

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Part Four in a Series of Ten



4. A Diplomat & A Soldier

THE GOSPEL HAS NO RESTRICTIONS

'caring for **PEOPLE** for **PEOPLE** matter to God' Romans 5:8

THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF ACTS MAY BE SUMMARISED IN THIS WAY

THE CENTRAL STORY OF ACTS

1. The central message of Acts may be summarised this way: God is at work in the person of Jesus Christ – and especially in his death, burial and resurrection – to bring life and salvation to all mankind through the People of God, the Church.

THE STORY UP TO THIS POINT

2. We noted how the Church began in Jerusalem (**Acts 2**) just as it was supposed to do. Thousands turned their lives over to the living Lord (**2:37-38,41**) and the Church grew in Jerusalem and Judaea. There was persecution, of course, and Satan tried to destroy the Church from within (**Ananias & Sapphira**) but the disciples of Christ behaved honourably and the Church continued to grow. The death of Stephen and the persecution which flared up at that time sent believers out from Judaea and they preached as they went.

Philip went down to Samaria and there reaped a rich harvest for Christ (**Acts 8**). The apostles at Jerusalem sent Peter and John to check things out and they gave the work their approval. So did the Holy Spirit. The apostles preached in villages throughout Samaria as they made their way back to Jerusalem. **Acts 1:8** was being fulfilled!

THE DIPLOMAT FROM ETHIOPIA

3. The story about this man's conversion to Christ is told in **Acts 8:26-40**. There are a number of things we learn about him from the text. **He was a very important official (8:27). He was obviously an intelligent and very responsible person (8:27). He was a deeply religious man (8:27-28). He was a humble man (8:30-31). He was a man who was anxious to give his life to God (8:34-38). He became a thoroughly saved man (8:39). He was a eunuch (8:27, 39).**

BUT NOT EVEN JERUSALEM COULD SATISFY HIS THIRST

4. Everything about this man was attractive! He was intelligent (or he wouldn't have held such a responsible position) but he was humble. (He wasn't offended by Philip's question and he wasn't too proud to ask his help.) He was deeply religious or he wouldn't have made the trip of more than 1,000 miles to Jerusalem to worship. (The biblical Ethiopia is modern Nubia.) But he wasn't satisfied with just any religious claims because (if he sailed down the Nile) there was plenty of religion sprawled out on the banks of the Nile. Tombs and temples, shrines and pyramids.

Egypt had enough religion to choose from to satisfy most people. Not this man! He passed by it all, however ancient, however many people lived by it, however honoured it was by mighty pharaohs. He went to where the Bible was taught and read. But not even Jerusalem satisfied his thirst for God because on his way home he is eagerly reading the Scriptures (**8:28**).

5. And he was a eunuch! Ancient nobility wanted trusted advisers around them but they didn't trust them with the women of the palace so they very often castrated them. There are many famous eunuchs in ancient history who made it to the top of the diplomatic ladder. But this man had been exploited – however well he had done since, he had been denied human rights! (Is this why he had a real interest in the 'suffering servant' he was reading about in **Isaiah 53**?)

The Jewish scriptures excluded a eunuch from the congregation of Israel (**Deuteronomy 23:1**). So there were obstacles to be overcome even in his desire to worship at Jerusalem. He overcame them!

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?

6. 'Do you understand what you're reading?' Philip asks him. He confesses he needs help and invites Philip to join him. Philip preaches Jesus to him, beginning at that very text (**8:35**). He must have told him that baptism was involved in becoming Christ's for as soon as they reached some water, the man claimed the privilege of being baptised (**8:36**). They both went down into the water and Philip immersed him (**8:38**). The last we hear of the eunuch was that he went on his way rejoicing (**8:39**). The trip back to Nubia, no doubt, was more wonderful than the trip to Jerusalem. Now he belonged to the King of Kings as well as being a servant to Candace the queen!

THE ROMAN CENTURION

7. The gospel was on its way to Nubia in the person of the eunuch and, as **Acts 10** tells us, it wasn't long before it went to an uncircumcised Gentile. Up to now the gospel had only gone to people who were circumcised and had a Jewish connection. What happens in the case of Cornelius is a tremendous step forward. 'A giant step for Man' if you like.

8. **Acts 10** tells us a number of things about Cornelius. He was connected with an auxiliary cohort (about 1,000 men) in Caesarea. His rank (centurion) would be similar to an army captain today. He and his family were God-fearing, generous, prayerful and devoted (**10:2**). About three in the afternoon he received a vision, an angel telling him to send for Peter who was in Joppa – about 34 miles away (**10:3-6**). But why does such a man need Peter? **Acts 11:13-14** says: 'He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' He needed saved!

WHY DOES SUCH A MAN NEED PETER?

9. Meanwhile, Peter too has received a vision (**10:9-17**). In the vision he sees a large sheet lowered from heaven. On it are all kinds of animals and he is invited to eat from them but they were animals Jews regarded as unclean so he refused. He was told that what God had cleansed he wasn't to regard as unclean (**10:15**). He didn't understand the vision so he pondered on it later (**10:17**) and that's when the messengers from Cornelius arrived. The Spirit insists that he go with the men (**10:19-20**). He arrives at Cornelius' house, the man rehearses the vision (**10:30-33**) and humbly tells Peter he is ready to do whatever God will tell him through Peter.

Peter begins to speak, gets a few things said and the Spirit interrupts him by coming upon Cornelius and his companions (**10:34-44**). Peter and his Jewish brethren are absolutely amazed that the Spirit would do such a thing (**10:45-46**). But it had happened right there in front of them! Peter has no option but to ask (**10:47**): 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptised?' Ordinarily Jews would have protested non-stop against uncircumcised people being baptised in Christ's name but if the Spirit saw fit to come upon them, how could they object? So Peter commands the man and his family to be baptised in water in the name of Jesus Christ (**10:48**, see **2:38** for the same command).

HE HAD NO OPTION BUT TO BAPTISE THEM AND RECEIVE THEM AS GOD'S

10. For doing this, Peter is called to answer before the Jewish believers at Jerusalem (**11:2**).

Peter tells the story carefully (II:4-14). Then he says in II:15: 'As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.' He appeals to them in II:17: 'So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could withstand God!' He had no option but to baptise them and receive them as God's people!

11. We need to understand how these Jews felt before we can appreciate how big a step this was. Of course they knew salvation in Christ was for all (Mark 16:15). Of course they understood that all believers should be allowed to be baptised to be saved (Mark 16:16). But they didn't know that this extended to all men **independent of their becoming Jews and being circumcised!** This truth they didn't need to know until now! Up to this time the only people they were preaching to and baptising were circumcised people, people within the Jewish framework.

12. Jesus was **their** Messiah; the blessings were **their** blessings! They didn't mind others sharing the blessings provided they became Jews! Even after this incident, there would be Jewish believers who would still insist that Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved in Christ (see Acts 15:1). Some would forbid the baptising of 'raw' Gentiles (10:47) but the Cornelius case would settle the matter for all who were open-hearted.

THE CORNELIUS INCIDENT WAS UNUSUAL

13. The Cornelius incident was unusual! In order to find something like it, Peter has to look back to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 (see II:15). Had there not been a series of signs from God the Gentiles would never have been approached. Peter didn't say: 'It happened to them as it happens every day!' No, what happened at Cornelius' place happened only one other place – at the temple in Acts 2. No one laid hands on anyone (as in Acts 6 or 8).

14. To open the gospel to Gentiles apart from the Law of Moses, God gave two visions. The Gentile wouldn't have sent for Peter and Peter wouldn't have gone to the Gentile if God hadn't told them to. And Peter wouldn't have baptised this man and his family into Christ if the Spirit had not come upon them as he did! The Cornelius case was unique. And note, even after having received the Spirit, he was still commanded to take Christ's name on him by being baptised (10:48).

A Diplomat & A Soldier

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED IN PART FOUR

- Thoroughly good, generous, prayerful, humble and worshipping people still need Jesus to give them life with God!
- It isn't easy for people to give up their cherished past and open their hearts to new truth. But it can be done!
- The spread of the gospel in Acts makes it clear that there are no restrictions on the gospel offer of life in Christ. Race (a Nubian and a Roman), social status (a black eunuch and a soldier in the occupying forces) and religious background are all ignored by the Lord as he reaches out to bring salvation and blessing to people.

EVALUATION SHEET

Please go ahead and fill in the evaluation sheet attached.

CONTACT DETAILS

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EVALUATION SHEET

Acts LESSON 4

(Please type or write your answers within the lines provided)

Name:

Home Address or Email address:

TRUE OR FALSE? (If the statement is true write T, if false write F.)

1. The Church's birthday is recorded in Acts 2! _____
2. Stephen preached in Samaria! _____
3. Any religion at all will do a person with a good heart! _____
4. Since Cornelius had received the Spirit he wasn't required to be baptised! _____
5. Peter and Cornelius both received visions! _____
6. The eunuch was reading Jeremiah 53 when Philip approached him! _____
7. Cornelius lived in Caesarea! _____
8. In preaching Christ, Philip must have mentioned baptism to the eunuch! _____
9. The eunuch had just been to Mecca to worship! _____
10. Some believers objected to Peter baptising an uncircumcised Gentile! _____

WHO SAID IT?

1. Do you understand what you read? _____
2. I have never eaten anything unclean! _____
3. Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised? _____
4. Go to that chariot and stay near it! _____
5. Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance before God! _____
6. I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism! _____
7. Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? _____

CIRCLE THE CORRECT SCRIPTURE:

1. Where 3,000 people turned their lives over to Christ:
Acts 15:1 Acts 1:8 Acts 2:37-38,41
2. Where Jesus is spoken of as a sheep led to slaughter:
Acts 11:13-14 Acts 8:32 Acts 10:43
3. Which says God doesn't show favouritism:
Acts 8:35 Acts 10:34 Acts 10:26

PUT A TICK NEXT TO THE SCRIPTURES WHEN YOU'VE READ THEM:

1. Acts 8:26 _____ 2. Acts 10:1-48 _____ 3. Acts 11:1-18 _____ 4. Acts 15:1 and Deuteronomy 23:1 _____

SUMMARISE THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF ACTS:

COMPLETE THIS STATEMENT: (As found in the booklet.)

1. Swift surgery at a crucial point _____

2. Where Peter was staying with a friend! _____

3. Philip was on a desert road that led to this place! _____

4. Where men criticised Peter over his dealings with Cornelius! _____

SENDING YOUR ANSWERS

Once we have received your evaluation sheet we will send you the next study in this series.

Please return your completed evaluation sheet as an email attachment to info@the-scriptures.co.uk