ongoing conversation for the first few decades of the early Church: Is what Jesus gave us only for the Jewish



people, or are others (Gentiles/non-Jews) meant to be brought into this faith? Is the gospel meant to be addressed to all people? And if the later should they become Jewish as a part of their whole experience? Up to this point the work of the Apostles has been focused only on the Jews and done within the Temple. St. Peter is lead to an experience in chapter ten that will lead the way to the final answer just as St. Philip did with the Ethiopian in Chapter eight. St. Paul will later become an outspoken advocate of Christianity being seen as something different from Judaism. As St. Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians: *Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.* (7:19-20). One scholar suggested that St. Luke in putting together these two “conversion stories – St. Paul on the road to Damascus and St. Peter and Cornelius, he is describing the process by which the early Church moved towards their final decision (at the council of Jerusalem, chapter 15).

*Paul changed from seeing the Jesus movement as a threat to the will of God to seeing it as the very fulfillment of God's plan. Similarly, Peter is moved from perceiving the messianic movement as a Jews-only affair to understanding it as God's blessing for Gentiles as well.*

*New Collegeville Bible Commentary The Acts of the Apostles by Dennis Hamm*

In these early years of discerning what it meant to come to faith in Jesus Christ, the Church struggled to know the way. In chapter ten we will see how God helps St. Peter to better understand what is God’s way. We will see that the baptism of Cornelius will open an new chapter in the history of Christianity.

## 10:1-8 Vision of Cornelius

This is a great turning point in the mission and ministry of the Christian Church because for the first-time a in our reading of Acts a gentile will be directed by God to be baptized and admitting into the fellowship. God is repealing the law that He established on Mount Sinai (Genesis 17:10-14). The power of the Holy Spirit has been pour out onto ALL peoples; the Spirit of God who can purify the souls of anyone – pagan, gentile, Jew...

**10:1 Caesarea** Did you know that there are over 40 cities in the U.S. named Springfield? The name Caesarea is a derivative of the name Caesar. It makes sense that in the time that Rome was dominate in this part of the world that there would be multiple cities named Caesarea. This Caesarea is a port city on the Mediterranean about 30 miles north of Joppa (60 miles from Jerusalem) and not to be confused with the town Caesarea Philippi mentioned in the gospels of Matthew and Mark.

**a man named Cornelius** A Roman centurion who must have been stationed to command some of the troops stationed in Caesarea. We know from the Biblical text that he was “God-fearing”, given to charity and a man of prayer. Cornelius is also to remind us of the centurion at the foot of the Cross who ended up believing in Jesus.

**The Cohort called Italica** *“In the Roman military set-up, there was first of all the “legion”. It was a force of 6,000 men... In every legion, there were ten cohorts. A cohort therefore had 600 men...”*  
Taken from Barclay’s Acts of the Apostles  
Commentary

This specific Cohort, or six hundred men was an auxiliary unit of archers. Originally formed in Italy but later sent to Syria around 69 AD.

**10:2 a devout man who feared God** Cornelius was a Gentile. He was not Jewish but this short phrase tells us that he was one of many Gentiles who understood (probably better than most Jews) the presence of God in the world and sought to honor and adore that God. These Gentile “God-fearers” were a part of Jewish experience since Old Testament times. (read about Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-18) They would worship God, attend Synagogue worship, visit the Temple on Holy Days, possibly read the sacred scriptures and follow the moral and religious teachings. They would stop short of getting circumcised and because of that they were not considered “converts”.

**used to give alms generously** Once again (remembering Tabitha/Dorcas from Chapter 9) we have a person who understands and has completely incorporated the lessons of Christ on wealth into their lives. Cornelius wealth is given where it is needed (to the Jewish people) not just to his pet projects. The faithful Jews (and faithful people today) would see commitment to prayer and commitment to the poor as signs of genuine piety.

**10:3 about three o’clock** In some translations we will read the ninth hour which would be 3pm. It is significant that this vision occurred at this time. Daniel was also visited by and angel at the ninth hour or 3pm (Daniel 9:20-21) Yes, it is the same hour that Jesus died on the cross, but it is

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also the hour of the day that the evening sacrifice is offered at the altar at the Temple. It was the practice of the Jews (even to this day) to stop in their work and to pray. Here we have a gentile who has taken into his life, without becoming Jewish, Jewish prayer practices and ways. Three o'clock is also the hour, at the moment of Christ's death, that the veil of the Temple separating the Holy of Holy's was torn in two top to bottom. As we talked in our study of the gospel of Luke this act of tearing is understood by Christians as the knocking down of the Old Covenantal ways. In other words, the Old Covenant has passed away. As we move further into this account we can understand the connection of God challenging the Church to see that holding onto past Old Covenantal ways is no longer desired by God.

**10:4 *ascended as a memorial to God*** In offering burnt offerings it was believed that the smoke told if God accepted it or not. Smoke that goes up, ascended means God has accepted the sacrifice. So, to *ascend as a memorial* means that God took notice of Cornelius and his prayer; the Angel was affirming that. From all that we have seen we can see that Cornelius was a pious and holy man.

**10:6 *Simon, a tanner*** This is a perfect example of seeking to understand some of the smaller, seemingly insignificant details helps to give a fuller experience and knowledge to the whole story. The important thing to see here is that the occupation of tanner was one avoided at all costs by a devout Jew because of dealing with blood which would mean a constant need to seek religious cleansing or more probably to live as an ritually unclean Jew. To be in the house of a tanner would be to become ritually unclean themselves. We can understand from the fact that Peter is staying here that he has already begun to alter his views on some of the "laws" that once defined his life. Following in the footsteps of Jesus.

**10:7 *a devout soldier*** We are to understand the devotion of the soldier as not toward his master, Cornelius but the devotion showed by this man is to God. Like Cornelius this soldier is a believer in God, or so suggested by scholarship.

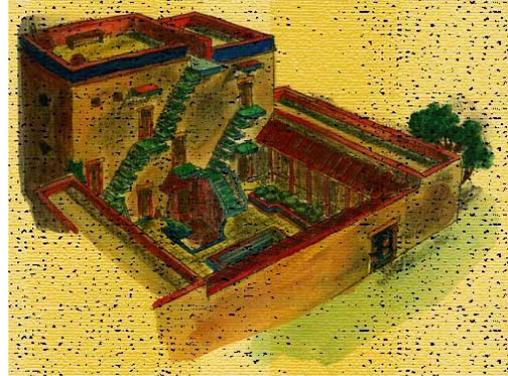
### **10:9-23 Peter's Vision**

Ah, the power in the presence of the Lord. In this next section we peak into the life of Peter. He is still in Joppa and in a quiet moment takes that opportunity to pray. It is in the midst of his conversation with God that Peter is prepared for his interaction with Cornelius. We will see, once again, that the Apostles understandings of the teachings of Christ was a process.

### **10:9-16**

**10:9 *sixth hour*** We have talked about this before. In those early centuries the way of marking time was by dividing the 24 hour day into two parts: 6am to 6pm and 6pm to 6am. 1<sup>st</sup> hour - 6am; 2<sup>nd</sup> hour - 7am; third hour – 8am... So according to the hour it was lunch time – 12 noon

**On the housetop** Because of the hot weather of the area homes were made flat with a roof that became like porches or terrace. Families would go up there to catch the cooler evening air and even sleep up there on extreme hot nights. But it was a way to find privacy during the day and with a few potted palms placed strategically; added some shade. The roof usually had three layers: the wooden beams, straw mats, and a clay top. The clay would be pressed down tight with a stone roller.



**10:10 he fell into a trance** Peter went off to a quiet place to pray and while in prayer God led him into a mystical state of rapt attention. Peter was given a vision while he was in communion with God.

**10:14 certainly not, sir** Peter offers a very firm but polite “No”. Being a good Jew he protests because like the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 4:14) his lips have never eaten unclean food

**never eaten...common or unclean** As a faithful Jew Peter would never have eaten the food forbidden by the Torah (Leviticus 11). To explain what it means to eat Kosher is difficult because it has as much to do with what foods are permitted and not permitted as it has to do with how those foods are prepared. For our study, it is important to understand two things.

1. How to eat and what to eat are as ingrained into Peter’s life as how to breath; how to fish. It is not what he does but who he is. Imagine, as a devout Catholic, you are being told that we can now include Pizza and beer on the altar as our Eucharistic sacrifice. Peter was scandalized by the idea that something he had lived with, believed it, defined him was now being challenged. No wonder it took three times before Peter would accept it.
2. These dietary restrictions are not simply an act of obedience but have become for the Christian community a moral dilemma as well. Their dietary restrictions kept the Jewish converts from sitting down to table with Gentiles converts. To now eat what was once considered unclean means they could be seen as accepting the ways of the pagans. Look at how the Pharisees challenged Jesus. The feeling of outrage we might have is minimal compared to the challenge of acceptance that Peter is facing.

Through this vision God is calling Peter to realize that the Old Covenant, the old ways are now gone. Jesus has brought about a New Covenant that is not defined primarily by action but by mercy, love and acceptance.

**10:15 What God has cleansed** One of the great battles that Jesus endured during His time of teaching was to challenge those in Jewish leadership to understand that all ritual practice is empty unless it is done as an outward sign of an inward state of being. In Mark 7 we can read of one such discourse (1-24) and in the end Jesus says: *Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a*

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*man are what defile him.” (7:15). It was in this and other conversation that Jesus abolished the old ways of understanding what God expects of His people and established new ways under a new covenant*

**10:16 *this happened three times*** Here we can see the strong and stubborn nature of St. Peter. It took “the voice” three time to convince Peter that God was serious. We should not beat ourselves up when we finally realize something that we should have *known* long ago. God has a loving and forgiving nature and, as we see with Peter, doesn’t take our arrogance personally.

### **10:17-23**

Peter must now try to understand the vision. Certainly there is the issue of eating unclean animals but there is a larger issue to consider as well and this will only come to Peter when he hears of the invitation by Cornelius. Yes, keeping the ritual purity laws are now in question but there is also the issue of whether Gentiles (non-Jews) should be allowed into the fledging community of believers. Jesus was a Jew who primarily preached to Jewish communities but as the message of Christ grows all sorts of people are coming to belief. Should the message be denied them, should baptism be denied them simply because of an accident of birth?

**10:19 *ponder the vision*** Notice that the Holy Spirit does not say, ‘Here is the explanation of the vision you have receive’ but ‘I have sent them’, to show thereby that obedience is called for and that it is not a matter of asking questions. This sufficed for Peter to realize he had to listen to the Holy Spirit. St. John Chrysostom, Homily on Acts 22

**10:23 *So he invited them in*** The delegation from Cornelius understood that a strict Jew could not have gentiles into their home without causing the home to become unclean. So out of respect they waited at the gate assuming that they would not go much further. But we see that Peter has accepted the spirit of the vision from God. Not only does he invite them in but they spend the night

### **Peter Travels to Caesarea 10:24-33**

**10:24 *called together his kinsman and close friends***

We assume one must know they are lost to be found. How often have I heard people tell me once they have come to the Catholic



Faith they never knew how empty their lives were until they came home to the Church. Isaiah says: *I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.* (65:1) It is also true that when we evangelize or tell one person of Christ we often find a whole family behind them waiting to be saved. Cornelius knew what was truth before he even met Peter and he wanted his whole family to know it.

**10:26 Peter lifted him up** Peter is uncomfortable with Cornelius' adoration not because of the honor Cornelius is bestowing him, but for fear of the idea that he was being worshiped. As a Jew and a man of deep faith Peter knew that no knee shall bend except at the name of the Lord so all such worship belongs to God through Jesus Christ. He would also be sensitive to the Roman custom to bestow god qualities and power to human beings. We will see Paul and Barnabas deal with inappropriate acts of worshiping false gods in Acts 14.

**10:28 but God has shown me** We can see two things clearly. That Peter is still struggling with this new concept of acceptance of all things as clean and it is almost as if he is making this statement to convince himself. More importantly it shows Peter's great love and obedience to God. How often do we "know" the right thing to do but do not do it because it would make us or the other person "uncomfortable", or we aren't sure how people will understand our words or actions.

*Personal Note:* When my daughter was about 3 or 4 we had a rare opportunity to go out to eat at a cheap restaurant. (All we could afford at the time.) After we ordered our food and brought it to the table we began to "dig in" when our daughter reminded us we hadn't said grace yet which was our custom each night before dinner. Uncertain what to do (because we "adults" didn't want to be embarrassed) but not wanting to discourage or confuse our daughter we bowed our heads and made the sign of the cross and said our prayers. That small moment brought me one more step closer to understanding the importance of living out our faith in front of others regardless of comfort level.

***I should not call any man common or unclean*** regardless of St. Peter's struggle through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Old Covenant is shattered. The old ways of thinking and relating to one another and to food is now gone. All are one in the Lord.

**10:30 "Four days ago"** The literal translation from the original Greek would read: *from the fourth day up to this hour.*

**10:33 here in the presence of God** Another shift in the way Peter understands how God now functions in the world. Cornelius is offering that God is present with them in his home, but for an orthodox Jew God can only be present in the Temple. Peter is understanding the direction of God that God is in all and can be found everywhere

***to listen to what you have been commanded by the Lord*** Cornelius and his family sit down to listen to Peter and because he has prepared his heart through prayer, fasting and almsgiving for so many years he has received the grace of God to know what Peter is about to say comes not from man but from God. In *Lumen Gentium* from the Second Vatican Council it is written: *...those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation."*

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## **Peter's Speech 10:34-43**

This is Peter's fifth speech proclaiming the story of faith. (Acts 2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32)

This too follows the same basic outline:

1. Jesus sent by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit is the Lord and Messiah.
2. Jesus taught and healed those in need of physical and spiritual healing.
3. He was put to death but arose from the dead on the third day.
4. He appeared to His disciples and commissioned them to preach in His name.
5. Whoever believes in Him and is baptized in His name will receive forgiveness of sins.

**10:34 *no partiality*** Peter reminds his listeners that God shows no preference to one nation over another in this New Covenant age. All peoples regardless of nation or creed stand as equal candidates for God's blessing. We can see similar teachings in Romans 2:10-11 and Galatians 3:28.

**10:38 *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth*** When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan we see the dove and the voice of God confirming his pleasure and identifying Jesus as His son. All that was written about in the Old Testament, all that happened was to prepare for the coming of the Messiah – the Son of God – Jesus Christ. Jesus is the summit of faith and all that has happened since his life, death and resurrection to live out the salvation He brought.

**10:39 *We are witnesses of all he did*** For Luke it is important to show that what has been told of Jesus was not just made up but in fact there were witnesses to the miracles and teachings of Jesus and that the apostles. Peter was there every step of the way and can and does give eye witness testimony to what he saw and did.

***Hanging on a tree*** What is the cross of Christ made of? Wood and wood comes from trees. We have already heard this phrase used for the crucifixion in chapter 5 of Acts.

**10:42 *He commissioned us*** In this verse Peter identifies two of the main themes of New Testament teaching and preaching. The first is the idea that Jesus was and is the Messiah, the one the Jews have been waiting for. The second is the idea of God's final divine judgement. The first theme was important for the Jews and the second was one for the Gentiles.

**10:43 *through his name*** Forgiveness for our sinful nature comes when the name of Jesus Christ is offered in prayer in Baptism. Today we see this as a foundational concept in so many of our prayers and Sacraments. Example: On Sunday the priest will end his prayers often with the phrase "...in Christ's name..." Once again we see the power in the simple prayer of Jesus' name.

## **Baptism of Cornelius 10:44-48**

What we see in this short account is a Pentecost experience for the Gentile community. Just like the Pentecost we read about in chapter two there are similar elements.

1. Preaching of the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ (verses 34-43)
2. The descent of the Holy Spirit (verse 44)

3. Those receiving the Spirit speaking in tongues (verse 46)
4. Baptism (verse 48)

**10:44 *the Holy Spirit fell upon all*** While Peter was still preaching the power of the Holy Spirit comes over the room and they all began speaking and proclaim the glory of God. One could see this as a Pentecost experience for the Gentile community

**10:45 *were amazed*** Here we can see that they were following God's command to take the preaching and teaching to the gentiles was something they were doing but still not convinced themselves. God does not require our acceptance and agreement with what we are asked to do.

**10:49 *invited him to stay for a few days*** We could blow this off as simply a polite gesture on the part of Cornelius and his household; but there is more here. Our faith is sustained not on just one moment but on all the moments that follow. The household needed to know more if they were to live their faith fully. Peter and his group stayed so that they might instruct and teach the newly converted.

**Final Thought:** Philip was living in Caesarea at this time. Why did God not command this exchange to happen between Cornelius and Philip? Scholar suggest that what we have just studied is a huge step for the early Church. Having this exchange happen between Cornelius and the first Pope of our faith lends authority to the action. If Philip had been the one Cornelius went to (not to suggest that Cornelius was doing anything other than looking to inform his already serious faith), than this moment would have been nothing more than a small blip in a series of blips that the Church would have eventually had to deal with. God orchestrating this moment shows the path the Church is expected to go – opening its doors to ALL peoples.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. It has been a long standing tradition that the Church required that all Catholics fast from eating meat on Fridays. Now the Church simply asks for the faithful to fast on Fridays but does not specify from what (except in Lent). What are your thoughts on fasting? Do you see it as a good thing, and if so why?
2. Cornelius was a prayerful man. Take a moment to describe your prayer life. What does it add to your day? To your life?
3. The Holy Spirit will move where it wills. Have you ever experienced or seen a "Holy Spirit moment"?

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Baptism of Jesus: 438

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