

Biblical Missionaries

Peter and the Gentiles

Lesson #9 for August 29, 2015

Scriptures: Acts 2:5-21; 10:1-48; 11:1-10; 15:1-35; Romans 2:14-16.

1. This lesson focuses on the means God used to change Peter from a relatively narrow-visioned-Jewish-fisherman disciple into an apostle to the Gentiles.
2. Read Acts 8:1,4. After the stoning of Stephen and the severe persecution that began against Christians (A.D. 34) largely due to the work of Paul, the Christians scattered from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and other areas, preaching the gospel. Philip began preaching in Samaria. Some time later, Peter traveled to Joppa where he stayed with a tanner named Simon. We assume that the tanner was also a Christian. As a tanner, of course, he had to violate many of the traditional Jewish laws regarding ritual cleanliness. Every day he dealt with dead creatures and used excrement in his work.
3. Read Acts 9:32-43. Lydda was a small village not far from Joppa. We are told that in Lydda Peter healed a man named Aeneas. Later, in Joppa he raised a believer named Tabitha or Dorcas back to life. Thus, many people in Joppa became believers. (Acts 9:42)
4. But, Peter had not given up his distinctive Jewish ideas. To devout Jews, their customs often took on the characteristics of divine absolutes. How do we distinguish between those customs and ideas that are culturally determined and those which are truly a part of the gospel?
5. Just before ascending back to heaven, Jesus give the commission to His disciples to preach the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. (Acts 1:8) Ten days later on the day of Pentecost, Peter and the others had the Holy Spirit descend upon them in what we now call the early rain. (Acts 2:5-21) At that time, Peter had said that *whoever* calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. People from as many as 15 different countries were there to hear his message. We do not know whether those were all Jews from those different countries or if some of them were actually Gentiles.
6. Where did Peter get the outline for his sermon? Is it possible that he used the ideas that Jesus Himself had given to the travelers on the road to Emmaus? (See Luke 24:13-35.) Notice these important points in Peter sermon:

First, Old Testament prophecies and promises are fulfilled in Christ (*Acts 2:17-21*), a truth revealed through the powerful works and signs accompanying His ministry, as well as through His death and resurrection (*vss. 22-24*).

Second, Jesus was exalted, placed at God's right hand, and is now Christ (the Messiah) and Lord of all (*vss. 33-36 [Acts 2:33-36]*). In Him, all who repent and are baptized will receive forgiveness for sins (*vss. 38, 39 [Acts 2:38-39]*). (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sunday, August 23.) [Content in brackets is added.]

Note that *all* includes not just Jews but Gentiles as well.

7. What were the events and factors that led up to the outpouring of the early rain? Seventh-day Adventists have believed that the latter rain will be greater and more glorious than the former rain. How do you think that will take place in our day? What factors will make it possible? Is God waiting for a new group of Peters, Pauls, Stephens, and Phillips?
8. Read Acts 10:1-48. It would be very interesting to know more about how Cornelius came to be a "follower of the way." Clearly, he had already recognized the superiority of Old Testament teachings and Jewish beliefs to his polytheistic religious background. He was a man of prayer, study, and giving alms to the poor. He was very friendly to Jewish believers.
9. The Roman army's headquarters for all of Judea, including Jerusalem, was in Caesarea on

the seashore north of Joppa. Cornelius was one of six centurions commanding the 600 soldiers that made up the Italian cohort based there. He was a member of an illustrious Roman military family that had been responsible for defeating Hannibal from Carthage who had caused so much trouble for Rome in the past. Had Cornelius heard about Jesus?

Believing in God as the Creator of heaven and earth, Cornelius revered Him, acknowledged His authority, and sought His counsel in all the affairs of life. He was faithful to Jehovah in his home life and in his official duties. He had erected the altar of God in his home, for he dared not attempt to carry out his plans or to bear his responsibilities without the help of God.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 133.1. [Note that this was before he met Peter.]

10. Notice carefully that it was God working through Cornelius who called Peter. It was not Peter going forth with an intention to evangelize Gentiles. And Cornelius was already a “follower of the way.” How many of us are as faithful as was Cornelius? How many Gentiles do we know who have received messages from God?
11. After three times receiving the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven and saying, “No” each time, Peter woke up and realized when the Gentile servants of Cornelius arrived at the door that God intended for him to go with them. After spending the night, they set out together. Knowing what kind of reaction he would get from his friends back in Jerusalem, Peter took six of the believers from Joppa with him. Peter was not going to take any chances!
12. Arriving at the home of Cornelius, Peter was met by Cornelius who bowed down to him in worship. Fortunately, Peter made him get up and reminded him that he was only a man. What would Caesar have said if he had received reports of a Roman centurion bowing down to a humble Galilean fisherman?
13. Peter entered the home of Cornelius and began discussing the gospel with all who were gathered. We do not know how long Peter spoke to them. But, eventually, the Holy Spirit descended upon those converts from among the Gentiles, apparently in the same way He had descended upon the apostles at Pentecost. What do you think happened there? When the Bible says they were “speaking in strange tongues and praising God’s greatness,” (Acts 10:46, *GNB*) what does it mean? How many of the Christian doctrines do you think Peter covered before he baptized them? In any case, Peter stayed with them for several days.
14. Try to imagine yourself walking from Caesarea back to Joppa with Peter and his six Jewish believer friends. What do you think they said to each other? Were they excited about the possibility of the gospel going to Gentiles? Were they worried about what the reaction back in Jerusalem would be? It had been years since Jesus ascended. To how many Gentiles had Peter preached?
15. It is clear that Peter did not immediately begin trying to evangelize Gentiles. That revolutionary miracle happened in Antioch some time later. Read Acts 11:19-21. It is very interesting to read that believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern-day Libya) went to Antioch in Syria (Think of what is happening in Syria today!) and began proclaiming the message to Gentiles as well as Jews. We do not even know the names of those believers; but, they were the first ones we know about in Scripture who openly proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles. And we read, “The Lord’s power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21, *GNB*) It was that event and the subsequent work in Antioch by Barnabas and Paul that really led to the gospel going to the Gentiles.
16. Read Romans 2:13-16. Do you think these verses could be describing people like Cornelius? Do we have any information about what happened to Cornelius later in his life? Did he return to Rome and try to spread the gospel there?
17. One important point to notice in this story is that the angel that appeared to Cornelius could have given him all the information he needed about the gospel. But, he did not. He told Cornelius to call for Peter to come to bring the gospel to him. Is that because Peter could do a better job than an angel? Of course not! Almost certainly, it was because Peter and his

associates from Joppa needed that experience, and they needed to relate it to the other believers back in Jerusalem in order to gradually break down the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles.

18. God asks us to go and witness to our neighbors and friends and even to people in other lands not so much because they need to hear it but because we need to practice spreading the gospel. And we need to learn how to do it better every day.
19. Read Acts 11:1-18; remember Acts 15:5. As we could easily imagine, when Peter got back to Jerusalem, there was a reaction! The word had reached the believers in Jerusalem that Peter had actually gone to the house of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile, and had eaten with them. So, Peter thought that it was appropriate for him to give a full account of what happened. Fortunately for him, he knew what to expect when he got back to Jerusalem. That is why he had taken six fellow believers from Joppa to be his witnesses. What he said was apparently convincing enough so that the members of the council of believers recognized that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Gentiles. Peter concluded by saying: "It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; who was I, then, to try to stop God!" (Acts 11:17, *GNB*) That was apparently powerful enough evidence that the criticism stopped, at least temporarily.
20. Unfortunately, we know from reading Galatians 2:11-14 that Peter still had some inherent prejudice. He had to be rebuked openly and pointedly by Paul at Antioch.
21. Having reviewed the story of Cornelius and Peter, what changes do you think took place in the house of Cornelius after that interaction? He was already a man of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Did Cornelius ever travel to Jerusalem to try to meet other Christian believers? Did any of them travel to meet him at Caesarea? We know that some time later Philip moved to Caesarea with his four prophesying daughters. Do you think Cornelius had anything to do with their acceptance there? (Acts 21:8-9)
22. We should also note that as a Roman centurion, Cornelius had probably been a religious man all his life. But, in his earlier days as a soldier and presumably a member of one of the mystery religions, he probably worshiped Mithra and may even have been involved in emperor worship. Clearly, those forms of religion were unacceptable in God's eyes. So, while we may reach out to people of all kinds and tell them that God accepts them, not all religious experiences are acceptable to God. In our day, political correctness would tell us to speak as if all religions are equal; but, that is obviously not true. How do we respect people without recognizing and honoring their religious beliefs? First, we must do our best to understand our audience.
23. Read Acts 15:1-35. After Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary journey and reported how successful they had been at converting Gentiles to become Christians, a great deal of controversy over that information arose in Antioch. Jewish believers from Jerusalem had gone to Antioch and proclaimed that Gentiles must be circumcised before they could become Christians. Of course, that led to some very strong opposition from Paul and Barnabas. So, it was decided that a group of believers should travel from Antioch to Jerusalem to set the issue before the church leaders. It is important to notice who it was that thought the Gentiles must be circumcised before they became Christians. (See Acts 15:5.) But, fortunately, Peter had learned something from his experience with Cornelius. Only after hearing Peter's speech before the council was it possible for them to sit quietly and listen to the report of Paul and Barnabas. They took "baby steps" in reaching out to Gentiles.
24. Peter told of his astonishment when, in speaking the words of truth to those assembled at the home of Cornelius, he witnessed the Holy Spirit taking possession of his hearers, Gentiles as well as Jews. The same light and glory that was reflected upon the circumcised Jews shone also upon the faces of the uncircumcised Gentiles. This was God's warning that Peter was not to regard one as inferior to the other, for the blood of Christ could cleanse from

all uncleanness. . . .

Peter's address brought the assembly to a point where they could listen with patience to Paul and Barnabas, who related their experience in working for the Gentiles.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 193.1-194.1.

25. A careful reading of Acts 10 and 11 makes it very clear that Peter understood his vision of the sheet to be talking about not rejecting carrying the gospel to Gentiles. There is no way that passage could be construed to promote the eating of unclean meats. This text is not about dietary restrictions.
26. In reviewing the council that took place in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15, what can we learn about how Christian councils should be conducted in our day? What was the role of personal testimonies? About witnessing? About the role of the gospel and Scripture? About how we should reach out to people in other settings? And about how they related to each other in the council.
27. We know that Peter was a changed man after his experience over crucifixion weekend. That led up to his preaching on the day of Pentecost. Did those changes make it easy for him to go to the home of Cornelius? How ready are we to move outside of our comfort zone to reach out to others?

Peter had a long and bitter experience trying to do things his own way: contradicting Jesus about His death (*Matt. 16:22-24*), taking his eyes off Jesus and sinking into the waves (*Matt. 14:22-32*), severing the ear of the high priest's servant (*John 18:10, 11*), falling asleep in Gethsemane (*Matt. 26:36-46*), and finally denying Jesus just hours before His death (*vss. 69-75*). (*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* p. 120)

28. For a number of weeks, we have been discussing the issue of missions and what we can learn from some biblical examples. What can we learn from the following quotations:
 1. “[The church] was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 9. [Content in brackets is added.]
 2. “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Pub., 2010), p. 36.
 3. “The church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.”—Emil H. Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), p. 108.
29. Earlier in his experience, Peter had been imprisoned more than once and had given his testimony before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 4) What do you think the Sanhedrin would have said to him after his experience with Cornelius?
30. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? If we look around the world to the rapidly growing cities, the so-called “10/40 Window,” the growing secular and postmodern populations, the task of taking the gospel to all of them might seem almost impossible. What can we learn from this lesson about Peter and others that could help us in our day? It was more than 30 years after the great disappointment in 1844 that the small Adventist Church sent forth its first missionary, J. N. Andrews, who tried to take the Seventh-day Adventist message to Christians in Switzerland. It was almost 20 years later that Adventist missionaries first tried to carry the Adventist message to non-Christian lands. How well are we doing at carrying the gospel even to non-Christians or secular people in our world today? Are we as slow to learn as Peter was?

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