

“Sheets”

Acts 10:1-11:18 (10:9-16 read) ¹

In the weeks following Jesus’ Resurrection & Ascension, the believers in Jerusalem had been on a real roller coaster. On Pentecost morning, they had seen several thousand new believers join their number,² but before long, Stephen, one of the first Deacons, had also become their first martyr.³

Peter had been granted divine ability to heal the sick,⁴ but then he had been arrested, and after that, Ananias and Sapphira were struck down because of their deceitfulness.⁵ As the numbers of believers grew, persecution increased as well, driving many followers of Jesus out of Jerusalem.

Good things came from that dispersion, such as Philip’s amazing encounter with a Ethiopian government official that resulted in a baptism in a roadside pond;⁶ but hard things came, too, with Saul of Tarsus persecuting and arresting every believer he could find, both near and far. Some had reported that Saul had experienced a dramatic conversion experience, but many found that difficult to believe.⁷ It was also hard for many to believe the reports that God’s Holy Spirit had been given to the despised Samaritans just as had happened to the Jewish believers on Pentecost morning.⁸

Amazing as all this had been, what was about to happen in what we know as Acts 10-11 was more dramatic still. Acts 10:1-11:18 is the longest single narrative in the book of Acts. It actually tells the same story twice, which shows how important it was in Luke’s estimation.

Ancient writers didn’t have the unlimited writing space we have in digital documents today. New Testament writers usually used rolls of a material called papyrus, a forerunner of paper, and those rolls were usually not longer than thirty-five feet. The book of Acts as we have it would be almost precisely that length, and Luke had far more information available to him than would fit in that space; so the fact that he recorded this story, not once, but twice, tells us that Luke thought this was crucial.

Indeed, what we’re about to examine is so important that Luke included it a third time during Peter’s testimony at the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15. I invite you to open your Bibles to the beginning of Acts 10, and let’s see what Luke thought was so very important. This account can be divided into seven scenes, and what Pastor Andrew read was part of the second scene.

Scene 1: Cornelius’ Vision (Acts 10:1-8)

Our story begins in the city of Caesarea, about sixty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast. Originally a small village called “Strabo’s Tower,” Herod the Great had rebuilt the city about 12 B.C., renamed it, and made it the seat of government for the region.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on 5.31.20, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pentecost Sunday.

² Acts 2:14-41

³ Acts 7:54-60

⁴ Acts 3:1-10

⁵ Acts 4-5

⁶ Acts 8:26-40

⁷ Acts 9:1-19

⁸ Acts 8:14-17

Caesarea was largely Gentile, and was a showplace for Roman culture, and the Jews hated it and everything for which it stood. According to the historian, Josephus, it was a riot between the Jews and Gentiles in Caesarea that led to the Jewish War against Rome in A.D. 66 that eventually led to the destruction of the Temple forever.

As our text opens, we meet a Roman soldier named Cornelius who was stationed in Caesarea with the Italian Regiment. We're told that Cornelius was a centurion, which means that he was, in our terminology, either a very senior enlisted man or a junior officer, charged with leadership of about one hundred men.

Centurions are generally represented sympathetically in the New Testament,⁹ and Cornelius is no exception. We're told that "*he and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*"¹⁰ Reading between the lines, we might conclude that Cornelius was a moral man who was unimpressed with the pagan religions of the Empire and was at the same time drawn to the monotheism of Judaism, but without becoming a full member of that faith.¹¹

The afternoon prayers and sacrifices in the Temple took place at "the ninth hour," or 3 p.m., and as scene one begins, Cornelius is at prayer at this appointed time. During his prayers, Cornelius "*distinctly saw*" an angel from God, who gave very specific directions: "*Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.*"¹² And then the angel vanished.

Military folk are accustomed to following orders, so although this made no sense to him, Cornelius called two of his servants and one of his trusted soldiers and dispatched them at once to Joppa, about thirty miles south of Caesarea.

Scene Two: Peter's Vision (Acts 10:9-16)

About noon the next day, as Cornelius' emissaries were nearing Joppa, Peter went up on the roof of his host's home to pray. Simon, his host, was a tanner of animal hides, which was a rather messy profession that obviously involved working with the skins of dead animals, some of which were "unclean" by Jewish ritual standards. This meant that Simon was ritually unclean all the time, and that accounted for his business being located outside the city.

Based on what follows, we can assume that Simon was both Jewish and a follower of Jesus. We don't know how Peter came to be staying with him. Perhaps Peter was on a preaching mission of some sort.

In those days, Jewish folk usually ate twice a day, at mid-morning and late afternoon, and it would appear that Peter had missed his breakfast, so he was hungry. After he asked his host's servants for something to eat, Peter had taken the exterior stairs to the roof, probably because it was cooler up there. Such houses often had awnings to shield the sun, and there was usually a breeze from the water.

⁹ See Matthew 8:5-13, 27:54; Acts 22:26, 27:43 and parallels.

¹⁰ Acts 10:2

¹¹ The requirement of circumcision was off-putting for many such candidates.

¹² Acts 10:5-6

Now it was Peter's turn to have a vision. *"He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as animals and birds."*¹³

Peter heard a Voice, which he may have recognized as Jesus' Voice, telling him to get up, kill one of the animals, and eat it. While the sheet apparently included both clean and unclean animals, Peter was offended by the implication that it would be acceptable for him to eat one of the unclean animals, and he objected strongly to that idea. This strange sequence was repeated, not once, not twice, but three times, and then the vision ended.¹⁴

Just as the sheet disappeared into heaven, Peter heard shouting down below: "Hello, there! Do you have a man named Simon who goes by the nickname Peter staying here?" And the Spirit of God said to Peter, *"Get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with these men, for I have sent them."*¹⁵

Scene Three: The Emissaries Arrive (Acts 10:17-23a)

Peter went down and met Cornelius's emissaries, heard the nature of their request, and invited them to stay overnight. It was easier for a Jew to host Gentiles in his home than for a Jew to go into a Gentile home, because as host, the Jew could ensure that ritual laws were observed. But it was still quite a stretch for Peter to do this (and, of course, it wasn't his house!). God's transforming Spirit was at work.

Scene Four: Cornelius Explains (Acts 10:23b-33)

The next day, Peter started out with Cornelius's men, but, since he had no idea what he was getting into, Peter took six Jewish believers with him as witnesses and for support. On the next day—the fourth day since Cornelius's vision—they arrived back at his home in Caesarea.

Because he was confident that Peter's coming was God-ordained, Cornelius had already gathered his family and close friends to hear God's message. And because he was familiar with Jewish ritual laws, Cornelius was unsure whether Peter would be willing to enter the house, so Cornelius met him at the door.

Peter did go in, thanks to his own vision, but under protest: *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"*¹⁶

Cornelius recounted his experience of the vision, concluding with, *"So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."*¹⁷ Seldom, I suppose, has any preacher had a more receptive audience!

¹³ Acts 10:11-12

¹⁴ In his shock, Peter forgot that Jesus had declared all foods "clean" (Mark 7:5-23).

¹⁵ Acts 10:20

¹⁶ Acts 10:28-29

¹⁷ Acts 10:33

Scene Five: Peter Explains (Acts 10:34-43)

Peter began his message with the lesson he had learned from the vision: *“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*¹⁸ We who have heard and known this Good News all our lives cannot possibly know how upsetting and difficult this new understanding was to Jewish folk.

We Gentiles need to always keep in mind that we have been grafted into the Tree that is Israel. We do not replace Israel in the Plan of God. We join the redeemed of Israel in God’s coming Kingdom.¹⁹

The inclusion of the Gentiles—that is, every human redeemed by the Blood of Jesus—in the larger “Israel” has always been God’s plan, and it was foreshadowed even in the call of Abraham.²⁰ Jesus had implied that He was bringing salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews,²¹ and He had commanded that the Good News be taken to all nations;²² but it was going to take something more dramatic to drive the point home so that His Jewish followers understood that He was serious about the mission to the Gentiles. And something more dramatic was about to happen.²³

After his introductory remarks, Peter gave the most complete account of Jesus’ ministry that any New Testament sermon records, and what we have here is surely just the “Cliff Notes” version of what he said. In this sermon, Peter referred to Jesus as “Lord of all,” which is the first such reference in the New Testament.²⁴

“Lord of all” is a phrase the Older Testament applies only to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, recognizing that God is Creator and Lord of all that is. Peter’s vision was already having a dramatic effect on his understanding of Who Jesus really is. For us, too, the conviction that “Jesus is Lord,” can lead to surprising and unexpected insights, as God’s Spirit grants new understandings that we would never have seen on our own.

Scene Six: The Fire Falls (Acts 10:44-48)

This is where things got really interesting. Peter hadn’t finished his sermon, and he hadn’t given an “invitation,” but when he pointed out that *“All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name,”*²⁵ the hearts of his hearers responded in faith to that implied invitation, and the Holy Spirit descended on those Gentile believers just as had happened to the Jewish believers on Pentecost morning. It was a **Gentile Pentecost!**

We’re told that *the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being*

¹⁸ Acts 10:34-35

¹⁹ Romans 11:11-24

²⁰ Genesis 12:1-3. See also Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-7.

²¹ John 10:16, 12:32

²² Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8

²³ It would take very nearly a bolt of lightning for Paul to internalize this message, but internalize it he did: *“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 3:6; see also 2 Corinthians 5:17-19; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:11).

²⁴ The other is Romans 10:12.

²⁵ Acts 10:43

baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.²⁶

Scene Seven: The Defense (Acts 11:1-18)

Peter stayed with Cornelius for several days, explaining more about what it means to follow Jesus, and then returned to Jerusalem. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Peter was very glad that he had taken other Jewish believers with him to visit Cornelius, because he was soon called on the carpet: *“You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!”²⁷*

Understanding that God’s redeeming Love is for Gentiles as well as Jews was a hard pill for those early believers to swallow. If you’ve spent your entire life seeing the world in one way, it’s pretty difficult to turn those beliefs inside out and upside down, even when you’ve seen their inadequacy.

So, starting from the beginning, Peter told the believers in Jerusalem the whole story all over again. He described his own vision. He described Cornelius’s vision. He described how the Spirit had come upon Cornelius and his family in power. And he pointed out that six of the men in the room had been there with him to see the whole thing. *“So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”*

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life!”²⁸

Things were changing, but more challenges were still to come. Later, when Paul and Barnabas travelled the Mediterranean preaching the message of Jesus and welcoming Gentile believers in large numbers, they ran afoul not just of Jewish folk who didn’t believe in Jesus but also of those who did. The sticking point for Jewish believers was whether or not Gentiles had to become Jews before they could follow Jesus or whether Gentiles could follow Jesus apart from Judaism.

If we make the effort to understand how this must have felt to the Jewish believers, we can be more sympathetic to their struggle. They had spent their whole lives working hard to follow the Law of Moses and had frequently suffered as a result; and now they were told that the whole thing was *no longer necessary?* I expect that we would have felt the same way.

This controversy bubbled up for years, with a compromise finally being reached at the great Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15 . . . but that’s a story for another day. For today, I’d like to make six applications from “the Gentile Pentecost.”

First, it’s important to note that **both Cornelius and Peter received their transforming encounters with God when they were at prayer.** While I expect that God is speaking to us most of the time, and perhaps all the time, we are far more likely to hear God’s quiet Voice when

²⁶ Acts 10:45-48. Several things are noteworthy here. First of all, the order of faith, baptism, and the coming of the Spirit are variable from one experience to the next, indicating that the order is not sacred and that the Spirit responds with great specificity to each believing situation. It was typically the case, however, that baptism followed immediately after belief, and it appears that any believer could administer baptism. Peter did not do it himself.

²⁷ Acts 11:3

²⁸ Acts 11:17-18

we have silenced ourselves and our worlds so as to hear more clearly. And hearing God's "inside Voice" is much to be preferred to having to hear God's "outside Voice."

Second, **once Peter realized that God was teaching him something, he leaned into it, even though it made him very uncomfortable.** For us, too, the conviction that "Jesus is Lord," can lead to surprising and unexpected insights, as God's Spirit grants new understandings that we would never have seen on our own.

Third, **when God's instruction or guidance surprises us, it's important to talk and pray that guidance through with other believers,** as Peter did in Jerusalem. And we need to remember that criticism can be expected when God leads us into new areas of obedience and ministry.

As just three examples, Handel's *Messiah* was scorned in the beginning as inappropriate music for worship. William Booth was castigated for his "Salvation Army" ministries to the poor and the addicted; and William Carey, the "father of foreign missions," was rejected when he suggested that God might actually care about the salvation of "the heathen."

When God leads, my friends, we follow. When God commands, we obey.

Fourth, **God's Spirit is always at work beckoning those who do not yet know Jesus to "Come closer, come in farther, come up higher," and sometimes we get to be a part of helping persons come to know Him.**²⁹ Keep your eyes open. Anytime you are in a conversation that takes a spiritual turn, drop whatever you're doing and go with that. God is at work.

Fifth, **Peter's experiences with "the sheets" and with Cornelius remind us we are all equally loved and valued by God.** Each of us, no matter our color or our creed, is created in God's image and is called to know and serve our Lord. This week's cruel murder of an African American man by a white police officer reminds us just how far we have to go in this respect.

And finally, **I wonder what "sheets" God might be lowering in front of you, in front of me, or in front of us that are intended to take us into adventures we have not yet imagined?** Can you feel the wind? The Spirit has come!

²⁹ This Spirit work is known as "prevenient grace."