

Peter and the Gentiles (Non-Jews)



SABBATH—AUGUST 22

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 2:5–21; Acts 10:1–8; Acts 10:23–48; Romans 2:14–16; Acts 10:9–22; Acts 11:1–10; Acts 15:1–35.

MEMORY VERSE: “Peter replied, ‘All of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children. It is also for all who are far away. It is for all whom the Lord our God will choose’ ” (Acts 2:38, 39, NIV).

PETER WAS THE FIRST APOSTLE (TEACHER; LEADER) TO PREACH SALVATION TO THE GENTILES (NON-JEWS). He continued to give leadership to the church for many years after it started. Together with Paul, Peter helped the Jews understand that Jesus’ great command (Matthew 28:18, 19) was to spread the gospel worldwide.

Peter worked to bring about a united (joined as one) church, including both Gentile and Jewish converts (believers). The Gentile converts did not understand Jewish culture. And the Jewish converts tended to think that God required all Jewish customs and laws to be strictly followed. Like all pioneer missionaries, Peter had to sort (separate) between strict requirements and cultural practices. So, it was Peter who, at the Jerusalem Council, announced that God “showed that there is no difference between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles]. He made their hearts pure because of their faith” (Acts 15:9, NIV). Peter also helped work through the issues that threatened the early church’s unity (oneness).

PETER AT PENTECOST¹ (Acts 2:5–21)

Jesus' last words before He went to heaven were of a missionary nature: " 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. You will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other' " (Acts 1:8, NIV). Here again we find the command to spread the gospel into all the world. Only 10 days later, this calling started to unfold, with Peter doing a very important part of the gospel work.

Read Acts 2:5–21. How does this event reveal God's plan for the gospel to go worldwide and the part that the Jews were to have in that preaching?

The Great Command found its first fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost. There the outpouring of the Holy Spirit started the first evangelization² of the world. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave great results on the Day of Pentecost. But this was only an example of much greater results to come in the years that followed.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost held a few main points that remain true even to us today:

First, Old Testament prophecies (special messages from God) and promises are fulfilled in Christ (Acts 2:17–21). This has been shown through the powerful works and signs through His ministry (work done for God) and through His death and resurrection (return to life from the dead) (verses 22–24).

Second, Jesus was honored, put at God's right hand, and is now Christ (the Messiah [the Chosen One]) and Lord of all (verses 33–36). In Him, all who repent (turn from sin) and are baptized will receive forgiveness for sins (verses 38, 39).

Here we find the active disciple Peter, who spoke out often about his belief in Jesus. He was called by Jesus to be a strong leader in the church's earliest days. Peter was less accepting of other cultures and religions than the apostle Paul was (read Galatians 2:11–14). But Peter opened the way for the gospel to go to about fifteen nations, as he preached to Jews who had come to Jerusalem from around the world to worship. In this way, he used a very important bridge to bring the good news to the Middle Eastern world of his time.

What does the story of Pentecost show about our great need of the Holy Spirit in our lives? What choices can we make in order to be closer to the Spirit's leading?



All who repent and are baptized will receive forgiveness for sins.

DEFINITIONS

1. Pentecost—the time when Jesus' followers received the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus rose from the dead and went back to heaven (Acts 2:1–4).
2. evangelization—the spread of the gospel around the world.

THE CONVERSION³ OF CORNELIUS: PART 1 (Acts 10:1–8; Acts 10:23–48)

Read Acts 10:1–8 and Acts 10:23–48. What does the story of this Gentile becoming a follower of Jesus teach us about salvation and witness?

Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army who had been raised as a pagan (an idol worshiper). The conversion of Cornelius and his whole household has been called the *Gentile Pentecost*. It is an important story in Acts. It is the one that addresses the biggest issue facing the early church: Can a Gentile become a Christian without first becoming a Jew?

The Roman army's headquarters for all of Judea, including Jerusalem, was Caesarea. Cornelius would have been one of six centurions commanding the 600 soldiers that made up the Italian army based there. His name revealed that he came from a well-known Roman military family that had earlier produced the commander who had defeated Hannibal. Hannibal was a Carthaginian general who caused problems for Rome for years. More important, Cornelius was a God-fearing man who enjoyed spiritual fellowship with his family, prayed regularly, and was generous to those who were needy. God heard his prayers and sent an angel with a special message to him.

“Believing in God as the Creator of heaven and earth, Cornelius honored Him, accepted His authority, and sought His guidance in all the affairs of life. He was faithful to Jehovah [God] in his home life and in his official duties. Cornelius had made an altar of God in his home. He dared not try to go ahead with his plans for this life or to carry out his responsibilities without the help of God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 133.

Notice, too, what happened when Cornelius finally met Peter. He bowed down and worshiped him, an act that must have shocked Peter. So, what we can understand is that this Gentile, a faithful man on God's side, still had a lot of truth to learn, even at the most basic level. But, no doubt, he was about to learn it.

Even though Cornelius did not fully understand truth, what are some of the traits of Cornelius that we all would do well to follow in our own spiritual lives?



God heard Cornelius's prayers and sent an angel to him.

DEFINITIONS

3. conversion—the act or process of changing from a fallen sinner into a saved believer based on faith in Christ.

**THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS: PART 2
(Acts 10:33)**

“Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God treats everyone the same,’ he said. ‘He accepts people from every nation. He accepts all who have respect for him and do what is right’ ” (Acts 10:34, 35, NIRV). To us these words are not that much of a shock. But for them to have come from the mouth of Peter was a shocking confession. We have to remember who Peter was, where he came from, and the attitudes (thoughts and feelings) that he had and still struggled with. (Read Galatians 2:11–16.) But, no doubt, Peter’s experience with Cornelius helped him understand even more clearly the error of his ways. It also helped him to get a better picture of what God planned to do with the gospel message.

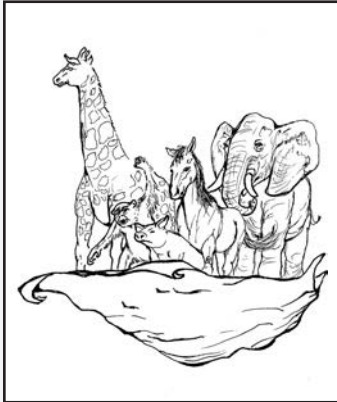
Read Acts 10:33. What did Cornelius say to Peter that tells us that he understood that following the Lord also meant obeying Him?

Read Acts 11:14. What does it say that helps us to understand the need to spread the gospel even to such godly men like Cornelius?

How does Romans 2:14–16 help us to understand what was going on with Cornelius?

As we have read, Cornelius was a Gentile who “feared God” (Acts 10:2). But he still had a lot to learn. (And we all do too!) Anyway, Cornelius’s fasting, his praying, and his gifts of money all revealed a heart open to the Lord. And when the time was right, God worked miracles in his life.

An important point to remember in this story is how an angel appeared to Cornelius, but the angel did not preach the gospel to him. Instead, the angel opened the way for Cornelius to meet Peter, who then told him about Jesus (read Acts 10:34–44). This is an example of how the Lord uses humans as His messengers to the world.

PETER'S VISION (Acts 10:9–22; Acts 11:1–10)

The different kinds of animals in Peter's vision showed that all different kinds of people are God's children.

DEFINITIONS

4. tanner—a person who changes the skin of an animal into leather by a chemical process.

5. tanning—to change the skin of an animal into leather by a chemical process.

6. excreta—waste matter released from the body such as urine, sweat, or feces (solid waste from the body).

7. prejudices—unfair feelings or dislike for a person or group because of race, sex, religion, and so on.

As we learned yesterday, by the time Peter met Cornelius, he had changed his attitude (feeling) about the Gentiles. Other Jewish believers had not yet understood about the Gentiles (read Acts 10:44, 45). What happened that changed Peter's attitude?

Read Acts 10:9–22 and Acts 11:1–10. What do these verses reveal about how deep-rooted Peter's attitudes must have been for it to take direct communication from God to open his mind?

It is interesting to know that while Peter was in Joppa he stayed with a tanner⁴ (Acts 9:43; Acts 10:6, 32). This is something that we do not want to miss. Tanning⁵ and tanners were disgusting to the Jews since they handled dead bodies and used excreta⁶ in their processes. Tanneries were not allowed in towns. Note that Simon's house was located "by the sea side" (Acts 10:6).

Peter's stay with a tanner showed that already, before his vision, he realized that some of his past attitudes were at cross-purposes (had different goals and purposes) with the gospel. Both Peter and the family of Cornelius needed to get rid of some cultural prejudices.⁷ All people, represented by "all kinds of . . . animals" (NKJV) in Peter's vision, are God's children.

Peter's call to witness to Cornelius suggested that all people are acceptable to God, but not all religions are equally acceptable. Cornelius was already a "religious" man, like nearly everyone else in Roman society. As a soldier he would have been involved with the worship of Mithra. And as an officer he would have taken part in emperor worship. But these were not acceptable to God.

There is a lesson here today for those who approach non-Christian religions on the basis of equality with Christianity. Sometimes it is done in a spirit of political correctness. But such an attitude (thought or feeling) leads to a weakening of strong Christian beliefs, including obeying the Ten Commandments.

How do we respect people whose faith we believe is wrong without giving the impression that we respect those beliefs ourselves? What is the difference between respecting people and respecting their beliefs?

THE JERUSALEM DECISION (Acts 15:1–35)

Early success of the mission to the Gentiles raised some serious questions for the early church about Gentiles becoming believers in Jesus. It was becoming clear that they were to become part of the “true” Jewish faith in Jesus (Romans 11:17). Whenever people from other religions and cultures join an established believing community, tensions always come up. In this case, Jewish Christians continued to have high respect for the requirements of the Old Testament laws and rituals. So they expected that Gentile converts would accept and obey these laws too. The main issue was circumcision.⁸ Circumcision was believed to be the fundamental requirement for entry into the Jewish community for males. Circumcision symbolized obedience to all the requirements of Judaism. Should Gentile converts to Christianity be required to be circumcised? Some Jewish Christians in Judea thought so. They voiced their opinions in strong language. To them it was important for salvation.

What happened at the Jerusalem Council that helped to settle this important question? Read Acts 15:1–35.

The question of circumcision was the main reason for the meeting of the Jerusalem Council. But the council dealt with a range of cultural practices that the gospel did not require of its converts. The decision of the council (Acts 15:23–29) set forth a common program where Jewish and Gentile Christians could fellowship together in peace. While basic Jewish values were respected, Gentiles were not forced to be circumcised. The council’s decision was both useful and followed biblical principles (important rules). It set an example for the church to deal with issues and problems before they became too “hot.” Experienced missionaries learn to recognize important Christian beliefs and keep the focus on them, instead of getting trapped by things that are not important to the faith.

What lesson can we learn from the Jerusalem Council that could help the church today as it deals with “hot” topics and issues? What did they do that can serve as an example for us?

DEFINITIONS

8. circumcision—removal of the foreskin from a male’s penis.



Experienced missionaries keep focused on important beliefs instead of getting trapped by things that are not important.

DEFINITIONS

9. uncircumcised—not having the foreskin of the male sex organ (penis) removed.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “Jew and Gentile,” in *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 188–200.

“At the Jerusalem Council meeting, Peter shared his experience at the home of Cornelius. Peter said that he was surprised when he witnessed the Holy Spirit taking possession of his hearers, both Gentiles and Jews. The same light and glory [power and beauty] that was shown upon the circumcised Jews shone also upon the faces of the uncircumcised⁹ Gentiles. This was God’s warning that Peter was not to regard one group as lower than the other. This is because the blood of Christ could cleanse from all uncleanness. . . .

“Peter’s speech brought the hearers to a point where they could listen with patience to Paul and Barnabas, when they spoke of their experience in working for the Gentiles.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 193, 194.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Peter’s vision has been used to support the argument that the dietary (food and health) laws of the Old Testament are no longer necessary; for example, some use it to support eating unclean meat. The meaning of the vision was clearly explained by Peter himself: “ ‘I should not call any [human] common or unclean’ ” (Acts 10:28, NKJV). So, the vision was not about diet but about acceptance of other humans as God’s children, no matter who they are. But why do people use this as an argument to eat whatever they want? What should this tell us about how careful we need to be in how we interpret the Bible?
- ② Think more deeply on Romans 2:14–16. How should we who are interested in outreach relate to this idea? If Gentiles can “by nature do the things in the law,” why do we need to preach to them?
- ③ In Thursday’s study, we talked about the Jerusalem Council as an example for the church today. Read over the verses about the council (Acts 15:1–35). What are some important things the council did that are an example for how the church should work today? Think about such things as: (1) personal testimonies (stories) about witness, (2) the purpose of the gospel, (3) the purpose of the Bible, (4) the purpose of missions, and (5) how the people related to each other in the council.