

# Peter and the Gentiles



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 2:5–21; 10:1–8, 23–48; Rom. 2:14–16; Acts 10:9–22; 11:1–10; 15:1–35.*

**Memory Text:** “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call’ ” (*Acts 2:38, 39, NKJV*).

Peter was the first apostle to proclaim salvation to the Gentiles. He continued to provide leadership in the church for a number of years after its foundation, even after Paul became the missionary to the Gentiles par excellence. Peter, together with Paul, helped the early church and its leadership, mostly Jews, understand the universality of the Great Commission.

Peter worked to bring about an integrated church, uniting Gentile converts, who were unaware of the finer points of Jewish culture, and Jewish converts whose customs tended to take on the character of divine absolutes. Like all pioneer missionaries, Peter had to discriminate between unchangeable divine absolutes and those practices that are cultural and relative and of no important consequence in the life of the believer, whether Jew or Gentile. Thus, it was Peter who, at the Jerusalem Council, declared of the Gentiles that God “put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (*Acts 15:9*) and who helped work through the issues that threatened the early church’s unity.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 29.

## Peter at Pentecost

Jesus' last words before His ascension were of a missionary nature: "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*). Here, again, we see the mandate to spread the gospel into all the world. Only ten days later, this calling started to unfold, with Peter playing a key role.

**Read Acts 2:5–21.** How does this event show God's intent for the gospel to go worldwide and the role that the Jews were to have in that proclamation?

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The Great Commission found its first fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit had as its aim the evangelization of the world. This initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave great results on the Day of Pentecost. This was, however, only a foretaste of much greater results to come in the years that followed.

Peter's sermon contained a few main points that remain relevant even today:

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*). In Him, all who repent and are baptized will receive forgiveness for sins (*vss. 38, 39*).

Here we see the active and vocal disciple Peter standing up for his belief in Jesus. He was called by Jesus to be a strong leader in the church's earliest days. Although less cosmopolitan, efficient, and adaptable to other cultures and religions than was the apostle Paul (*see Gal. 2:11–14*), Peter opened the way for the gospel to go to about fifteen nations, as he preached to Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem. 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 reveal about our utter need of the Holy Spirit in our lives? What choices can we make in order to be more attuned to the Spirit's leading?**

## The Conversion of Cornelius: Part 1

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

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The conversion of Cornelius, a pagan officer in the Roman army along with his household, has been termed the Gentile Pentecost. It is a crucial story in Acts, one that addresses the most divisive 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 cohort based there. His name indicated his descent from an illustrious Roman military family that had earlier produced the commander who had defeated Hannibal, a Carthaginian general who wreaked havoc against 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 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.

Notice, too, what happened when Cornelius finally met Peter. He bowed down and worshiped him, an act that must have appalled Peter. Thus, what we can see is that this Gentile, favored of God, a devout man, still had a lot of truth to learn, even at the most basic level; no doubt, though, he was about to learn it.

**What are some of the traits of Cornelius, even in his ignorance, that we all would do well to follow in our own spiritual lives?**

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## The Conversion of Cornelius: Part 2

“Then Peter began to speak: ‘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’ ” (*Acts 10:34, 35, NIV*). Though these words to us are not that revolutionary, for them to have come from the mouth of Peter was an astonishing confession. We have to remember who Peter was, where he came from, and the attitudes that he had and still struggled with. (*See Gal. 2:11–16.*) No doubt, though, his experience with Cornelius helped him to see even more clearly the error of his ways and helped him to get a better picture of what God intended to do with the gospel message.

**Read** Acts 10:33. What did Cornelius say to Peter that showed that he understood, even despite so much ignorance, that following the Lord also meant obeying Him?

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

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

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As we have seen, Cornelius was a Gentile who “feared God” (*Acts 10:2*), though he still had a lot to learn (don’t we all?). Nevertheless, his fasting, his praying, and his giving of alms all revealed a heart open to the Lord; and thus, when the time was right, God worked miraculously in his life.

An important point to remember in this account is how, though an angel appeared to him, the angel didn’t preach the gospel to him. Instead, the angel opened the way for Cornelius to meet Peter, who then told him about Jesus (*see Acts 10:34–44*). We can see here an example of how the Lord uses humans as His messengers to the world.

## Peter's Vision

As we saw yesterday, by the time Peter made contact with Cornelius, he had a change in attitude regarding the Gentiles that other Jewish believers hadn't yet understood (see *Acts 10:44, 45*). What happened that changed Peter?

**Read** *Acts 10:9–22* and *11:1–10*. What do the passages say about how entrenched Peter's wrong attitudes were that it took something like this to open his mind?

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Cornelius's conversion and Peter's role in the witnessing task were so important for the mission of the church that God communicated in a supernatural way with both the missionary and the missionary's eventual host: while an angel visited Cornelius, Peter was given a vision.

Also, Peter stayed in Joppa with a tanner (*Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32*), a detail that we don't want to miss. Tanning and tanners were repulsive to the Jews since they handled dead bodies and used excreta in their processes. Tanneries were not allowed in towns; note that Simon's was located "by the sea side" (*Acts 10:6*).

Peter's stay with a tanner indicated that already, before his vision, he realized that some of his previous attitudes were at cross-purposes with the gospel. Both Peter and the family of Cornelius needed to shed some cultural baggage. All people, represented by "all kinds of . . . animals" (*NKJV*) in Peter's vision, are God's children.

Peter's call to witness to Cornelius implied that, although all people are acceptable to God, not all religions are equally acceptable. Cornelius was already a "religious" man, like nearly everyone else in ancient society. As a soldier, he would be acquainted 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. Although sometimes it is done in a spirit of political correctness, such an attitude leads to a watering-down of the biblical claims of Christian uniqueness and finality.

**How do we show respect for people whose faith we believe is wrong, without giving the impression that we respect those beliefs ourselves? What is the difference between respecting people as opposed to respecting their beliefs?**

## The Jerusalem Decree

Early success of the mission to the Gentiles raised some crucial questions for the early church regarding what requirements should be expected of Gentile converts—those grafted into the faith (*Rom. 11:17*). Tensions always appear when people from other religions and cultures join an established believing community. In this case, Jewish Christians, with their high regard for the requirements of the Old Testament laws and rituals, assumed that Gentile converts would accept and obey these laws and rituals. The main focus was circumcision, the fundamental indication of entry into the Jewish community for males, symbolizing compliance with all the requirements of Judaism. Should Gentile converts to Christianity be required to undergo circumcision? Some Jewish Christians in Judea certainly thought so and stated their conviction in stark theological language: to them it was essential for salvation.

**What** happened at the Jerusalem Council that helped settle this important issue? Acts 15:1–35.

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Although the question of circumcision was the main reason for the Jerusalem Council, it dealt with a range of cultural practices that the gospel did not require of its converts. The decree of the council (*vss. 23–29*) provided a common platform where Jewish and Gentile Christians could coexist in fellowship. Jewish core values were respected, but Gentiles were allowed to avoid circumcision. The council’s decision was both practical and theological. It set a pattern for the church to deal with issues and problems before they became too divisive. Experienced missionaries learn to identify core Christian belief issues and keep the focus on them as opposed to getting bogged down with things that are not essential to the faith.

**What lesson can we take away from the Jerusalem Council that could help the church today as it deals with controversial issues? What did they do that can serve as a model for us?**

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**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–200, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“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, 194.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Peter’s vision has been explained to support the argument that the dietary laws of the Old Testament are no longer valid—specifically, as justification for 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*). The vision was not, therefore, about diet but about acceptance of other humans as God’s children, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, occupation, or religion. Why, though, do people use this as an argument in regard to diet? What should this tell us about how careful we need to be in how we handle Scripture?
- 2 Dwell more on Romans 2:14–16. How should we as a church relate to this idea in terms of missions? That is, why do we need to preach to those who have the law written in their hearts?
- 3 In Thursday’s study, we talked about the Jerusalem Council as a model for the church today. Read over the texts about the council (*Acts 15:1–35*). What are some specific things it did that provide a template for the church today? For instance, look at such things as (1) personal testimonies about witness, (2) the role of the gospel, (3) the role of the Scriptures, (4) the role of missions, and (5) how the people related to each other in the council.

## Despair to Hope: Part 1

by CHENGHORN THEAN, CAMBODIA

Chen lived in a slum-like camp for displaced persons in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

One day Chen walked past a house and heard someone speaking to a group of people. Curious, she stared through a window. Was this a church? She wanted to study English, and she had heard that churches often teach English. She waited outside until the program ended. A man walked out and introduced himself as Pastor Hang.

“I want to learn English,” Chen said. Pastor Hang told her that an English class met at the house church on Wednesday afternoons.

On Wednesday afternoon, Chen returned for the English class. The teacher started the class with prayer, and when the class ended, he invited Chen to visit the church on Sabbath. She came to the worship service but knew nothing about God and didn’t understand the sermon. Nevertheless, she wanted to return. She continued studying English on Wednesdays. Two weeks later, Pastor Hang invited Chen to a Bible class on Friday afternoon. She enjoyed learning more about the Christian God and invited Pastor Hang to come to her home to teach her.

Chen told the pastor that she was having marital problems. She explained that she and her husband were not legally married, and her mother-in-law was trying to separate them so that her son could marry a Chinese girl. The couple moved, but then her mother-in-law took their two little sons and refused to allow Chen to see them.

And then her husband began refusing to give her money from his earnings to buy food. The pastor listened sympathetically to Chen’s sad story; then he offered a possible solution. He had noticed that Chen was a natural salesperson. He invited her to sell Seventh-day Adventist books to earn some money. Chen agreed to try. The pastor continued to study the Bible with her and led her to Jesus.

He taught her how to sell the books. Chen followed his directions, but she wasn’t able to sell any books. The best places to sell books are in restaurants early in the morning and during the evening meals. But it was the rainy season, and Chen could not get to these restaurants easily.

When the rains stopped, Chen prayed, “God, if You are the true God, if You want me to follow You, please show Your power by helping me to sell some books tonight.” Then she set a goal to sell three or four books for one dollar each.

*To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.*



## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *Acts 11:1–10*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize that even after he or she has accepted Jesus as his or her Savior, there are still many things to learn and unlearn.

**Feel:** Cherish the promise that God will help him or her to grow in the Christian life and to encourage our participation in His mission.

**Do:** Resolve to find opportunities to move outside the Christian community to share God’s love with those who may never set foot in a Seventh-day Adventist church.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Learning From Jesus**

**A** Peter’s life was a continual learning experience. How do you think Peter’s future ministry was affected by His betrayal of and forgiveness by Jesus?

**B** Even the thought of eating unclean foods was anathema to Peter, an observant Jew. How can we make sure that we are open to God’s leading and willing to be pushed out of our comfort zones, if necessary?

**C** In Cornelius’s home, Peter ate for the first time with Gentiles, which was a confronting experience for him. But why should this have been difficult for Peter when he had often seen Jesus sit down to eat with “sinners”?

**II. Feel: Facing the Unexpected**

**A** Describe how you think Peter felt, eating for the first time in the home of a Gentile.

**B** How can we experience a sense of willingness to make ourselves uncomfortable for the sake of the gospel?

**III. Do: Ready and Willing**

**A** Pray that God will keep your heart and mind open to new thinking and to the opportunities He opens for you.

► **Summary:** The apostle Peter made many mistakes, but his teachable attitude and his openness to God’s leading in his life is a powerful lesson to us today.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Acts 11:17, 18*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** The story of what God achieved through Peter’s life and ministry is a comfort and encouragement to Christians today. If God could use stumbling, failing Peter, He can also use us.

**Just for Teachers:** 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*). Take the opportunity to explore with your class ways in which Peter’s experiences could have impacted his later ministry and perhaps made him more open to the gospel’s going to the Gentiles.

**Opening Activity:** Compare and discuss these three quotes:

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.

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.

There is a massive gulf between the Peter of the Gospels and the Peter of the book of Acts. The younger Peter is parochial and narrow-visioned, failing to understand Jesus’ broader mission (*Matt. 16:21–23*). The older, more spiritually mature Peter has a passion for mission that crosses all geographical and cultural barriers. This Peter declares boldly that God “‘accepts from every nation the one who fears him’ ” (*Acts 10:35, NIV*).

**Thought Questions:** Is your congregation fundamentally outward looking or inward looking? What other types of activities can the church spend its time and money on that may be a distraction from its core mission? What practical steps can we take to stay focused on mission as did the apostle Peter and the early church?

## ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Peter was broken by his own cowardice (*Mark 14:29–31, 66–72*), but through the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, he was reborn and given a fresh start (*John 21:15–17*). Within a short time, we see Peter preaching powerfully, healing the sick, and leading people to observe that he had “been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13, NIV*). Perhaps the old Peter would never have agreed to go to Joppa to socialize with Gentiles. But the new Peter was open to God’s leading. Explore with your class this week how God can accomplish great things with the humblest person.

## Bible Commentary

### I. Simon, Son of Jonah (*Review Acts 10:1–8 with your class.*)

Theologian Robert Wall suggests that the story of the apostle Peter in this passage has many parallels with the story of Jonah.—Robert W. Wall, “Peter, ‘Son’ of Jonah: the Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of Canon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 9, issue 29 (1987): pp. 79, 90. Of course, a hint that this might be the case is found in Peter’s Aramaic name—Simon Bar-Jonah (*Matt. 16:17, NKJV*).

In both stories, God tells His reluctant messengers to go from Joppa to the *goyim*—the Gentiles (*Jon. 1:2, Acts 9:43*). In Jonah’s case, the mission assignment is to a city—Nineveh. In Peter’s case, the mission assignment is to Cornelius and his family. Both initially protest—Jonah by action (taking a Mediterranean cruise instead) and Peter by word: “Surely not, Lord!” (*Acts 10:14, NIV*). And in order to convince them to take the assignments, God has to intervene in dramatic ways. In Jonah’s case, it takes a storm and a big fish, while for Peter it’s the confronting vision of eating unclean food (*Jon. 2:1, Acts 10:16*). Note also that Jonah stays in the fish for three days, and God had to speak three times in vision to Peter.

God tells Jonah to arise and go (*Jon. 3:2*) and also tells Peter to get up and go (*Acts 10:20*) to deliver His message to the Gentiles. In both cases, the Gentiles believe and are forgiven (*Jon. 3:5, Acts 10:43*). Also, in both cases the conversion experiences generate hostile reactions. In Jonah’s case, ironically, it’s the prophet himself, the one delivering the message, who is upset (*Jon. 4:1*). In Peter’s case, it’s the “circumcised believers” (*Acts 11:2*). And

finally, God steps in to rebut the protests. “ ‘Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?’ ” He asks Jonah (*Jon. 4:11, NIV*). And “ ‘who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?’ ” asks Peter (*Acts 11:17, NIV*).

The parallels remind the reader that Jonah’s God, the One who forgave and saved Gentiles, is also Peter’s God—a God who continues to extend His grace and mercy beyond His chosen people. Of course, this is also a theme among the Old Testament prophets. For example, in describing their mission, Paul and Barnabas quote Isaiah: “ ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’ ” (*Acts 13:47, NIV*). And Peter himself—a quick learner—says to Cornelius and his family: “ ‘All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name’ ” (*Acts 10:43, NIV*).

Thus, through Luke’s telling of the story, Cornelius’s conversion demonstrates “the continuation of God’s merciful work at Nineveh” and that “ ‘Simon-Peter is the bar Jonah, who is called by his ancestor’s God to convert the Gentile, and the people of God should do nothing but praise God and say, ‘God has granted the Gentiles repentance unto life’ ’ (Acts 11:18).”—*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, p. 85.

**Consider This:** How is “the continuation of God’s merciful work,” as seen in Jonah and Acts, demonstrated in our church? In what way are we focused on mission? On the other hand, what are some of the ways that demonstrate that we are more interested in the maintenance of what we have?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** If we are honest, each of us has at least a little of the early Peter inside us. In humans there is always a tendency to try to do things our way rather than to trust God completely. But what an inspiration it is to see the very human Peter transformed into the instrument whom God used to help catapult the early Christian church into new mission territory, literally and figuratively. Explore with your class practical ways that we can strengthen our dependence on God.

#### Thought Questions:

- 1 What specific things led people to observe that Peter and John had “been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13*)? Would people who observe us and our lives make a similar observation?

② As we look at the mission challenge of rapidly growing cities, the 10-40 Window, the growing secular and postmodern populations, the task is daunting. What can we learn from Peter's experience that can help us put things in perspective?

③ What sort of cultural prejudices might we have that are negatively affecting our mission as a church?

**Activity:** Ask each class member to list every activity that his or her church is involved in. This should include everything from Sabbath School classes to prayer meetings to having the church building maintained (if they have a church building). When they have finished, ask them to label those activities that are aimed at church members and those activities that are aimed at the community. Discuss the results.

## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** The early Adventist believers had a limited concept of mission. Until around 1870, they saw their mission as only extending to the Atlantic Ocean in the East and the Pacific in the West. But soon they accepted that their calling was to go to all the world.

In 1874, J. N. Andrews, the first official Adventist overseas missionary, aimed his ministry 100 percent to other Christians in Switzerland. It wasn't until the 1890s that Adventist missionaries were sent to non-Christian lands. Explore with your class ways that we can expand our mission vision to include the "Gentiles" of today (for example, starting work in cities that have been neglected, working to reach people from non-Christian religions, reaching secular college campuses). Remind the class that any innovation or change in approach to mission will be open for criticism. Read Acts 11:2 where the "circumcised believers" criticize Peter because he went into a Gentile house and ate with them. However, discuss their reaction after Peter told them about his experience (*Acts 11:18*). How can we be open like these believers to new developments in mission?

**Activity:** Depending on the size of your class, invite members individually or in small groups to think of at least five practical steps they can take in the following week to extend their contact with nonbelievers. It may be strengthening their relationship with a neighbor they already know or initiating a relationship with one they don't know. Invite the class to share and discuss the ideas they have listed.