

from the dead.<sup>122</sup> Peter comes and does as they ask, resulting in the conversion of many of the people who live in the area.

Luke uses a favorite phrase when he tells Theophilus that Peter will remain in Joppa "many days." It really has no clear meaning. In some case it indicates days, other times it indicates months, and, in this case, it may even indicate years as will be seen with Luke's next story about Peter's ministry. Luke's point is to tell Theophilus of Peter's lengthy stay in Simon's house while he ministers throughout the area.

The Lord will move Peter out of Joppa when the time is right. In fact, he will send him back to Caesarea, about forty miles away, where a centurion is having an encounter with the Lord. The Lord sends Peter to give approval to his conversion just as he and John were sent to give approval of the new converts in Samaria several years before.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Tabitha is also known by her Greek name Dorcas,

<sup>123</sup> Acts 8:14-17

## The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

### Lesson 7 Acts 10:1 – Acts 11:18

The Christians in Israel were still restless from the persecution of Saul. Word of his conversion did not spread as fast as the word of his persecution. By this time in the story, Saul is back in his home town of Tarsus, sent there by Peter. Saul will quietly remain in his hometown for at least eleven years.

After putting Saul on the boat in Caesarea, Peter begins his journey back to Jerusalem, stopping at Lydda to heal a man and in Joppa to raise Tabitha from the dead. In Joppa, Peter settles down with Simon the tanner for an extended stay. In Caesarea, just forty miles north, the Lord is dealing with a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Because of their loyalty to Rome and their military service, Cornelius and his ancestors became a great name in Roman history.

#### The Lord Speaks to Cornelius

**Acts 10:**<sup>1</sup>Now there was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, <sup>2</sup>a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually. <sup>3</sup>About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had *just* come in to him, and said to him, "Cornelius!" <sup>4</sup>And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup>"And now dispatch *some* men to Joppa, and send for a man *named* Simon, who is also called Peter; <sup>6</sup>he is staying with a certain tanner *named* Simon, whose house is by the sea." <sup>7</sup>And when the angel who was speaking to him had departed, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were in constant attendance upon him, <sup>8</sup>and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The city of Caesarea was built by Herod the Great between 25 BC and 13 BC. For many years it remained the most modern city in Israel. The majority of the inhabitants of Caesarea were Roman military families stationed at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea where communications to and from Rome could be sent and received on the boats that entered the port.

Cornelius was a centurion belonging to a cohort of archers which consisted of a thousand men. To have devout soldiers under his control meant that he was one of the ten centurions in charge of ninety-nine men. We believe that he was a member of the Cohors II Miliaria Italica Civium Romanorum Voluntariorum, a volunteer militia called into service only when needed. The unit was originally formed of freed slaves who had received Roman citizenship. As leader in the cohort, Cornelius received his wages as a paid soldier of Rome but all of his soldiers were volunteers. As such, Cornelius would have worn a beautiful Roman uniform every day, distinguishing him from the volunteers and citizens.

With the stoning of Stephen, the job of the military drastically changed in Israel as it became one of crowd-control between the Christians and the Jews. As mentioned before, the Christians were restless because of the fear of persecution, but it was the restlessness of the Jews seeking to end Christianity that concerned Rome.

The Lord instructed Cornelius to dispatch men to Joppa and return with Peter. In contrast to Caesarea, the most modern city of the day, Joppa was an old shanty seaport town mentioned on monuments as far back as 1600 BC. The contrast of how the Lord works in people's lives is astounding in this story. We see the centurion who lives in a beautiful new home and the tanner who resides in a seaside shack. The centurion is the well-to-do Gentile seeking help from the poor Jew.

### **The Lord Speaks to Peter Peter's Trance**

**Acts 10:**<sup>9</sup> And on the next day, as they were on their way, and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. <sup>10</sup> And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; <sup>11</sup> and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, <sup>12</sup> and there were in it all *kinds* of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." <sup>15</sup> And again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy." <sup>16</sup> And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

The servants and the soldier are on their way to Joppa even before the Lord tells Peter about His plans. With the forty mile journey almost complete, it is time for the Lord to have a conversation with Peter. Peter is hungry<sup>124</sup> and perhaps can smell the food cooking on the outside fire. Hunger is a natural fact of life, and we can hardly imagine Peter falling asleep when he is hungry, but that he does. Throughout the Scripture, we see the natural and the supernatural closely related.<sup>125</sup> Even today when resources are scarce, we tend to rely on the supernatural intervention of the Lord more than in times of plenty. Perhaps the Lord arranges the circumstances that cause Peter to be extra hungry on this day since He is going to use a dream about food to convey his message.

Peter is in a natural and spiritual turmoil. Three times he politely refuses the offer from the Lord. At the end of the vision, Peter is still hungry. We can only wonder what would have happened if he had followed the Lord's instruction to kill and eat. Would his natural hunger have been filled?

### **The Spirit Tells Peter about the Three Men**

**Acts 10:**<sup>17</sup> Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius,

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<sup>124</sup> The word hungry is found many times in the Scripture, yet this is the only time this specific word is used. It carries the meaning of Peter being "very" hungry.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew 4:1-2 - Jesus was tempted by Satan after he prayed for forty days and he "then" became hungry.

having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; **18**and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. **19**And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. **20**"But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them Myself." **21**And Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" **22**And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was *divinely* directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." **23a**And so he invited them in and gave them lodging.

The story is fairly straight forward, yet one important point can be easily overlooked. The Lord instructs Peter to "accompany them without misgivings."<sup>126</sup> Today, a better word might be any of the following: doubts, qualms, worries, uncertainties, reservations, fears, or suspicions. All of these words convey the intent of the Lord when Peter meets the Gentile men at the bottom of the stairs. We must not forget that the Lord instructs Peter to kill and eat three times and three times he has misgivings and politely tells the Lord no. When Peter is once awake, the Lord speaks directly to him, telling him what to do, and Peter does exactly as instructed. Cornelius's men spend the night with Peter in the tanner's house, a strictly forbidden and unlawful act for any Jew, Christian or not.<sup>127</sup>

### **Peter Goes to Cornelius' House**

**Acts 10: 23b** And on the next day he arose and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. **24**And on the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.

Peter does not go to Joppa alone with Cornelius' men; he takes several Jewish Christians with him on the journey. Joppa has been a Christian-friendly community since a majority of the town's people became believers when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead. People who live in thirty miles of the forty mile trip back to Caesarea are also Christian-friendly because everyone in Lydda and the Plain of Sharon are members of the church. But Caesarea is a Gentile town and very few Jews live there. Peter cannot know what he is walking into, but he is going to Caesarea at the instruction of the Lord.

It takes two days for the men to walk the forty miles from Caesarea to Joppa. Likewise, the return trip to Caesarea is a two day journey. Cornelius knew how long it would take his men to return and he is ready for the arrival. Cornelius does not meet Peter alone; he has assembled a congregation of all his family and all his close friends.

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<sup>126</sup> Acts 10:20

<sup>127</sup> Acts 10:28

**Acts 10: 25** And when it came about that Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped *him*. **26** But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am *just* a man."

Cornelius' falling at the feet of Peter is not an act of idolatry, and he surely would not have honored him as a God. It is a normal centurion greeting, probably one of pure habit for Cornelius. However, Peter takes Cornelius' greeting as an act of worship and corrects him.

**Acts 10: 27** And as he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. **28** And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. **29** That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me." **30** And Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, **31** and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. **32** Send therefore to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon *the tanner* by the sea.' **33** And so I sent to you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

We cannot find an Old Testament regulation forbidding such social contact with the Gentiles; however, the rabbis had added it and made it a binding custom. Little is more binding on the average person than social customs.

Up to this point in Christianity, all its members came through the portal of Judaism. Gentiles who converted to Judaism were called proselytes. While they were not of the Jewish bloodline and did not receive all the privileges of Judaism, they were considered Jewish by faith. The converts on the Day of Pentecost were natural born Jews and proselytes to Judaism. When Peter and John went to Samaria after Philip's preaching convinced the people to believe, all of those converts were only part Jewish and were considered half-breeds. Because they were half-breeds, the rabbis also created a regulation forbidding social contact with them. At the house of Cornelius, every person there, except Peter and the brethren who came with him, are Gentiles who had never converted to Judaism. With everyone near and dear to Cornelius assembled, he thanks Peter for overcoming the Jewish regulation and invites him to share the gospel.

**Acts 10: 34** And opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, **35** but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him. **36** The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)-- **37** you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. **38** *You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him.* **39** And we are witnesses of all the things He did both in the

land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. And they also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. **40**"God raised Him up on the third day, and granted that He should become visible, **41**not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us, who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. **42**"And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. **43**"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

It is interesting that Peter refers to things that the Gentiles in that room already "knew" about in the life of the Lord, spanning all the way back to His baptism. It is believed that Cornelius' cohort served in Jerusalem during the Lord's ministry, keeping the peace between the Jews and the Lord's followers. A cohort of Roman soldiers had marched Jesus to Calvary and to His death.<sup>128</sup> It is possible that Cornelius was at the crucifixion or that he heard testimony about it from other soldiers. After the Day of Pentecost, the Roman cohorts kept the peace between the Christians and Jews at the Temple and synagogues throughout Israel. Many years later in this story, a Roman cohort will be dispatched to protect Paul and ultimately deliver him to Rome.<sup>129</sup>

Peter begins to preach and after just two hundred and thirty nine words, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles in the room. The short message is similar to the record found in Mark's gospel, starting with the baptism of Jesus and skipping to Galilee, ignoring the Judean ministry.

### **The Gentile Pentecost**

**Acts 10:** **44**While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. **45**And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. **46**For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, **47**"Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" **48**And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

The Holy Spirit interrupted Peter's sermon. The Jews<sup>130</sup> and Samaritans<sup>131</sup> had received the Holy Spirit and now the Gentiles, representing the rest of the world, receive Him too. On the Day of Pentecost, the apostles spoke in the tongues of every nation under heaven from which a Jewish or proselyte representative was present in Jerusalem to hear them. At the Samaritan Day of Pentecost, the miracle of the tongues was not needed since the Samaritans were partially Jewish in bloodline. But on this day, the Gentiles begin to speak in tongues, clearly speaking the languages and dialects of Peter and the brethren. It is a clear sign to Peter and his six Jewish companions<sup>132</sup> that Gentiles are to be part of the church.<sup>133</sup> Upon their

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<sup>128</sup> Matthew 27:27; Mark 15:16; John 18:3; John 18:12

<sup>129</sup> Acts 21:31; Acts 27:1

<sup>130</sup> Acts 2:4

<sup>131</sup> Acts 8:17

<sup>132</sup> Acts 11:12

belief and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, they are baptized as a symbol to the world of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Never again will the Scripture record a repetition of the miracle of the Jewish Day of Pentecost and the Gentile Day of Pentecost. Never again will a Christian immediately speak an unlearned but known language to prove presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **Peter is challenged in Jerusalem**

**Acts 11:**<sup>1</sup>Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup>And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, <sup>3</sup>saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." <sup>4</sup>But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, <sup>5</sup>"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, <sup>6</sup>and when I had fixed my gaze upon it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. <sup>7</sup>"And I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Arise, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup>"But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup>"But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' <sup>10</sup>"And this happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. <sup>11</sup>"And behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. <sup>12</sup>"And the Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. And these six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup>"And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; <sup>14</sup>and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' <sup>15</sup>"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup>"And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, '**John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**' <sup>17</sup>"If God therefore gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" <sup>18</sup>And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life.*"

The news of the conversion of the Gentiles sweeps through the Christian community like a wildfire. By the time Peter returns to Jerusalem, the Christians are stirred into a fury. Peter will have to give an account of his actions. In just three hundred and eleven words Peter convinces his opponents that God has granted to the Gentiles eternal salvation.

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<sup>133</sup> The introduction of Gentiles to the church will be the topic of great debate in AD 50 at the council of Jerusalem. Many of the Jewish Christians want the Gentiles to become Jewish proselytes and faithful to the Jewish traditions before being admitted to the church. The decision of the council is found in James' letter recorded in Acts 15.