

The Ministry of Peter



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 9:32–43, Acts 10:9–16, Eph. 2:11–19, Acts 11:1–26, Acts 12:1–18.*

Memory Text: “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ ” (*Acts 10:34, 35, NRSV*).

With Paul's departure to Tarsus, Peter is again the main character in Luke's narrative of the early days of the Christian church. Peter is portrayed in a sort of itinerant ministry throughout Judea and the surrounding regions. Acts here tells two brief miraculous stories, the healing of Aeneas and the resurrection of Tabitha (Dorcas), which are then followed by the story of Cornelius in chapter 10.

The conversion of Gentiles was the most controversial issue in the apostolic church. Though the discussions that followed Cornelius's baptism were far from solving all the difficulties, the outpouring of the Spirit, reminiscent of what had happened at Pentecost, helped to convince Peter and the brethren in Jerusalem that the blessings of the gospel were not restricted to Jews. Meanwhile, the church in Antioch had already started moving toward the Gentiles, as well.

This week's study also includes the rise of a new, short persecution—this time under King Herod—and its impact on the apostles, who had been spared in the persecution carried out by Paul.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 11.

At Lydda and Joppa

Peter was visiting the Christian communities through the coastal region of Judea. His purpose was probably to give them doctrinal instruction (*Acts 2:42*), but God used him powerfully to perform miracles in the same fashion as those performed by Jesus Himself.

Read Acts 9:32–35. What similarities do you see in the miracle of Jesus in Luke 5:17–26 and the healing of Aeneas?

Despite the brevity of the account, the miracle reminds us of the well-known story of the Capernaum paralytic healed by Jesus (*Luke 5:17–26*). Even the detail about the bed is similar. More important, however, was the impact of Aeneas’s cure, not only in Lydda but also in the coastal plain of Sharon. Having verified for themselves the reality of the miracle, many people turned to the Lord.

Read Acts 9:36–43. Review the story of Tabitha’s resurrection. What was so special about her?

Tabitha—the Aramaic for “gazelle;” in Greek, Dorcas—was a believer very dear in her neighborhood because of her works of Christian charity. The story of her resurrection also parallels a miracle performed by Jesus, the resurrection of Jairus’s daughter (*Luke 8:41, 42, 49–56*), which Peter had witnessed. Following Jesus’ example, he asked everybody to leave the room (*see Mark 5:40*). Then he knelt down and prayed, after which he called to the dead woman, “ ‘Tabitha, get up’ ” (*Acts 9:40, NRSV*).

The apostles performed many miracles; yet, in fact, these were God’s actions through the apostles’ hands (*Acts 5:12*). The similarities with Jesus’ own miracles were perhaps to remind the church, including us today, that what matters most is not so much who the instrument is but the measure of his or her surrender to God (*see John 14:12*). When we fully allow God to use us for the gospel’s cause, great things can happen. Peter not only resurrected Tabitha, but the miracle also led to many conversions in Joppa (*Acts 9:42*).

Some people think that if only they could see a real miracle, such as what happened here, then they would believe. And though at times miracles helped lead some people to faith, the Bible is filled with stories of those who saw miracles and still didn’t believe. On what, then, should our faith be based?

At Cornelius's House

In Joppa, Peter stayed with a certain Simon, a tanner by trade (*Acts 9:43*). Meanwhile, in Caesarea, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Joppa, there lived a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He and his household were devout worshipers of God, though they had not yet formally adhered to Judaism, meaning that Cornelius was still an uncircumcised Gentile. In a God-given vision, he was instructed to send messengers to Joppa and invite Peter to visit him (*Acts 10:1–8*).

Read Acts 10:9–16, 28, 34, 35. What did Peter experience, and how did he interpret it?

It is important to know that Peter's vision was not about food but about people. Yes, it was around noon, Peter was hungry, and the voice told him to kill and eat; yet, God used the vision, not to remove the distinction between clean and unclean animals but to teach Peter about the inclusive character of the gospel.

The vision was explicitly intended to break Peter's resistance against Gentiles. Peter's view was that if he entered Cornelius's house and fellowshiped with him, he would defile himself and so become unfit to worship in the temple or to come before God's presence. First-century Jews from Judea and the surrounding areas did not associate with uncircumcised Gentiles.

The problem was with the contemporary theology, which excluded the Gentiles from the commonwealth of Israel, even though this view had become a perversion of the whole point of Israel's existence as a nation, which was to reach out to the world with a knowledge of the true God.

Because circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, uncircumcised Gentiles came to be segregated and treated with contempt. They could have no part whatsoever in the blessings of the covenant unless they accepted circumcision and became Jews. Such a concept, though, was incompatible with the universal scope of Jesus' death, as the early believers, over time, were coming to understand.

Read Titus 2:11, Galatians 3:26–28, and Ephesians 2:11–19. What do these texts teach us about the universality of the gospel message? What should they tell us about how wrong it is for Christians to harbor prejudice against any group based on ethnicity?

The Gift of the Spirit

Acts 10:44–48 reveals a critical moment in the early church’s history. It was the first time that the gospel was being preached to uncircumcised Gentiles by one of the apostles. Unlike the Hellenistic believers, the apostles and other Judean believers were not ready to receive Gentiles in the church. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, they thought that the gospel was to be shared only with Jews from near and far. The Gentiles would first have to be converted to Judaism and then be accepted into the community of faith. In other words, before Gentiles could become Christians, they first had to become Jews. That was the thinking that needed to be changed among these early Jewish believers.

The gift of tongues given to Cornelius and his household was added as a clear, observable sign that such a concept was mistaken, that God has no favorites, and that in terms of salvation both Jews and Gentiles stand on equal footing before Him.

Read Acts 11:1–18. How did the church in Jerusalem react to Peter’s experience at Caesarea?

The long-established Jewish prejudice concerning Gentiles led the believers in Jerusalem to criticize Peter for having eaten with uncircumcised people. It seems that they were more concerned with Jewish ceremonial scruples than with the salvation of Cornelius and his family. They might have feared that if the church broke with such practices it would represent a denial of Israel’s faith; they would lose God’s favor, and become liable themselves to the same accusations—from their fellow Jews—that had led to Stephen’s death.

“The time had come for an entirely new phase of work to be entered upon by the church of Christ. The door that many of the Jewish converts had closed against the Gentiles was now to be thrown open. And the Gentiles who accepted the gospel were to be regarded as on an equality with the Jewish disciples, without the necessity of observing the rite of circumcision.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 136.

As at Pentecost, here, too, they spoke in languages previously unknown to them, rather than in ecstatic or heavenly languages. Only the purpose was different: while for the apostles the gift aimed at the church’s world mission, for Cornelius it functioned as a confirmation that God’s grace was operating even among the Gentiles.

The Church in Antioch

Motivated by Cornelius's conversion, Luke briefly interrupts his account of Peter's ministry to show the gospel's initial progress among the Gentiles.

Read Acts 11:19–26. What happened when some Jerusalem refugees came to Antioch?

This section of Acts 11 refers back to Paul's persecution in chapter 8. Thus, while the previous developments were taking place in Judea and elsewhere, some of the Hellenistic believers who were forced to leave Jerusalem were spreading the gospel way beyond the borders of Judea.

Luke gives special attention to the great city of Antioch, in Syria, where refugees began to preach to their fellow Jews and to the Hellenists, and many of them were accepting the faith. Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 was then being realized through the efforts of these Hellenistic Jewish Christians. They were the ones who became the real founders of the mission to the Gentiles.

Because of the church's success in Antioch, the apostles in Jerusalem decided to send Barnabas to evaluate the situation. Noticing the great opportunities for the advancement of the gospel, Barnabas sent for Paul in Tarsus, feeling he could be a vital helper.

Barnabas was right. During the year he and Paul worked together, large crowds, mostly Gentiles, heard the gospel. The enthusiasm with which they spoke about Jesus Christ made the believers there become known for the first time as "Christians" (*Acts 11:26*). That they "were called" Christians indicates the term was coined by those outside the church, probably as a form of mockery, while the believers preferred to refer to themselves as "brethren" (*Acts 1:16*), "disciples" (*Acts 6:1*), or even "saints" (*Acts 9:13*). By the time Acts was written, "Christian" had become a common designation (*Acts 26:28*), and Luke seems to approve of it. "Christian" means a follower or an adherent of Christ.

What does it mean to you to be called a "Christian"? What about your life is truly Christian? That is, how differently do you live from non-Christians in the things that really matter?

Herod's Persecution

Turning again to Judea, we are faced now with the account of King Herod's executing James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee (*Mark 1:19*). He also wanted to do the same with Peter.

Read Acts 12:1–4. What does this teach about the challenges the early church faced?

The King Herod mentioned here is Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great (*Matt. 2:1*); he ruled Judea from A.D. 40 to 44. As a result of his show of piety, he earned popularity among his Jewish subjects, especially the Pharisees. His attempt to win the favor of the Jews by attacking some apostles fits perfectly with what we know of him from other sources.

Because James's execution was effective in fulfilling Agrippa's agenda, he planned to execute Peter, as well. Peter was arrested and delivered to four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, one squad for each of the four watches of the night. Peter had four soldiers at a time with him: he would be chained to two soldiers, one on each side, and two would guard the entrance. Such extreme precaution was certainly taken to try to avoid what had already happened to Peter (and John) some time before (*Acts 5:17–20*).

Read Acts 12:5–18. What happened in response to the brethren's prayers?

The night before the day that Agrippa had planned to put Peter on trial and execute him, Peter was once again miraculously released by an angel.

Next, we find the story of Agrippa's death at Caesarea (*Acts 12:20–23*). Attempts have been made to identify the cause of his death (peritonitis, an ulcer, even poison); yet, Luke is clear in saying that the king died because of a divine judgment.

James is killed, Peter is delivered, and Herod faces divine judgment. In some cases, we see justice; in others, it doesn't appear that way. What should this teach us about how we just don't have all the answers to all our questions and why we need to live by faith regarding what we don't understand?

Further Thought: “In the tenth chapter of Acts we have still another instance of the ministrations of heavenly angels, resulting in the conversion of Cornelius and his company. Let these chapters [8–10] be read, and receive special attention. In them we see that heaven is much nearer to the Christian who is engaged in the work of soulsaving than many suppose. We should learn through them also the lesson of God’s regard for every human being, and that each should treat his fellow man as one of the Lord’s instrumentalities for the accomplishment of His work in the earth.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1059.

“When the church prays, the cause of God will go forward, and His enemies will come to naught, even if this does not exempt the church from suffering and martyrdom; Luke’s belief in the victory of the gospel is thoroughly realistic and recognizes that though the word of God is not fettered, its servants may well have to suffer and be bound.”—I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 206, 207.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Cornelius is described as “a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God” (*Acts 10:2, NRSV*). It is evident that God’s Spirit was already working in Cornelius long before he met Peter. Could it be that his devotional life was an opportunity for God to reach him with the gospel message? What lesson is there for us in his story?
- 2** In class go back to Monday’s final question and ask yourselves this question: What is the cultural, social, and political context in which you live that breeds the kind of ethnic tension that Christians are not supposed to harbor? In other words, when we need to, how can we all as Christians rise above our culture and background?
- 3** Despite their damage, Paul’s efforts to persecute turned out to good effect: the refugees who came to Antioch started preaching to Jews and to Hellenists. In class share a personal experience of pain and suffering that God turned into a blessing.
- 4** James was one of Jesus’ closest disciples (*Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33*); yet, he was the first of the Twelve to suffer martyrdom. What other examples do we find in the Bible of faithful people suffering unfairly? What lessons should we draw from these accounts for ourselves about the whole question of suffering?

A Reoccurring Nightmare

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The dream scared Helen Yen, a retired housewife in Taiwan's capital, Taipei. In the dream, she would go someplace and then realize that she couldn't find her way back home. The nightmare tormented her nightly.

The daylight hours were more pleasant. Helen spent time with her husband, adult children, and granddaughter. She began attending free menopause classes at Taiwan Adventist Hospital.

In the classes, Helen heard that the nearby Sung Shan Seventh-day Adventist Church was seeking volunteers for a new community outreach program. The church planned to offer Tuesday classes on Alzheimer's disease, a major challenge in the local community, as well as cooking classes and Bible studies on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

"I had always wanted to volunteer in the community," Helen said in an interview at the church. "I had never heard of Adventists before. But I just came to this church, and the pastor invited me to help in the kitchen."

Helen went to the church at 6:00 A.M. on Tuesdays to bake bread to sell at the Alzheimer's classes. The bread, also offered to the church's 180 members, helps supplement outreach funding from the Taiwan Conference.

Helen said volunteering gave her a new sense of fulfillment and joy. She began to visit the church every weekday and soon was attending Bible classes led by the pastor's wife, Brenda Huang, who oversees the outreach. Helen, a Sunday churchgoer, heard about the seventh-day Sabbath.

"I felt something strange in my heart," Helen said. "I couldn't go on with the way I was living after discovering this new information."

She started to worship at the Adventist church every Sabbath. "Before, I thought, *I'm very blessed because I have a husband, children, and a granddaughter*," she said. "Then, I realized that there is something more to life."

Nearly two years after Helen started volunteering, she is preparing to join the church through baptism. "She is our first fruit," said the church's pastor, Raymond Ko. In all, 300 people have visited the church's Sabbath services as a result of the outreach program, he said.

Helen had had the reoccurring nightmare about not being able to find her way back home for a year. "But after I came to this church, I stopped having this dream," she said. "I realized that the Seventh-day Adventist truth is the way home—to heaven."



Your Sabbath School mission offerings help support community outreach programs such as the one that led HELEN YEN, left, to baptism.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Acts 9:32–43, Acts 10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the pastoral and administrative gifts of Peter.

Feel: Appreciate the courage and boldness that characterize Peter’s ministry.

Do: Apply lessons from Peter’s life and ministry to strengthen his or her personal life and church life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Strength of Peter

Ⓐ What made a vacillating person like Peter become a bold and courageous witness for Jesus?

Ⓑ How did prayer play a prominent part in Peter’s life and ministry? How did Peter face the expectations of believers in various places where he ministered?

II. Feel: The Chief Characteristics of Peter

Ⓐ Even though Peter was a prominent leader of the church, how did he make himself available to the common people in the church? What does this tell us about Peter’s character as a pastor and leader?

III. Do: Learning From Peter

Ⓐ What can we learn from Peter’s approach to meet the needs of the individual and of the congregation?

► **Summary:** Peter as a church member, prayer warrior, evangelist, and church leader has left a model for Christians to follow.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 9:32–43*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: After the Resurrection, Jesus took time to prepare His disciples for their ministry ahead. Peter had denied Jesus three times before His death. The risen Jesus asked three times whether He could count on Peter to shoulder the responsibilities of discipleship. “The question that Christ had put to Peter was significant. He mentioned only one condition of discipleship and service. ‘Lovest thou Me?’ He said. This is the essential qualification.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 815.

Just for Teachers: Begin the class with a review of Peter’s failures and successes prior to the Resurrection.

With the supper over and Gethsemane ahead, Jesus looked at Peter and said, “ ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’ ” (*Luke 22:31, 32, NKJV*). Peter wasn’t quite sure what to make of these words, but he swore his undying allegiance to Jesus with the readiness to defend Him and, if need be, to go “ ‘both to prison and to death’ ” (*Luke 22:33, NKJV*). However, all along, Peter had been a vacillating figure. At one moment, he confessed that Jesus is the Christ of God; at another, Peter denied ever knowing Jesus. Peter walked on water, but faith gave way to doubt, and the miracle almost became a disaster. Jesus shared Gethsemane with Peter—a rare privilege—but Peter chose to sleep. Peter did cut off an ear, but could not muster the courage to face a maid’s query regarding Jesus. The rooster crowed, and Peter wept. For Peter’s sins and the sins of the world, Jesus stood crucified outside Jerusalem. On the third day, Peter saw the risen Jesus. His life was never the same again. The Lord turned Peter into a new person, one who could preach with a firm heart from the Pentecost pulpit.

Discussion Questions: Christian discipleship is both a privilege and a responsibility. What are some of the privileges and responsibilities? How do we often fall short in meeting the responsibilities?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Jesus said to Peter, “ ‘When you have returned

to Me, strengthen your brethren' ” (*Luke 22:32, NKJV*). Peter was a sad paradox of opposing elements—strength and weakness, daring and timidity, loyalty and betrayal. But the prayer of his Master was ever with him, and Jesus assured Peter that he would return to Him. Peter may deny, but that denial is not the termination point. It is only a temporary failure, for the Lord has assured him with His prayers. The hope the Lord had in Peter will not be in vain: Peter will strengthen his brethren. Thus, we have the powerful Peter, soaked in Scripture and filled with the Spirit to interpret it, a man through whom God’s Spirit moves the multitudes to repentance from sin and acceptance of Jesus as their Savior. And this powerful, daring, and fearless apostle fortified believers—the needy, the doubting, the dying, the stranger—in fulfillment of the hope Jesus had in him to “ ‘strengthen your brethren.’ ”

This week’s lesson focuses on Peter, who strengthened the laity and who broke down racial barriers so that the church could grow.

Bible Commentary

I. Peter: The One Who Cared for the Laity (*Review Acts 9:32–35 with your class.*)

In the history of missions and church growth, we often note a strange phenomenon. The principal evangelist behind the advance often seems so deeply engrossed in membership growth, development, and fundraising that the need for personal touch and membership visitation gets neglected or assigned to others. While division of labor is an important concept in ministry, leaders must not lose touch with grass roots. Peter, whose preaching shook Jerusalem and was foundational in the great surge of church growth, set us a good example in pastoral visitation: “Peter went through all parts of the country” (*Acts 9:32, NKJV*) to strengthen and encourage the believers. He came down to Lydda, where he met Aeneas, paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. To him Peter brought healing with the words, “ ‘Jesus the Christ heals you’ ” (*Acts 9:34, NKJV*). The apostle-pastor-evangelist did not want the believers in Lydda to miss the main point: healing is important, but more important is to affirm that Jesus Christ is the Healer. In Him is the Creator’s “wonder-working power.”

Soon another miracle occurs. Eleven miles northwest of Lydda in Joppa, the church suddenly experiences a painful vacuum in its midst: Dorcas, a woman “full of good works and charitable deeds” dies (*Acts 9:36, NKJV*)—a woman who took her faith and calling seriously, and made the gospel speak through the language of “tunics and garments”

(*Acts 9:39, NKJV*). Jesus restores Dorcas to her ministry of needle and thread and makes the brokenhearted widows of Joppa smile again.

Consider This: Then a third miracle: “So it was that he [Peter] stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner” (*Acts 9:43, NKJV*). A tanner works with leather, handling the skin of dead animals—an occupation that put Simon the tanner at risk of becoming ceremonially “unclean” (*Lev. 11:24, 25*), hardly the kind of company a conscientious Jew would keep. How did the walls of partition begin to break down in this encounter?

II. Peter: The One Who Crossed the Frontiers (*Review Acts 10 with your class.*)

“God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal, No. 107*). So He worked long ago in the lives of Peter and Cornelius. The story tells us how God broke down the walls of partition between Jew and Gentile so that one united body of Christ could emerge. Divisive factors—Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, white or black, rich or poor—have no place in the communion of the crucified and risen Savior. Peter was not yet fully proclaiming that Christ is “our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation . . . so as to create in Himself one new man from the two” (*Eph. 2:14, 15, NKJV*). But Peter was beginning the learning process: he chose to stay with a leather worker in Joppa.

The Holy Spirit wanted Peter to understand more about Christian relations, and through that midday vision in the tanner’s terrace, the apostle was shown that he had neither the authority nor the right to call any person unclean or untouchable. That was the core intent, as Peter was to learn later, of the vision of the clean and the unclean creatures that Peter was commanded to “‘rise . . . kill and eat’ ” (*Acts 10:13*). God instructed Peter to go down and meet with the new reality that the gospel had brought about: Cornelius’s emissaries were at the door. Peter was quick to get the message: “‘God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean’ ” (*Acts 10:28, ESV*). The apostle was ready to breach the great barrier between Jew and Gentile, and enter Cornelius’s home. God did the rest.

Earlier, Cornelius, a Roman centurion at Caesarea, was in prayer. A devout, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful man (*Acts 10:2*), Cornelius was on his knees for the 3:00 P.M. appointment with God. In response to his persistent search for truth and his earnestness to know more about God, an angel directed Cornelius to fetch Peter from Joppa, some 40 miles south of Caesarea. No search for the gospel truth goes unattended by the One who is the Truth and the Life. Earnest search for truth immediately makes way for heavenly agencies to come to the aid of the seeker.

Peter’s very first words in Cornelius’s home were oneness in the gospel:

God shows no partiality between Jew and Gentile, and Jesus Christ is Lord of all (*Acts 10:34–36*). Where oneness and unity become an essential insistence of the gospel, it is the most affirmative signal that the Holy Spirit is in action. And so it was, even before Peter could finish his preaching, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” (*Acts 10:44, NKJV*). “All those” included the circumcised and the uncircumcised, Jews and Gentiles, men and women. In the face of such undeniable approval from heaven, who are mortals to continue clinging on to walls that divide? The centurion’s home became the first place where such walls of hatred and partition were torn down by the Holy Spirit.

Consider This: The Creation account announced that humanity, created in God’s image, had inherited a common oneness (*Gen. 1:26*). The Cross affirmed that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek . . . slave nor free . . . male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal. 3:28, NKJV*). Why, then, do we still have divisiveness within Christian communities? How do we deal with this problem? Where must the solution begin?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Peter knew Jesus personally. Peter could speak about the art of fishing, whether the catch was fish or people. With Christ as the focus, Peter could speak about the healing of his mother-in-law, the feeding of the 5,000, the mount of transfiguration, the man at the pool, the 10 lepers, the walk on the sea, Lazarus, his own denial of Jesus, the kiss of Judas, the cross, and the Resurrection. To Peter, life was not a narrative of events, but the sharing of a certainty. His life was an eyewitness account of what the Lord did and can do!

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Peter was often a person of ambiguities and contradictions. The dividing point can be noted as Peter before Pentecost and Peter after Pentecost. What really happened to Peter that made the change in his life authentic? How does the reception of the Holy Spirit affect one’s spiritual life?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Bring slips of paper to class. On each slip, write down one incident in Peter’s life or one text from the gospel that relates to him. At the close of the lesson study, pass out the slips in a small basket or bag. Ask each member to pick one slip and share with the class his or her first thoughts about the incident or text.