

## SCRIPTURE STUDIES

**SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS****ACTS CHAPTER 10****“CROSSING THE BIGOT LINE”**

The definition of a “bigot” is: “One who is rigidly devoted to his own group, religion, race or politics and is intolerant of those who differ.” (American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition; Houghton Mifflin Co.)

A man was heard to say, “I can’t stand Asians, Blacks or Jews! And I really hate bigots!” As I was looking up the definition of the word “bigot” one reference had this statement after the word “bigot”: “See egotist, conceit and prejudice.”

Chapter 10 of the book lags begins a new era in the history of the early church. The conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, brought the apostles and the church to a recognition of the larger meaning of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. So far, for the most part, the members of the early church were Jews only. The policies, personnel and preaching had been geared to winning Jews. But things change here in Chapter 10.

In order to understand the controversy which was created by the conversion of Cornelius, we must understand some basic facts about the early church movement:

- In the beginning the Christian movement was distinctively Jewish;
- Jesus Christ himself, after the flash, was Jewish;
- Jesus own personal ministry was exercised principally among the Jewish people;
- John 1:11 states, “He came unto his own and his own received him not.” That is, His own according to the flesh.

In the early days of the disciple’s ministry with Jesus, they had been instructed not to preach to the Gentiles -- that is, only the Jews were to hear the message of deliverance. Matthew records, *“These twelve disciples Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (Matt.10:5,6)

Since the Lord Jesus had spoken those words, the Jews had rejected and crucified Him. Moreover, he had been raised from the dead and as He stood on Mount Olivet He gave the church her marching orders: *“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8)

These marching orders replaced the former command to *“Go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (Matt. 10:6) Now Jesus commands the disciples to go everywhere to everyone with the Gospel message. However, the change was slow in coming, owing mainly to the fact that the Jews would not readily condescend to preaching to Gentiles. Jonah is a good illustration of the reluctance and resistance of Jews to evangelize Gentiles.

Today, over 2000 years later, there is a continuing race relations problem in most every country. Peter shows us how to overcome this problem here in Acts chapter 10. The line had been drawn in the sand, the bigot line, and Peter stepped over it and there were repercussions. The dramatic revelation to the young church that non-Jews were to be accepted as full participants was a major turning point and to this very day prejudice has hindered world evangelism more than we will ever know this side of heaven.

The unique way in which the Lord straightened out Peter's thinking about preaching to non-Jews is quite a story. Let us analyze it as follows:

### **I. A GENTILE SEEKER.** Acts 10:1-8

*"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa."*

***What he was professionally*** – "Centurion."

Cornelius was a captain in the Italian Regiment, 100 soldiers, of the Roman Army, assigned by Rome to maintain Roman authority in Caesarea.

***What he was personally*** – "devout."

***What he was paternally*** – "feared God with all his house."

***What he was publicly*** – "gave alms to the people."

***What he was privately*** – "prayed to God always."

- His intercession, vs. 3-6
- His interruption, vs. 3-4
- His instructions, vs.5-6 – He was to send an emissary to Peter. (vs.7-8)

He and his family were God-fearing people which is a term for Gentiles who attended the Jewish synagogue, prayed to God and kept some of the Jewish religious laws but were not fully converted to Judaism. He was known as a generous man. One with such an excellent record certainly would go to heaven on the basis of his good morality, would he not? No! Certainly not! "One thing you lack" was what Jesus said to the rich young ruler and it could also be said to this Centurion.

## II. A GOD-SENT SERVANT. Acts 10:9-18

### ***His Vacation.***

Peter had been a busy man as the chief spokesman and trouble - shooter of the early church. In Chapter 9, after the record of Paul's conversion which ends with verse 31, we again find Peter plugging along fearlessly and faithfully. His ministry is an itinerant ministry. At Lydda he healed Aeneas. From Lydda he passes to Joppa and there raises Tabitha from the dead.

Problems and people had pressed upon him continually until we come to chapter 9 and verse 43. This is the first break in Peter's ministry. That is why I believe that Peter was on a little vacation with Simon the Tanner who lived by the seaside (10:6). So Peter is recuperating, meditating and being prepared for an even greater ministry.

### ***His Vision.*** Vs.9-16

Peter, in Joppa, had a vision. (Acts 10:9-15) Meanwhile, in Caesarea, Cornelius had a vision (v.3) in which God instructed him to send to Joppa for Peter. Peter was up on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house on the Mediterranean seashore. In his vision he saw a huge sheet being lowered from the sky and spread out before him containing all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds - all of which were on the Jewish "forbidden menu" - they were all "unclean" creatures to be avoided, and Peter were shocked! God said to him in the vision, "*kill and eat*" which left Peter with a dilemma.

As an Orthodox Jew, Peter carefully observed the Jewish prohibitions against contact with anything that was considered impure. These laws of ritual purity were deeply ingrained in his psyche. Laws of ritual purity touched upon every phase of a person's life, from conception and birth to clothing that might be worn, food that might be eaten, and even the treatment of the dead. (See Leviticus 11) The intent of these laws of separation was to constantly remind the Jewish people that they were set apart to God, and that they were to honor God in every aspect of their lives.

Peter debated with God! However, as in all matters of faith and practice, God's Word is final. In Peter's case, God made it clear that arbitrary Old Testament prohibitions had ended. The New Testament way of relating to God would not be by keeping rules, but by a relationship with Jesus Christ. Peter wrestled with the meaning of what he had just experienced. As the smorgasbord faded from view, Peter was awakened from his vision by voices at the front gate of Simon's house. These visitors were the emissaries sent by Cornelius. God's timing is always perfect, isn't it?

### ***His Visitors.***

The time of their arrival was not coincidental. Verse 17 & 18 state, "*Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there.*"

The Holy Spirit prompted Peter to go with the messengers sent by the Centurion: "*While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.'*" Then

*Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him." (Acts 10:19-23)*

One writer commented, "God had a problem 30 miles long; that is, if God has problems, and if you can measure a problem geographically. For Cornelius was in Caesarea, and Peter in Joppa, 30 miles away: 30 miles, not only of walking distance, but of inborn, inbred, inwrought prejudice." God had to save Peter from bigotry before he saved Cornelius!

It was indeed a hard saying that the Lord asked of Peter that day. To overcome in one day all the prejudice that had been built up by his culture and creed against Gentiles -- that is the heathen nations. But the vision of the sheet and the voice of the Spirit of God sent him on his way.

### **III. A GRAND SERMON.** Acts 10:34-43

Peter went to Caesarea with the visitors, met Cornelius and heard from him how he was led by God to send for Peter. Then Cornelius asked Peter to preach to those whom he had gathered at his house. So Peter preached a brief Christ-centered sermon. Notice the content of his message:

#### ***The Character of God.*** Acts 10:34

*"Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality." This was quite a revelation from God and recognition by Peter. The vision in Joppa and the voice of God had convinced Peter that the salvation purchased by Jesus Christ was for all peoples everywhere. This Paul later affirmed when he wrote, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." (Rom.10:12)*

#### ***The Christ of God.*** Acts 10:35-41

*"But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead."*

#### ***The Commission of God.*** Acts 10:42-43)

*"And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."*

The door or to the Gentiles had been opened. Within a few years, what began at Cornelius house had spread over the entire Roman world.

#### IV. A GREAT SALVATION. (Acts 10:44-48)

*“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.”*

The whole emphasis of this story is that God did not create any unclean or untouchable people! Whosoever will may come to Him. The great New Testament word is "come!" COME stands for:

C – Children;  
O – Old People;  
M – Mid-life People;  
E – Everybody.

Peter said to Cornelius: *“Through His name, **whoever** believes in Him will receive remission of sins.”* (v.43) Peter had crossed the bigot line! Prior to this experience at Joppa and Caesarea, it had been hard for him to say "whosoever will may come." However, from this point on Peter preached a "whosoever will" gospel!

Upon the authority of God's Word we can both say and sing:

*“Whosoever will, whosoever will,  
Send the proclamation over vale and hill;  
Tis’ a loving father calls the wanderer home,  
Whosoever will may come.”*

**Illustration:** in the city Madras, India, is a chapel, on the wall of which there is a strange cross. At the end of one arm of the cross-beam is a pierced hand, brown in color. At the end of the other arm there is another pierced hand, a white one. Christ died for white, brown, black and yellow and in Him these distinctions are forgotten.

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