

Spiritual Healing

Acts 9:32-43

³² Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. ³⁴ And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. ³⁵ And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

³⁶ Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹ So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. – Acts 9:32-43 ESV

The gospel continued to spread. It had already moved beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem into the neighboring region of Samaria. Now, Luke provides with an overview of how it was taken to Lydda and Joppa, two cities located on the Mediterranean coastal plain, northwest of Jerusalem. And Luke records that it was Peter who made the trip to these two cities. His journey to Lydda was most likely part of a trip he made to visit the believers who existed in the cities outside of Jerusalem. Verse 31 tells us: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" and Luke records that "Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda" (Acts 9:32 ESV). Peter was checking in on all those cities where the gospel had been taken and people had responded. He felt a responsibility to gain a first-hand report on what was happening and to encourage all those who had placed their faith in Christ. It was while he was in Lydda, visiting the saints who lived there, that he heard about a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Other than the physical ailment from which he suffered we know nothing else about this man. His name is Greek, so he could have been a Hellenistic Jew. But we are not told whether he was one of the saints in Lydda or not. But Peter, upon meeting the man, boldly declared to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed" (Acts 9:34 ESV), and Luke records that the man "immediately rose." His healing was instantaneous and complete, a clear work of God. And the immediate outcome of this miraculous healing was not just the man's renewed capacity to walk, but his neighbors' acceptance of the gospel. Luke simply states that, upon seeing Aeneas healed, "they turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35 ESV).

It is always interesting to consider why the Spirit of God inspired the writers of the gospels and the other books of the New Testament to include the accounts of the healings that they did. Surely, these were not all the healings that Jesus and the disciples performed. But they are all very particular in terms of their descriptions. There were many who were lame and could not walk. There were others who were blind and could not see. Jesus and the disciples all cast demons out of those who were possessed. And then, as we will see in the following verses, there are several accounts of those who were dead and then brought back to life. All of these have spiritual implications. They were physical healings, but they mirror what was happening on a spiritual level in the lives of those who came to faith in Christ. At one time they were unable to walk the path that God had chosen for them. They were incapable of following the precept and laws of God faithfully. Like a paralyzed man who was hindered by his body's disability, the lost were totally incapacitated by their sinful condition. They could never have turned to God on their own. And the blind, while physically incapable of sight, were really unable to see spiritually. They were blind to the realities of their own sin and their inability to achieve righteousness on their own. And Jesus placed this spiritual condition on all, including the Pharisees, who He referred to as "blind guides." They were spiritually sightless and devoid of any ability to see truth. Then there were the dead, like Dorcas, whose lives had expired and their ability to live any kind of life was gone, let alone to live righteously. They represent all those who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Every healing performed by Jesus and the disciples was intended to be a representation of man's spiritual plight. Jesus spoke of this very thing when He had read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth.

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,
¹⁹ and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."*

²⁰ *He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. ²¹ Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"* – Luke 4:18-21 NLT

Jesus had come to open the eyes of the blind – the spiritually blind. He had come to release those who were restricted, not by physical paralysis or non-functioning limbs, but by their own sinful state. He came to set free those who were trapped by their own state of spiritual death and condemnation, not just physical death. Jesus came to feed the spiritually hungry and to enrich the lives of the spiritually impoverished. And every physical healing He performed was a living lesson in the kind of power He possessed and proof of His claim to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

While in Lydda, Peter received word from Joppa, a coastal city about ten miles to the east, that a disciple there named Tabitha had recently died. Upon hearing of her death, two men from

Joppa had been sent to Peter with a simple, yet urgent message: “Please come to us without delay” (Acts 9:38 ESV). Why were they so insistent that Peter hurry? What was the rush? Tabitha was already dead, and her body had been laid in an upper room. It would seem that the disciples in Joppa fully expected Peter to do something about this situation. They weren’t just asking him to come in order to perform her funeral. They expected something far greater to happen. So, Peter made his way to Joppa and, upon arrival, he made a beeline to the room where Tabitha’s body lay. There, he found a weeping widow who showed him the clothes that Tabitha had hand-sewn for them. This woman had been a generous and compassionate individual, who had served the local community well. The women who had gathered to mourn her death were expressing their grief over having lost a friend and benefactor. But Peter ushered them from the room, then kneeled by the body and prayed. After some time, he turned to the body and said, ““Tabitha, arise.” And she did. She came back to life. And Luke somewhat anticlimactically states: “Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (Acts 9:41 ESV). No emotion. No excitement. It’s almost as if Luke is overly casual in his description of this episode, as if he was not surprised at all by what he had seen. To a certain degree, the members of the early church had an expectation that these kinds of things would happen. They were become somewhat normal occurrences and no longer shocked those who witnessed them. But to those outside the church, these kinds of things were far from normal or expected. And when news got out that Tabitha was alive, Luke reports that “many believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42 ESV).

This chapter closes with an interesting side note. It states that Peter remained in Joppa, staying the home of a man named Simon, who just so happened to be a tanner. This little aside can be easily overlooked by those of us in the modern, western church. To us, it simply sounds like Peter stayed in the home of a gracious host, enjoying his hospitality. But notice that Luke reports that Simon was a tanner. That means, as part of his profession, this man worked with the carcasses of dead animals. To any God-fearing Jew, this man’s occupation would have made him unclean and, therefore, to be avoided at all costs. But with this very brief note at the close of this chapter, we get a glimpse into a change that seems to be taking place in Peter’s heart and life. He is opening up to the idea that Jesus wants the gospel to go to ALL men, not just some. It has obviously been extended to Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews. Now, Peter is about to discover that God is going to open up the door to even those whom the average Jew would consider unclean and undeserving of God’s grace and mercy: The Gentiles.

A Tale of Two Visions

Acts 10:1-16

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa..

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. – Acts 10:1-16 ESV

Peter is in Joppa, the guest of Simon, the tanner. He is continuing his ministry among the believers there and sharing the gospel with the Hellenistic Jews who lived there. But his world was about to get rocked. While Peter had apparently become open to the idea of Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews coming to faith in Christ, he was about to learn that God had much broader, bigger plans for the gospel. Up until this point, it appears that Peter and the other apostles were somewhat reluctant to take the gospel to the Gentiles. It seems that their self-imposed requirement was that the gospel only be shared with those who had a pre-existing relationship with Judaism. Thus, they had been willing to approve of Philip’s work among the Samaritans, because of those individuals were technically part-Jewish and worshiped Yahweh. And it seems that those who came to faith in Lydda and Joppa had been Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jews. Even Simon, the tanner, with whom Peter was lodging in Joppa, was most likely a Hellenistic Jew who had come to faith in Christ. So, it appears that some formal link to Judaism had become a necessary requirement before anyone could hear the gospel message. But all that was about to change.

First, Luke introduces us to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman cohort who lived in Caesarea, a city located up the Mediterranean coast, about 30-miles north of Joppa. This man was a Gentile, but Luke describes him as “a devout man who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2 ESV). As an officer in the Roman army, it is doubtful that Cornelius had taken steps to become a full proselyte of the Jewish religion. That would have required circumcision and

would be an extremely dangerous thing for a man in his position to do. After all, he was part of the Roman army that occupied Palestine and whose responsibility it was to enforce Roman law. But Luke makes it clear that this man worshiped the God of the Hebrews and was favorably disposed to the Jewish people. He regularly gave financial gifts to the poor and needy and even prayed to Yahweh. And it was during the ninth hour, the Jewish hour of prayer, that Cornelius received a vision from God.

It is significant to note that God appeared to Cornelius long before any human representative did. In essence, God was giving His divine approval of not only Cornelius, but of all those who, like him, were outside the Jewish faith, but predisposed to having a relationship with God. This man had been drawn to God. He worshiped and prayed to God. Now, he was actually having an encounter with God. And the word he received from God, through the mouth of an angel, was quite clear:

⁴ “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” – Acts 10:4-6 ESV

Cornelius received instructions to send for Peter. God was very specific. He wanted Peter to be the one who to play a part in this man’s conversion. And so, Cornelius, petrified by what he had seen and heard, obeyed and sent two men to Joppa to find and bring back Peter.

Meanwhile, 30 miles away in Joppa, Peter was given his own vision from God. And his was dramatically different, and no less disturbing. Peter had gone up the roof of Simon’s house in order to pray and, while praying, he fell into a trance. It’s important to note that Luke describes Peter as having been hungry when he started his prayer time. His physical condition of hunger is going to play an important part in the overall context of the vision he was given by God. While waiting for his lunch to be prepared, Peter fell into a trance and had a dream about food. Not exactly an abnormal or unlikely scenario, but it is the nature of the food in Peter’s dream that make it significant. In his dream, he saw a giant sheet being let down from heaven, and in that sheet “were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (Acts 10:12 ESV). And we know from Peter’s reaction, that these creatures were all considered uncommon and unclean to Jews. They were all from the list found in Leviticus 11.

⁴ You may not, however, eat the following animals that have split hooves or that chew the cud, but not both. The camel chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is ceremonially unclean for you. ⁵ The hyrax chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is unclean. ⁶ The hare chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is unclean. ⁷ The pig has evenly split hooves but does not chew the cud, so it is unclean. ⁸ You may not eat the meat of these animals or even touch their carcasses. They are ceremonially unclean for you. – Leviticus 11:4-8 NLT

¹⁰ But you must never eat animals from the sea or from rivers that do not have both fins and scales. They are detestable to you. – Leviticus 11:10 NLT

¹³ *“These are the birds that are detestable to you. You must never eat them: the griffon vulture, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, ¹⁴ the kite, falcons of all kinds, ¹⁵ ravens of all kinds, ¹⁶ the eagle owl, the short-eared owl, the seagull, hawks of all kinds, ¹⁷ the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, ¹⁸ the barn owl, the desert owl, the Egyptian vulture, ¹⁹ the stork, herons of all kinds, the hoopoe, and the bat. – Leviticus 11:13-19 NLT*

Added to this list were various winged insects. Any and all of these creatures were forbidden and declared unclean by God. The Jews were not allowed to eat or touch them. To do so would make them ceremonially unclean. And yet, when the sheet descended from heaven, it was filled with nothing but these kinds of creatures. To make matters worse, a voice from heaven commanded, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.” The sheet had come from heaven. The voice had come from heaven. But the creatures were unclean. They were unacceptable and unholy. Why in the world was God commanding Peter to satisfy his hunger by consuming what was forbidden? Peter, shocked and outraged by the mere thought of doing such a thing, vehemently told God, “No!” and proudly stated, “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean” (Acts 10:14 NLT). This little exchange between Peter and God reminds me of another awkward moment that took place sometime earlier between he and Jesus.

Jesus had just finished telling Peter and the other disciples that He was headed to Jerusalem, where He was going to be arrested, tried and executed. But He had also informed them that He would be raised from the dead. But Peter wasn’t listening. Instead, he took Jesus aside and rebuked Him.

But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. “Heaven forbid, Lord,” he said. “This will never happen to you!” – Matthew 16:22 NLT

Later, on the very night Jesus was betrayed, He told the disciples that each of them would end up denying Him. But Peter had responded, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you” (Matthew 26:33 NLT). But Jesus broke the news to Peter that he would actually deny Him three times. To which Peter responded, “No! Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” (Matthew 26:35 NLT).

Peter had developed a habit of arguing with Jesus and now, he was doing the same thing with God the Father. Three separate times, God told Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15 ESV). And I don’t think Luke’s mention of these three repetitive declarations by God is unimportant. If you recall, Peter had ended up denying Jesus three separate times on the night that He was betrayed. And, when Peter had encountered the resurrected Jesus, they had had an exchange, where Jesus asked Peter three separate times, “Do you love me?” And each time, Peter had responded, “Yes!” But with each of Peter’s statements of affirmation, Jesus had repeatedly commanded him to “Feed my sheep!” In fact, His exact words were:

“Then feed my lambs.” – John 21:15 NLT

“Then take care of my sheep.” – John 21:16 NLT

“Then feed my sheep.” – John 21:17 NLT

Peter had been commanded by Jesus to care for His sheep. And now, Peter was going to learn that his definition of what it meant to be one of Jesus’ sheep was quite different than that of Jesus Himself. In fact, Jesus had clearly spoken concerning His sheep:

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, ¹⁵ just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd. – John 10:14-16 NLT

There were sheep, “that are not in this sheepfold”, for whom Jesus had died. And Cornelius was one of them. Much to Peter’s chagrin, the gospel message was not reserved for the Jews. It was not restricted to those who had some kind of ethnic alliance with the Hebrew people. It was for any and all. Peter was about to learn what Paul would later write: “For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes--the Jew first and also the Gentile” (Romans 1:16 NLT).

Good News for All

Acts 10:17-43

¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." ²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²² And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

³⁰ And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." – Acts 10:17-43 ESV

Peter was at a loss as to what the meaning behind his vision might be. But even as he wrestled over the possible implications of his dream, he was told by the Holy Spirit that he would be receiving three visitors and that he was to accompany them. That was all the detail he received from the Spirit. And, just as the Spirit had said, the three men arrived at Simon's house, in search of Peter. When Peter asked them the purpose behind their visit, they replied: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say" (Acts 10:22 ESV). This entire encounter had the hand of God all over it. Cornelius was spoken to by an angel from God. Peter had received a vision, clearly given to him by God. Then he had received a word directly from the Spirit of God. Peter may not have known what his vision meant, but he no doubt understood that God was behind all that was happening. And so, after hosting his guests for the evening, he accompanied them the next day to Caesarea, not knowing what God had in store for him there.

We know from Acts 11:22, that Peter did not go to Caesarea alone. He had invited six other brothers from Joppa to join him on the trip. The journey most likely took them about two-day's time. And when they arrived at the home of Cornelius, they found it packed with the centurion's family and friends. Luke informs us that Cornelius, in a sign of gratitude and veneration, fell down at Peter's feet and worshiped him. There is no indication that he knew of Peter's status as an apostle of Jesus. He simply knew that this man had been sent to him by God with something important to share with him. But Peter, informing Cornelius that he too, was nothing more than a man, had him stand and explain what it was that he wanted. Cornelius recounted to Peter the vision and message he had received from the angel, then he explained that he and his guests were eagerly waiting to hear what God had to say to them through His messenger, Peter. "Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you" (Acts 10:33 NLT).

Luke doesn't tell us when Peter finally put all the dots together. But sometime between when he arrived at Cornelius' house, saw the crowd of Gentiles gathered, and heard Cornelius' description of his vision, Peter grasped the significance and meaning of his own vision. Here he was in a Gentile's home, surrounded by other Gentiles who eagerly waited to hear him deliver a message to them from God. And Peter, as a good Jew, saw the absurdity of it all. He even told Cornelius and his guests, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28 NLT). The vision of the sheet filled with unclean creatures and the command from God to "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:13 ESV), all began to make sense. He remembered the words of God, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15 ESV), and he realized that Cornelius and the people gathered in his home were Gentiles whom God saw as clean, not unclean and common. They were acceptable to God, so they must be acceptable to Peter. To a Jew, a Gentile was considered unclean and to avoided at all costs. They were uncircumcised and did not keep the strict dietary laws of the Jews. They did not obey the Mosaic law. So, any contact with them made a Jew ceremonially unclean. And yet, here was Peter, under the direct command of God, sitting in the home of a Gentile, and a Roman centurion at that, getting ready to share the gospel. God was doing

something new. He was opening up the door of salvation and including those outside of what had once been the closed doors of the Jewish nation. The apostle Paul would later remind the Gentile believers in Ephesus of the significance of their inclusion into the family of God.

¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.
– Ephesians 2:11-13 NLT

He would remind the believers in Corinth that they were a fellowship made up of Jews and Gentiles, a blended family chosen and adopted by God. "Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13 NLT). And here was Peter experiencing this new phenomenon for the very first time. This was an historic moment. It was a paradigm-shifting point in time. Nothing would ever be the same. The playing field was being leveled. There would no longer be the haves and the have-nots, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised. And Paul would make that point perfectly clear in his letter to the Galatian believers.

²⁶ For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you. – Galatians 3:26-29 NLT

All of this would have been a shock to Peter's system. As a devout Jew, this was antithetical to all he had ever believed. He was part of the chosen race. He was a member of the holy nation, God's people, the Jews. But Peter saw the hand of God in all of this. When God had commanded him to go to the home of Cornelius, he had obeyed. "So when I was sent for, I came without objection" (Acts 10:29 ESV). He may not have fully understood what was going on, but he knew it was the will of God, and that was enough for Peter. And when he saw what God was doing in Cornelius' home, he fully grasped that God had far greater plans for the gospel than he or the other apostles had ever understood. God was non-discriminatory. In fact, Peter told Cornelius and his guests, "Truly I 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 ESV). Peter got it. The vision of the sheet made sense now. Gentiles, or non-Jews, were no longer to be considered unclean and unacceptable.

Which is what led him to later write to the highly blended congregations located in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia:

⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* – 1 Peter 2:9-10 ESV

Jews and Gentiles together were to make up the body of Christ. And so, Peter began to explain to the house full of Gentiles eagerly listening to his voice all that God had done through Jesus Christ, relating His ministry, death, burial and resurrection. And he told them the commission that Jesus had passed on to he and his companions.

⁴² *“And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead.* ⁴³ *He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”* – Acts 10:42-43 NLT

But notice that the “everyone” in Jesus’ order had just taken on a new meaning. No longer was the gospel restricted to Jews living in Jerusalem. It had already begun to spread outside the city walls and had even been taken to Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews living outside of Jerusalem. It had been shared with the Ethiopian eunuch. And now, Peter was sharing the good news with a house full of Gentiles in the city of Caesarea.

Amazed and Appalled

Acts 10:44-11:3

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”— Acts 10:44-11:3 ESV

Peter preached the gospel to a house full of Gentiles and something incredible happened. They came to faith. Now, that alone should not have surprised Peter and his six companions. They had seen thousands of people respond to the gospel message, placing their faith in Christ. But this was the first time they had seen it happen to non-Jews or Gentiles. And what made this particular occasion even more amazing was that Cornelius, and those among his family and friends who placed their faith in Christ, immediately received the filling of the Holy Spirit. If you recall, back in chapter eight, Philip took the gospel to the Samaritans and Luke records, “But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12 ESB). They believed and were baptized, but it was not until Peter arrived that they received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. — Acts 8:14-17

Why was the situation in Cornelius’ house different? They simply believed and were not even required to undergo water baptism. Luke simply states that the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word. In verse 16 of chapter 11, Peter infers that these new converts had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And not only that, they received the Spirit in the same that he and the 119 other disciples had on the day of Pentecost.

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to

us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"
 – Acts 11:15-17 ESV

They had the exact same experience as that of the Jewish disciples of Jesus. They received the Spirit *and* they spoke in foreign languages. And more than likely, they spoke in Aramaic, because the men who accompanied Peter from Joppa were Jews and they were able to understand that they were praising God. These Greek-speaking, Gentile converts to Christianity were experiencing the same powerful display of the Spirit's indwelling and confirming presence as Peter, James and John had. And it was all based on nothing more than their faith in the gospel message as proclaimed to them by Peter.

So, why the difference? How come the Samaritans had been required to wait for the arrival of Peter and have him lay hands on them before they could receive the Holy Spirit? Luke never provides us with an explanation. He simply records the facts as they occurred. Once again, we have God seemingly breaking established protocol. Not only was He doing a new and seemingly unacceptable thing by having Peter take the gospel to unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles, He was pouring out His Spirit on them without any involvement by one of His chosen apostles. All of this would have left Peter and his six companions perplexed and bewildered. What was God doing? What was He thinking? And Luke records that Peter and his fellow Jews were amazed at what they were seeing. This would not have been what they expected. It was hard enough for them to fathom God allowing Gentiles to embrace the gospel. But for Him to do so without requiring them to undergo water baptism, signifying their repentance, was hard to understand. These Gentiles were immediately anointed by the Spirit of God, with no additional or prerequisite steps placed upon them. What we have here is the inaugural occurrence of what will be many more Gentile conversion stories. And they will all follow this same basic pattern.

Immediately after their acceptance of Christ as Savior and their acceptance by God as illustrated by their baptism in the Spirit, these new converts were baptized in water, signifying their acceptance and membership into the family of God, the body of Christ. And just as Peter's vision of the sheet filled with unclean creatures had been a shock to his system, this day's events was a real-life illustration of what God had been trying to tell him through that vision. "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15 ESV). The word "common" has a much more intense meaning in the Greek. It is *koinoō*, and it refers to something that is defiled, unholy, or profane. God had been trying to tell Peter that Gentiles, who were seen as "common" or defiled by the Jews, were no longer to be viewed that way. He was declaring them clean. And Peter had just seen God confirm His words with actions. The apostle Paul would later write of the significance behind that day's events.

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. – 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NLT

That day, in the home of a Roman centurion, Peter was given a shocking introduction into God's new dispensation of grace. In that room there stood Jews and Gentiles, each of whom had expressed their faith in Christ as their Savior and had received the gift of the Holy Spirit as confirmation. They had all things in common. They were co-equals. They were brothers and sisters in Christ. And as Paul would later tell the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NLT). This was a new day.

But not everyone was going to be thrilled with God's seeming change in plans. When word got back to Jerusalem that Gentiles had received the word of God and been baptized in the Spirit of God, they were not exactly thrilled. This had not been what they were expecting. It wasn't that they were unwilling for Gentiles to be included in hearing the gospel message. Jesus had made that pretty clear in His commissioning of them as His witnesses. It was just that they thought there would be more requirement involved, such as circumcision, conversion to the Jewish faith, keeping of the Mosaic law, and more. After all, these people were common and unclean. They were out of step with the holy demands of God's righteous commands as given to Moses. There had to be more for them to do. And when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, he was met with criticism from the circumcision party. This is a reference to those Jews who had come to faith in Christ, but who held strong ethnic-religious ties to their Jewish faith. After all, Jesus had been a Jew and a rabbi. He was the Messiah who, according to the Old Testament prophets, was to be the Savior of the Jewish people. These people put a high stock in things like circumcision and the keeping of the various dietary restrictions and Jewish religious observances. So, they were not exactly thrilled to hear that the Gentiles in Caesarea had been baptized into the body of Christ without any additional requirements placed upon them. In fact, they look down their noses at Peter and express their disdain for his activities in Caesarea: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3 ESV). As far as they were concerned, Peter had violated the law of God. He, a Jew, had defiled himself by associating with common, unclean Gentiles. But they were in for a shock. Their preconceived notions of how things should be were about to be rocked. They were going to hear about Peter's vision about the sheet filled with unclean animals. They were going to share his shock at God's command to "kill and eat." They would reel upon hearing Peter's recounting of all that happened in the home of Cornelius. And I find it interesting that Peter doesn't bother to bring up that his host during his stay in Joppa had been a man who practiced the unclean trade of tanning animal hides. Peter kept that little tidbit to himself.

But the bottom line is going to be that the church was entering a new and exciting dispensation, where the grace of God was going to be extended to all and all who would believe in the name of His Son. Men, women, slaves, freemen, Jews, Gentiles, Romans, tax collectors, prostitutes, priests, widows, businessmen, shepherds, fishermen, and even tanners. We may not always agree with God's ways. We may not approve of His methodology. But God doesn't ask for our advice or our permission. He simply asks that we trust Him and willingly submit to His divine plan for our lives and the redemption of the world.

Don't Oppose What God Approves

Acts 11:4-18

⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."— Acts 11:4-18 ESV

The first question we have to ask ourselves when reading this section of Luke's account, is why did he include it? After all, it simply appears to be a retelling by Peter of all that happened while he was in Caesarea. In fact, it is virtually identical to what Luke wrote in chapter 10. But the key difference is the audience to whom Peter is sharing the story of the conversions of Cornelius and all the other Gentiles who had gathered in his house to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter is addressing his fellow apostles in Jerusalem. He is explaining to a room full of Jews what went down in Caesarea. And he is having to do so because he had been accused of wrongly associating with Gentiles. There were some in Jerusalem who, when they had received news of what had happened in Caesarea, were less-than-happy. In their minds, Peter had done the unthinkable. He, a Jew, had mingled with the unclean. He had defiled himself by associating with those whom the Mosaic law declared to be common and unclean. When Peter had arrived back in Jerusalem, rather than rejoicing with him over the exciting news of the conversions of Cornelius and his friends, these men said, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3 ESV).

Their response brings to mind the kind of reactions Jesus had received from the religious leaders regarding what they believed to be His questionable choices in relationships.

¹⁰ Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. ¹¹ But when the Pharisees saw this,

they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” – Matthew 9:10-11 NLT

¹ Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ² This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! – Luke 15:1-2 NLT

For some in the Jerusalem church, the idea of Peter eating with Gentiles was unacceptable. To think that he shared the gospel with them was even more disconcerting. How could he do such a thing? Well, Peter goes out of his way to tell them. He explains all that had led to his decision to make the journey to Caesarea. And he makes it clear that this had been God’s decision, not his own. He had simply obeyed orders and followed the divine directions given to Him by God. He recounts the vision he had received from God. And he once again makes note of the fact that the sheet containing all the unclean creatures had descended to him *out of* heaven. It had come from God’s very throne room, which meant that the very creatures Peter had viewed as unclean and defiled, had come from God’s presence. He had sent them. And at the end of the vision, the same sheet, full of supposedly unclean creatures, ascended *back* into heaven. And three separate times, God had told Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 11:9 ESV).

Notice what God said to Peter. He was very specific in His word choices. God had told Peter that he had “made clean” these once unclean animals. The Greek word Luke used is *katharizō*, and it means to cleanse or purify. In a levitical or sacrificial sense, it means to pronounce something clean that has been purified by sacrifice. In a moral sense, it means to free something from defilement of sin and from faults (“G2511 - *katharizō* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible). God was telling Peter that He had made a divine determination to purify what had at one time been considered unclean. He had done it. God had declared the creatures to be clean. He had passed judgment and declared His decision. And He had expected Peter to accept it.

And the vision had been just that: A vision. It had been a visual tool used to teach Peter a real-life lesson regarding Gentiles and his view of them. God was about to let down a sheet full of unclean creatures, in the form of Cornelius, his family members and friends. But God had cleansed them through the sacrifice of His Son. Their sin debts had been paid for on the cross. They had once been defiled by their sin and separated from God as a result of their impurity, but God had done something to redeem and restore them. He had sent His Son to die for them. And long before Peter and his six companions had made the trip to Caesarea, God had already chosen those who would be saved there. And Peter was not to call common what God had already made clean. God had chosen to remove the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, wrote of this important determination on God’s part.

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. – Colossians 3:11 NLT

The gospel was not reserved just for Jews. Jesus had come as the Jewish Messiah, but He had become the Savior of the world. And once again, Paul describes that what Jesus did on the cross had opened up the doors of heaven to all – both Jews and Gentiles.

¹³ But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith. – Galatians 3:13-14 NLT

Peter had seen this happen first-hand. He had seen God bless the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham. He had watched in amazement as the Holy Spirit filled those Gentile converts and empowered them in the very same way He had the disciples on the day of Pentecost. And Peter could only say, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17 ESV). Peter knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what he had witnessed in Caesarea had been of God. His vision, Cornelius' vision, the coming of the Spirit, the gift of tongues – it had all been evidence of God's divine hand. And he had no desire to stand opposed to the will of God.

And Luke simply records that when the Jewish believers in Jerusalem "heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18 ESV). Like Peter, they saw that this was of God and that they had no business standing in opposition to what God had predetermined to do. If He had decided to deem Gentiles worthy of receiving the gospel, who were they to stand in His way.

As we will say later in Luke's account, many of the same individuals who had called Peter to task over his association with Gentiles, would raise their voices again in protest over the growing movement to convert Gentiles to the faith. In fact, in chapter 15, we will see where Paul and Barnabas are accused of not requiring circumcision of all Gentile converts. Luke records, "But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:5 ESV). These men were teaching that Christianity was nothing more than a kind of reformed Judaism. They were demanding that all the requirements of the Mosaic law be kept in order to any Gentile to be accepted as a true believer. This matter will come up repeatedly in the later chapters of Luke's account, as we see Paul and others continue to spread the good news regarding Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

There were those who could not accept what God was doing. It went against their preconceived notions of religious right and wrong. They had put God in a box and determined that there was only one way for people to have a right relationship with Him – and that was through some form of law-keeping or adherence to a set of religious rules. But Paul, the apostle who spent his life ministering the gospel to the Gentiles, would later write:

²⁷ Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. ²⁸ So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.

²⁹ After all, is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Of course he is. ³⁰ There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. – Romans 3:27:30 NLT

Peter and Paul were ministering in a new day. The rules had changed. The Redeemer had come. The way of salvation had been paved by the blood of Jesus Christ. No more hopeless attempts to try and live up to God's holy standards on your own. No more need for physical circumcision. God was circumcising hearts and setting apart a people for His own, whom He had declared to be clean. And that would include Jews and Gentiles.

Just as He Had Planned It

Acts 11:19-30

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. – Acts 11:19-30 ESV

In this section, Luke begins to introduce yet another phase of the church's continuing spread and growth. Back in chapter eight, he had described one of the ramifications of Stephen's martyrdom. It was the increased persecution of the church, in part, because of the efforts of Saul. Yet, in spite of the intensification of the persecution, he said, "the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went" (Acts 8:4 NLT). Then, by way of example, he chronicled Philip's trip to the region of Samaria and all that happened as a result. Here in chapter 10, Luke picks up where he left off, letting us know that the persecution of the church had resulted in a dispersion of the Christians well beyond Samaria. The believers who fled Jerusalem "traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch" (Acts 10:19 ESV). But then Luke adds a telling detail, revealing that these Jewish believers kept their efforts to share the gospel restricted to their own people: The Jews. He says that they spoke the word to no one but Jews. This is significant because he shares it immediately after detailing the dramatic outcome of Peter's journey to Caesarea, where Gentiles came to faith and received the anointing of the Spirit of God just as the disciples had on the day of Pentecost. This provides us with an important insight into the early days of the church. As the church continued to grow and the gospel made its way outside the confines of Jerusalem and Judea, the effort developed multiple fronts, each seemingly with its own emphasis and distinct motivation. Those Jewish believers who escaped and made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in Syria, were still under the impression that this new religion was little more than a new branch of reformed Judaism. It was a religion of Jews and for Jews. After all, Jesus had been a Jew and had claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. So, it made sense that they would concentrate their efforts to share the gospel by focusing on fellow Jews. And, as Jews, the thought of sharing

their new-found faith with a Gentile would never have crossed their minds. Remember, it took a vision and a word from God to get Peter to go to the home of Cornelius.

Cyprus, Phoenicia and Antioch were located hundreds of miles from Jerusalem and illustrate the ever-expanding reach of the gospel. Antioch, located in the region of Syria, was 300 miles from the city of Jerusalem and, at that time, would have been the third-largest city in the entire Roman empire. It was a bustling metropolis, made up of people from all walks of life and from all over the world. It is estimated that Antioch had a population of anywhere from 500,000 to 800,000 people, with a seventh of them being Jews. As a city, it had a reputation for decadence and its citizens' love of pleasure. And yet, Antioch would become a major hub for Christianity in the coming years.

As the believing Jews made their ways to these various destinations, they faithfully shared the good news regarding Jesus Christ. Luke tells us that, in Antioch, they included Hellenistic Jews in their target audience. And he records that "a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 10:21 ESV). Even though they were restricting their outreach to Jews, God was blessing their efforts. And when news of what was happening in Antioch got back to the leadership of the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to check it out. When he arrived, Barnabas was greatly encouraged by what he saw and spent time exhorting those in the church there "to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (Acts 10:23 ESV). He knew that the days ahead would be difficult. It was not going to be easy to live out their new faith in the midst of a culture like that in Antioch. These people, as Jews, were already in the minority. Now, as believers, they were going to face further rejection by their own people. So, Barnabas felt compelled to strengthen the fledgling church by remaining with them for a prolonged period of time. And knowing he would need help, he traveled to Tarsus to enlist Saul in his efforts. This would begin an important new phase in the God-ordained ministry of Saul. And it is essential that we recognize God's sovereign hand at work in all these details. Stephen's martyrdom had resulted in persecution and the dispersion of the church. It had also resulted in Saul's intensified efforts in that persecution, after he approvingly watched the stoning of Stephen. And yet, the resurrected Jesus had confronted Saul as he made his way to Damascus to round up Christians and, as a result, Saul had undergone a dramatic conversion. And some three years later, when Saul had traveled to Jerusalem, it had been Barnabas who acted as his host and sponsor, introducing him to the apostles and explaining the dramatic details behind Saul's conversion. Now, when the leaders in Jerusalem felt compelled to send a representative to Antioch to investigate all that was going on, they *just so happened* to choose Barnabas. This was anything but a case of happenstance or blind fate. It was the hand of God. Barnabas was chosen because God had ordained it. And his arrival in one of the largest, predominantly Gentile cities in the Roman empire was something God orchestrated. Now, he would have Saul working by his side, a man whom Jesus had chosen to be His witness to the Gentiles. It's important that we recall the words spoken by Jesus to Ananias, commanding him to go lay hands on Saul.

"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." – Romans 9:15 ESV

Here in this chapter, we see God instigating what will be another new front in the war against sin and death. He is putting one of His primary weapons into the battle, sending Saul into an environment where his gifts and abilities will be used by the Spirit of God to accomplish great things for the Kingdom. It had probably been close to nine years since Saul's conversion, and during that time, he would have been growing in his faith and honing his Spirit-given abilities as a messenger of the gospel. God had been preparing Saul for this very occasion.

Luke records that Saul and Barnabas spent a year in Antioch; ministering, evangelizing, and growing the fledgling congregation there. Interestingly, Luke provides us with the insight that it was at this point in the timeline of the church that believers came to be known and referred to as Christians. This was most likely about ten years after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. A decade had passed and the church, formerly called "the way" was now known for the name of the One whose name they believed and placed their faith in. This name is significant in that it contains three important characteristics. First of all, "Christ" is the Greek translation of Messiah. The Messiah was the Jewish Savior, promised by God in the Hebrew Scriptures. So, we have in the name "Christian", an obvious link to the Jewish roots of Jesus. But Christ would become the primary name by which Gentiles would commonly refer to Jesus. It became like a second name for Him, much as we use it today. And the ending, "ians" is of a Latin derivation, the language of Rome and of the predominate language of the empire. Luke's inclusion of the seemingly insignificant fact that the name, "Christian" had become the primary means by which believers were described is more important than we might imagine. The faith was becoming universalized. It was making inroads into the various cultures of the day, and developing a reputation as a free-standing religion, separate and distinct from Judaism or any other pagan religion. It was slowly, but surely, becoming a fixture in the culture of the day.

Luke ends this chapter with what appears to be another interesting, but unimportant anecdote: A prophecy regarding an eminent worldwide famine. Once again, we have to look beyond the black and white nature of Luke's reporting of Agabus' prophecy. Why did Luke, under the inspiration of the Spirit, include this information at this point in his book? As we will see, this famine will play a significant part in the future of the church. And Luke provides some insight into how it will impact the ministry of Saul himself.

²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. – Acts 10:29-30 ESV

The church in Jerusalem would suffer greatly because of this famine. The Jews there, already suffering from persecution because of their faith, would find themselves living in relative poverty and barely able to exist. While there had been a time, in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, when the rich believers had been able to provide for the less fortunate in their midst, after the arrival of the famine, that would no longer be possible. Now, the global church would provide for the needs of those in Jerusalem. And Saul would make it part of his life's mission to raise funds among the predominantly Gentile congregations to which he ministered, and to see that those resources made their way back to the church in Jerusalem. God would

even use a famine to accomplish His will regarding the spread of the gospel and the unity of the church around the world. As it spread, God would see to it that it remained unified in its love and mission.

Rescued by God

Acts 12:1-11

¹ About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:1-11 ESV

In the preceding chapter, Luke mentioned the famine taking place in the land of Judea. This devastating natural disaster had left the congregation in Jerusalem in a state of great need and physical suffering. So much so, that an effort was made on the part of the new Gentile converts to raise funds to send to the church in Jerusalem to assist them in their time of need. Luke records that Barnabas and Saul made a trip to Jerusalem to deliver the generous gift of the Gentile church.

²⁹ So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. ³⁰ This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. – Acts 11:29-30 NLT

But chapter 12 presents an even greater problem taking place back in Jerusalem. The persecution of the church was continuing to increase in magnitude and intensity. Now, Herod, the pseudo king of the Jews, who had been appointed by Rome, was getting in on the act. Herod Agrippa I was part-Jew but was greatly disliked by the Jewish people because of his close association with the Roman emperor Gaius, who had given him his position. In an effort to curry favor of the Jewish people, Herod used his political office to carry out attacks on the church, even going so far as to have James, the brother of John, executed. And when he saw how much this pleased the Jews, he made plans to do the same thing to Peter. The murder of James, one of the original apostles and a leader in the Jerusalem church, would have had a

devastating impact on its members. And, while the news of his death would have surprising and unexpected, Jesus Himself had predicted it. Years earlier, while Jesus was still on the earth, James and his brother, John, had come to Jesus with a request.

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do us a favor."

³⁶ "What is your request?" he asked.

³⁷ They replied, "When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left."

³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?"

³⁹ "Oh yes," they replied, "we are able!"

Then Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering." – Mark 10:35-39 NLT

James was dead. And Peter was next. At least, that was Herod's plan. It was as if his plan was to eliminate the leadership of the church, one man at a time. And he was serious about it, having Peter arrested and thrown in jail.

This entire section of the Book of Acts provides us with an important interlude or break that separates the spread of the church to the Gentiles, as recorded in chapter 11, and Saul and Barnabas' trip to Cyprus, where they continued their evangelistic efforts among the Gentiles. As the gospel made its way into the world, the heat in Jerusalem was intensifying and the rejection of the gospel by the Jews was becoming increasingly volatile and violent. Yes, there had been thousands of Jews who had come to faith in Jesus, but as a nation, both politically and religiously, they were standing opposed to Jesus' claim to be their Messiah. John, the brother of James, recorded the nature of Israel's rejection of Jesus, illustrated in their corporate refusal to accept Him as their Messiah.

³⁷ But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him. ³⁸ This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted:

*"Lord, who has believed our message?
To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?"*

³⁹ But the people couldn't believe, for as Isaiah also said,

*⁴⁰ “The Lord has blinded their eyes
and hardened their hearts—
so that their eyes cannot see,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and have me heal them.”*

⁴¹ Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah’s glory. ⁴² Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. ⁴³ For they loved human praise more than the praise of God. – John 12:37-43 NLT

Now, years later, and long after Jesus had been put to death by the religious authorities of Israel and the Roman government, His disciples were facing the same threat of execution. But the hardness of the hearts of the people of Israel, while disappointing, had a purpose. It opened up the door to the Gentiles. Because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, the gospel was taken to non-Jews, so that they might enjoy the righteousness and redemption provided by faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. And Paul, himself a devout Jew, would later write that Israel’s rejection of Jesus would not be permanent in nature.

¹¹ Did God’s people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves. ¹² Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it. – Romans 11:11-12 NLT

This was all part of God’s divine plan. Had the Jewish nation, as a whole, not turned its back on Jesus, the persecution and scattering of the church would not have taken place. But it did, because that is the way God ordained it. Even Peter’s arrest, while clearly the decision of Herod, was part of God’s sovereign, pre-established will.

Luke tells us that when Peter was arrested, the rest of the church got busy lifting him up in prayer. They feared for the worst. James was dead, and they had no reason to expect that the same thing would not happen to Peter. So, they took their need to God. Luke doesn’t tell us what they prayed, but we can easily assume that they pleaded for God to spare Peter’s life and to deliver him from the hands of Herod. And God did just that. The story of Peter’s deliverance provides us with a startling, but often overlooked reminder of God’s power. Herod, the king of the Jews, who had the full authority of the Roman empire behind him, had placed Peter in jail and had every intent to put him to death. And Luke tells us that, on the very night he had determined to carry out his plan, God stepped in. And He did so in a dramatic and memorable way. Peter was sound asleep, chained to two Roman soldiers, when suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, filling the cell with dazzling light. Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to the two

guards, but they were either paralyzed or, perhaps, even killed by the angel. All we know is that Peter's chains dropped off and, after having gotten dressed, he walked out of the prison a free man. And the whole time this was going on, Peter thought he was dreaming. It wasn't until he had made his way out of the prison complex and the angel suddenly disappeared, that Peter realized that what had happened was real and not a dream.

"Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:11 ESV

God had much more for Peter to do. His work on behalf of the kingdom was not yet complete. In John 21, we have Jesus' prediction of Peter's death, but this was not the time or the place. Herod, even as powerful as he was, stood powerless before God Almighty. His execution of James could not have happened without God's approval. We don't know why God allowed James to die by the sword, any more than we know why God allowed Stephen to be stoned to death. And God is not obligated to explain Himself to us. But we can rest in the fact that God, in His sovereign will and almighty power, was in full control of all the circumstances surrounding His church. He was going to use each and every event – the good, the bad and the ugly – to accomplish His divine will for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. And as we will see later on in this same chapter, God would eventually deal with Herod, revealing that no one stands outside of or aloof from God's sovereign hand and righteous judgment.

Touched by an Angel

Acts 12:12-25

¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied.

²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. – Acts 12:12-25 ESV

After his miraculous release by God from prison and from Herod's intentions to put him to death, Peter made his way to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas, the man who enlisted Saul's help in Antioch. We are not told why Peter chose Mary's house as his destination, but it could have been that it was the one place of closest to the prison where he could seek refuge. Luke tells us that there were many believers who had gathered at Mary's home in order to pray for Peter. When he arrived, a young servant girl named Rhoda, was the one who responded to his knocks at the gate. But when she heard his voice, she was so surprised that she left him standing there and ran to inform the rest that Peter was standing outside the gate. Her news was met with incredulity and skepticism. Whatever it was that they had been praying for, it evidently had not been for Peter's release. They refused to accept Rhoda's word that Peter was standing outside the gate. They even went so far as to claim that it must have been his angel. The Greek word, *aggelos*, was typically used

to refer to a divine being or messenger from God. We cannot be sure exactly what those inside Mary's house meant when they used this word under these circumstances. They could have simply been saying that Peter had sent them a human messenger with news of his condition. That would have been a legitimate use of the word. But they could have also believed that it was an actual angel, sent from God with news about Peter. Finally, they might have been using the word in the sense of a guardian angel, sent by God to rescue Peter. Whatever they meant it seems that they were reticent to believe that it was actually Peter standing outside the gate. After all, they had just recently heard the devastating news that James, the brother of John, had been executed by Herod. So, even since Peter's arrest, they had been anticipating similar news. There is no indication in this passage that they had been praying for or expecting God to free Peter. They certainly could have been, but it seems odd that they were so dumbfounded and disbelieving when Peter showed up outside the place where they had been praying.

In fact, Peter was left to stand outside, knocking on the gate, hoping to gain entrance. He had found it was easier to get *out* of Herod's prison than it was to get *into* Mary's home. But eventually, they opened the gate and found Peter standing there, just as Rhoda had said, and they were amazed. The Greek word that Luke uses to refer to their reaction has a much more robust meaning than just amazement. It refers to a sense of astonishment or bewilderment. It was even used to refer to someone being out of their mind or insane. They were legitimately shocked to see Peter standing there. They had been expecting the worse. And they must have been shouting, crying, laughing and jumping up and down in excitement, because Luke indicates that Peter had to get them to quiet down long enough for him to tell them what had happened. And we can only imagine that they stood by in rapt silence as he related the details of his escape: The angel, the helpless prison guards, the chains falling away, and the self-opening prison gate. It was an amazing story and it must have left them awed and amazed at the power of their God.

When Peter had finished, he told them to take this news to James (the half-brother of Jesus) and the rest of the original apostles. This James, who had been in the upper room with the rest of his brothers on the day of Pentecost, had become a leading figure in the Jerusalem church and would later write the book that bears his name. Peter wanted these men to know what had happened to him, so that they might be encouraged by the news. Then, Luke tells us Peter departed. We are not told where he went or what he did. But it is likely that he left Jerusalem for a time in order to lessen the risk any of the other followers of Christ might face for harboring him as a fugitive. We know that Herod, upon discovering that Peter had somehow escaped, ordered a search for Peter, but he was never found. And, as a result, Herod had all the guards, whom he deemed responsible for Peter's escape, executed. Then, Herod himself left Jerusalem and traveled to Caesarea, where he had a palace. He got out of town. We don't know whether his departure was to save face or because he couldn't stand hearing the news circulating through the streets of Jerusalem that Peter had been miraculously rescued by God. This powerful man had failed in his attempt to put an end to the growth of Christianity. Even with his impressive resources and backed by the power of Rome, he was no match for the cause of Christ. In fact, Luke reveals that Herod's days were numbered.

Some dignitaries from Tyre and Sidon came to visit Herod at his royal palace. They were dependent upon Herod and his government for food, so even though they were at odds with the king, they found themselves having to grovel before him on behalf of their people. Luke goes out of his way to describe Herod in his royal robes, sitting on his royal throne and giving a royal speech before these men and all those in attendance. And these men, in spite of their dislike for Herod, were forced to listen, then to shower him with flattering accolades, shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" (Acts 12:22 ESV). And Herod basked in the glory of their words, thoroughly enjoying the experience of being compared to a god. But his pride and pleasure at being deified would not last long. Luke records, "Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last" (Acts 12:23 ESV). Herod was struck down by God. The angel who struck Peter's side in order to wake him up and set him free, struck Herod with a debilitating and devastating disease. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod would suffer for five days and then die. Peter was alive and well, doing the will and the work of God. Herod was dead, for having tried to oppose to the will of God and eliminate the messengers of God.

And Luke matter-of-factly states that "the word of God increased and multiplied" (Acts 12:24 ESV). The gospel didn't skip a beat. The kingdom of God continued to spread. And the chapter ends with the announcement that Barnabas and Saul left Jerusalem returned to Antioch, accompanied by John Mark. It was business as usual. There was work to be done. The death of James had not diminished the zeal and enthusiasm of the disciples. They mourned, but they went on with the work Jesus had assigned to them. Peter's arrest had shaken them, but God had proven to them that He was in charge. He was not done with Peter and they were not done with their job of taking the gospel to the nations.

The work of spreading the gospel is not without its risks. There will always be enemies and opposition. We will always face difficulties and trials as a result of our faithful obedience to fulfill the commission given to us by Jesus. But like Peter and the other disciples, we have work to do. We must remain faithful and diligent to do what we have been called to do. As we will see, Peter didn't give up. He didn't quit or run in fear, viewing his work on behalf of Jesus as too dangerous or risky. He knew he could end up in jail again. He was well aware that his life could end in violent death, just like James. But as long as God gave him breath and kept setting him free from imprisonment, he would keep telling the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen.

