

Study 14: Acts chapter 10

Introduction

After dealing with the conversion of Saul in Chapter 9 Luke continues with the work of Peter, and the critical issue of the conversion of the first Gentiles.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Jewish Proselytes: What were they?

Who was Cornelius and what were his characteristics?

What happened to Cornelius, and when?

What was Cornelius told to do?

What happened to Peter?

What happened to the three men?

What unclean animals did Peter see?

What happened when they came to Caesarea?

How did Cornelius respond?

Peter's sermon:

What happened whilst Peter was preaching to them?

What was Peter's response?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Why did they send for Peter, and not Philip the evangelist (8:40, 21:8)?*
- *Was the conversion of Cornelius a "special case", and why (or why not)?*
- *Why did these people need to be baptised in water, when they had already been baptised with the Holy Spirit?*

What was the action of the Holy Spirit in the conversions in chapters 8, 9, & 10?

Notes for study 14: Acts chapter 10

Introduction

After dealing with the conversion of Saul in Chapter 9 Luke continues with the work of Peter, and the critical issue of the conversion of the first Gentiles.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

These events follow directly after the end of Chapter 9, where Luke has directed the steps of his readers as to how Peter came to be in Joppa. This was after Paul's three years in Arabia, and is therefore dated at AD 37. (Compare 9:43 and 10:6).

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cornelius is told to call for Peter; Peter sees vision that nothing God has made is unclean; Peter comes to Cornelius & preaches Christ; Holy Spirit falls on them; They were baptised in Christ's name.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Cornelius, Peter.

Body of the Study

Jewish Proselytes: What were they?

Many Gentiles were attracted to the Jewish religion, because of the monotheistic worship (the worship of the one God who made the world, rather than the dumb idols). As they studied the Jewish history, they could see how God nurtured and provided for His people, and brought destruction on those who despised Him. Whilst the Jewish religion became *an interest*, becoming a *member* of it was something different. For the women, this was fairly easy, but for the men it required the painful operation of circumcision, which was performed (in those times), without any anaesthetic.

There are three groups of "Jewish" people described in the New Testament: *Jews, Proselytes, and God Fearers*. The *Jews* were born into the Jewish religion, and the male children would be circumcised when they were eight days old (more on this when we get to chapter 16). The *Proselytes* were Gentiles who had become Jews, and the men had undergone the painful experience of circumcision. The *God Fearers* were those who attended Synagogue worship, but had not made the change to become Proselytes. Sometimes these are referred to as *Proselytes of the Gate*, as they were effectively standing outside the gate of the Jewish religion but had not entered in. Consequently whilst they could attend Synagogue worship, they could not enter the Temple any further than the court of the Gentiles. Many of these *God Fearing* men became interested in christianity, since Paul specifically did not require them to be circumcised.

There were two classes of proselytes: 1) a *proselyte of the gate* was one who limited his obedience to the Jewish law and was not circumcised. His worship at the temple was also limited. 2) A *proselyte of righteousness* was one who accepted the full responsibility of the Law, and was circumcised. Such a Gentile enjoyed the full privileges of the temple.¹

Who was Cornelius and what were his characteristics?

Cornelius was a Gentile, and the events Luke records for us suggest that he was not a Proselyte – since there were Proselytes who were converted on the day of Pentecost (2:10), and Nicolas the Proselyte from Antioch was appointed as one of the seven deacons (6:5). He

¹ Dale, L. Edsils Acts Comments (Cincinnati: published by the author, 1952); quoted from Reese p. 54
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

was an upstanding man who was interested in serving God, and for some reason had not yet embraced the Jewish religion. He was most likely a “*Proselyte of the gate*”.

- He was *a devout man*. In 2 Pet 2:9, the same word (*eusebes*) is translated as “Godly men”, which suggests that he exhibited a special kind of devotion to God.
- But more than this, he was “*one who feared God*”. He was a man who did not follow the pagan religions, but understood the true and living God, a *proselyte of the gate*.
- He had a profound influence on *his entire household*, since they were also God-fearing people. His household would include his family, and also his personal servants.
- He was a prayerful man – “*he prayed to God always*”. We find from vs 3 & 30, that he observed the Jewish hours of prayer. We do not know what he was praying for, but from the answer to his prayers, we could conclude that he was seeking to find out how he could better serve God, and be forgiven of his sins.
- He was a Roman soldier, of *the Italian Regiment*. The regiment would have consisted of 600 to 1,000 men, and may have been a part of the regiment that guarded the governor, since Caesarea was the usual residence of the governor of Judea. He had a Latin name, and would have been of Italian origin.
- He was a leader of men – *a centurion*. He was in charge of a part of the regiment. As such he would have had a prominent position within the regiment, and could not have reached that position without leadership qualities. His belief in God, his family’s belief in God, and also the belief of his whole household demonstrate these qualities.
- He was a generous man – he “*gave alms generously to the (Jewish) people*”. Such generosity was not just to those of the Roman army of which he was a part, but extended into the community where he lived. Remember that he was an occupying soldier who was generous in his gifts to the people of the occupation. This would have been a high contrast to that of most soldiers, especially considering the hatred (on both sides) between the Roman soldiers and the Jews.

What happened to Cornelius, and when?

It was the 9th hour of the day (3 PM), and Cornelius was praying at one of the usual Jewish hours of prayer. “...*he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in ... to him...*” (10:3 NJKV). The description *clearly* suggests that this was not a dream, nor a trance, but something that clearly happened to him, and left him in no doubt about it.

The angel had human form and spoke to him, “...*a man stood before me in bright clothing...*” (10:30 NJKV) and told him that God had heard his prayers, and seen his good deeds, and an answer to them was on its way.

What was Cornelius told to do?

He was told to “...*send men to Joppa...send for Peter...*” (10:5). The instructions were quite specific about where Peter was, and how to find him.

Cornelius responded by sending two of his household servants, as well as a soldier who had been assigned to his house. He must also have been a religious person – most likely due to the influence of Cornelius as he is described as *devout*.

Cornelius explained everything to these men (about what he had seen, and what he had been told), and dispatched the men at once. It is a distance of 50 km (30 miles) from Caesarea to Joppa, and the journey would have taken probably 10 or 12 hours at a fast walk – or maybe longer.

They arrived in Joppa at midday the next day (vs 9), and so the men must have journeyed for most of the night, and been dispatched by Cornelius almost straight away.

What happened to Peter?

Peter had gone up onto the (flat roof) housetop at midday (the sixth hour) to pray. He was already staying in the house of Simon the tanner – a profession that would be regarded as

“unclean” by the Jews, since they would have had to deal with dead animals and burials. It is unknown why Peter chose to stay there, but he may have been a disciple.

It was lunchtime, and Peter was getting hungry, and thinking about food (smells good, eh?). The traditional early meal of the day was still being prepared, a few hours later than normal. He fell into a trance, and saw heaven opened and all sorts of animals descending.

A voice told him to “...*rise and eat, Peter...*” (10:13), but he refused because the animals were unclean. He was told “...*you must not call common (unclean) the things that God has cleansed...*” (10:15). This event occurred three times, and Peter was perplexed as to what this vision meant.

Whilst he was wondering about it, Peter was told to get down and go with the three men who were downstairs waiting for him “...*doubting nothing...*”.

These men had arrived at the place where Peter was staying at *precisely* the time when the vision had been revealed to Peter.

What happened to the three men?

Peter invited the men in, and they stayed with him and Simon for the rest of the day, and for the night. They would have been tired after a 50-km walk, having little or no sleep in preparation for the journey, and having (probably) been up for the previous day.

They explained the appearance of the angel to Cornelius, and that he had been divinely instructed to summon Peter to his house so that he might hear what Peter had to say.

The next day, Peter and the three men headed off back to Caesarea, and took some of the brethren from Joppa with them. There were six of them (11:12), making a total of 10 in the party who made the return trip back to Caesarea. The return trip took all of the day, and part of the next (10:23-24).

What unclean animals did Peter see?

In Deuteronomy, Moses provides some specific instructions regarding “clean” and “unclean” animals (Deut 14:2-21).

These may be grouped as follows²:

Category	Principle	Examples
Land animals	If it has a split hoof <i>and</i> chews the cud it is clean. Animals with paws or that travel in any other way are unclean.	Camel, badger, pig, weasel, rat, lizards of all types are unclean.
Water animals	If it has fins <i>and</i> scales, it is clean.	Catfish, eels, shellfish are unclean.
Birds	Specific birds are restricted.	Eagle, vulture, hawk, raven, owls, gull, cormorant, osprey, stork, heron, hoopoe, bat are unclean.
Insects	Flying insects that walk, <i>except</i> those with jointed legs, are unclean.	Locusts, katydids, crickets, grasshoppers are clean.

The list of animals that were unclean included birds, quadrupeds, insects and fish. However, some “clean” animals could become unclean if they were strangled, offered to idols, or died (Lev 17:10-14).

² From the Applied Bible Dictionary, p. 228
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN are ritual terms used in OT religion to identify persons, places, animals, and things which could or could not have a role in the worship of God.

The OT concept of cleanness is rooted in the holiness of God. Priests, places, sacrificial animals, and objects used in worship were “holy” or “set apart” for God. For the worship of an utterly holy God to be done properly, all of these elements needed to be thoroughly “clean.” uncleanness was an affront to God’s holiness.

A person became unclean through contact with an unclean thing (for example, a dead body); by menstruation, seminal discharge or childbirth; by contracting certain skin diseases; or by eating unclean food. In OT times a believer had to be in a “clean” condition to participate in community worship of God.

In the NT the old categories of clean and unclean things are set aside, and the focus of relationships with God shifts from externals to heart attitude.

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN IN THE OT

Some scholars have tried to explain ritual uncleanness by suggesting the regulations dealt with matters of sanitation. Thus unclean animals were thought of as those which might carry disease. But this explanation misses the point. When the distinction between clean and unclean was introduced, Moses portrayed God as saying,

Do not defile yourself by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. (Lev. 11:43,44)

Clean and unclean were holiness issues, reminders to the Israelites that they were God’s own people and must set themselves completely apart to him.

A close examination of those things the OT identifies as unclean reveals that they focus on the central experiences of human life: on birth and death, sex, food, and health. In establishing the clean and unclean, God showed Israel in a graphic way that every issue of life must be related to him, and that in every way God’s people must be set apart from others.

Ceremonial uncleanness did not cancel a believer’s relationship with God, although uncleanness did temporarily disrupt participation in community worship. The Law provided steps a person could take to become “clean” again. These steps involved (1) a period of time during which the individual remained unclean and could not participate in worship rituals, and (2) purification, either by washing with water or by offering a blood sacrifice. Persons set apart to God (as were the priests) and objects dedicated to God’s service were cleansed by blood.

Whilst the early OT books pay most attention to ritual uncleanness, the concept of clean and unclean had moral implications. Sinful acts made a person “unclean” in God’s sight. The sacrifice of the Day of Atonement was offered to cleanse [literally, to make the people of Israel clean] from “all your sins” (Lev. 16:30). The later prophets drew this analogy when condemning the sins of God’s people. The Psalmist describes the idolatry of the forefathers and says, literally, they “made themselves unclean by what they did” (Ps. 106:39; see Jer. 2:23; Ezek. 20:30,31; Mic. 2:10). This is the theme Jesus emphasised as he explained the inner meaning of Mosaic Law, and taught that ultimately clean and unclean had always been matters of the heart.

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN IN THE NT

In Jesus’ time the Pharisees emphasised external, ritual performance. This led them to criticise the failure of Jesus’ disciples to go through a ceremonial washing before they ate, thus (according to them) eating “with unclean hands” (Mk. 7:1-23). Jesus later explained, “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’” (v. 15).

Jesus’ statement seems to contradict the ritual concept of clean and unclean. In fact, however, it did three very different things:

1. Jesus challenged the right of the rabbis to extend the concept by calling things unclean which Scripture did not identify as such.
2. Jesus focussed attention on the moral thread which was always present in the Law. “From within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All of these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (vv.21-23).
3. Jesus acted, as was his right as the Son of God, to annul the Law’s ritual regulations, making them of no effect. Thus, Mark comments, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’” (v. 19).

The young church struggled with this change, as with the other revolutionary changes in life-style introduced by Jesus. The vision of Peter, in which he was called on to kill and eat “unclean” animals, is significant. Revolted at the very thought, Peter refused, only to hear the voice say, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15). This vision was intended to jolt Peter’s preconceived notion that Gentiles were unclean and that Jews were the only “clean” people with access to God. But it also did more. The vision affirmed the belief that ritual cleanness and uncleanness does not rest merely in an object or thing. A thing is unclean only because God calls it unclean. When God removes this designation, the thing becomes clean again.

Paul makes the vital point that “no food is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14). Only a violation of God’s Word or one’s own conscience can interrupt fellowship with God. God is concerned about what is in our hearts.

Applied Bible Dictionary, Kingsway Publications, ISBN 0-86065-846-5 p. 228, 229

What happened when they came to Caesarea?

Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together those of his household (as we have previously noted, including his servants), and also his relatives and close friends.

He had several days to contemplate the situation, and was in no doubt about the revelation. He was absolutely certain that this was the answer to his prayers to the true and living God, had spread the word to his relatives and friends, and had a ready audience when Peter arrived.

As Peter came to the house, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshipped him. Peter resisted this, since he was not God to be worshipped, but only a man like Cornelius. Peter and Cornelius talked together as they entered the house, where Peter found that the crowd had come together to hear him.

After the preliminaries, Peter asked why it was that Cornelius had sent for him? (10:29). Clearly, God's revelation did not tell Peter *why* it was that he was to go, but only that he should go without doubting.

Peter came to the understanding that he should now mix with the Gentiles, but had not quite understood that they also should be part of the church. Had he not had the vision & revelation from God, he probably would not have even mixed with them, as that would make him unclean for the day.

How did Cornelius respond?

Cornelius recounts the events from a few days earlier (four part days = two whole days, plus the part of the present day, plus the part of the first day). It was now the ninth hour of the day again (10:30) and the same time that Cornelius received the vision. The angel had said that Peter was going to tell him the things that God had commanded.

Peter's sermon:

Peter had reached the understanding of why it was that he was here – to preach the gospel. He then understood that God does not regard people, and that all men are equal whether Jew or Gentile. Peter's words could be described as “...*I am beginning to understand...*” (10:34). What he is beginning to understand is that “...*in every nation, he who fears God is acceptable to Him...*” (10:34).

Peter did not need to argue his case from the Old Testament as he had done with the Jews, and as others had done in previous sermons. His credibility as a representative of God had already been established without any shadow of doubt, and therefore Cornelius understood that the things that Peter was to tell him was the very message of God. Jesus' credentials as the Messiah had been a key issue in the previous sermons to the Jews. Peter started to outline a similar scenario to that of the first sermon in chapter 2.

- Let me introduce to you Jesus Christ,
- He is the one who is Lord of all,
- You know that Jesus taught throughout all of the region,
- And that He was proved to be an appointed messenger of God by his good deeds and miracles, and the power that He had from the Holy Spirit,
- We are eyewitnesses of these things.
- Jesus was killed and crucified,
- But God raised Him up again the third day.
- He was revealed openly to witnesses (but not to everyone),
- And He commanded us to preach to the people, that He is going to judge us.
- All the prophets gave witness to Jesus.
- Therefore, whoever believes in Jesus will have his sins forgiven...

Peter was about to tell them that what they needed to do was to repent and be immersed for the forgiveness of their sins as he had said on the day of Pentecost, but he is interrupted.

What happened whilst Peter was preaching to them?

“... *Whilst Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on them...*” (10:44). This was exactly the same thing as had happened to the apostles on the day of Pentecost (11:15).

It is highly likely that this event was for the benefit of Peter and the other apostles, more than for those who received the blessing. Peter had been uncertain all along:

- He saw the vision, but was perplexed,
- The men who came told him that Cornelius had sent for him to tell him what to do,
- Peter arrived at Cornelius’ house and asked “*what is it that you want*”
- He was preaching, probably thinking what next? What am I to do if they want to obey?

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit removed all doubt from his mind. When Peter recounted the events to the apostles (chapter 11), it also removed any doubt from them. Remember that Peter had brought 6 brethren from Joppa who were witnesses, and Peter brought them with him to the apostles in Jerusalem (11:12).

The Jews were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. They should not have been surprised, since the prophecy of Joel said that the Holy Spirit was to be poured out on all flesh (ie both Jews and Gentiles). The Jews received it on the day of Pentecost, and the Gentiles received it here. It is also significant that Peter was the “leader” on both occasions, and completed the prophecy of Jesus that he (Peter) was the one who was going to unlock the door to the kingdom (Mt 16:18-19).

What was Peter’s response?

Peter then understood exactly what God had in mind, and said that these people had just as much right to be baptised (immersed) in water so that they might have their sins forgiven, as the Jews did.

Peter commanded them to be baptised *in the name of* (with the authority of) the Lord. Whilst we are not specifically told, there is a necessary inference that they did what Peter had commanded them to do, and that they were baptised.

The question often asked, about “household baptisms” – *Were the children of the household also baptised?* In order to establish this, we would first need to establish that there were in fact children in the household, and secondly that they were of such young age as to not be able to understand and comprehend the things that Peter said, and their implications. Further, we would also need to ascertain that these people were baptised. The scripture here says *nothing* about it. More on this in chapter 16.

Peter stayed with them for a few days, eating and sleeping in the house of Gentiles. He was “hauled over the coals” for this later by the apostles (11:3), although he had a perfect explanation for it (as we will see in the study on chapter 11).