

Peter - Man of the Spirit (Acts 9:32-10:35)



Why does the book of Acts suddenly go back to Peter from Paul? Because it was Peter, not Paul, who first took the gospel to the Gentiles. Peter gave the official blessing to the Gentiles as full and equal members of the church. Jesus entrusted the leadership of the early church to Peter, and so it was Peter who preached the first message to the Jews as well as to the Gentiles. (Matt 16:18-19)

A. Miracle at Lydda (9:32-35)

1. Lydda is the modern Lod on the Mediterranean coast where there is now an international airport. It is 10 miles from the sea, and 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was located at the junction of the roads from Joppa to Jerusalem, near the place where David slew Goliath. Here Peter slew disease and death in Jesus' name, and the gospel spread across Israel's coastline into the Philistine territory. This was a greater victory than that of David and Goliath.
2. Why was Peter in Lydda? Peter, the first pastor of the church, saw his congregation scatter everywhere beyond Jerusalem due to Saul's persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. Others later took over from Saul and continued the persecution. Peter was probably trying to rebuild the scattered flock in 'diaspora'.
3. In Lydda, Peter came across a man who had been paralysed for 8 years - Aeneas, which means 'terrible' in Greek. His life was terrible. Peter looked at this man and said, '*Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.*' (9:34) Peter was careful with his choice of words. It is not *I*, but *Jesus the Christ* heals you. This was the gift of faith operating in Peter. Usually, the gift of faith is released by a word of command or by act of faith. Peter probably surprised himself, hearing what came out of his mouth – '*Get up and make your bed.*' Peter's word made Aeneas respond by faith. Aeneas's faith was activated when he took the step to act on the spoken word.
4. Aeneas hadn't been able to do anything for 8 years! Now suddenly he could stand and even make his bed. Jesus met paralytics in Capernaum (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:11; Luke 5:24) and Bethesda (John 5:8). Each time He said to them, '*take up your bed and go home (or walk).*' Healing must be followed by changed life leading to a productive life. Aeneas arose immediately. This miracle done resulted in many in Lydda and Sharon turning to the Lord (9:35). Sharon is a maritime plain stretching from Joppa to Mt Carmel.

B. Miracle at Joppa (9:36-43)

1. Next Peter got an unexpected call from the believers in Joppa, which is the modern Yafo, a suburb in Tel Aviv. A godly woman disciple, Tabitha, died (Greek name – Dorcas meaning 'Gazelle'). Tabitha had devoted her life to helping the widows by sewing clothes for them. '*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: To visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*' (James 1:27)

Tabitha's good works did not make her a Christian. She did good works because she was a Christian. Good works do not guarantee that one will not get sick and die. When Tabitha got sick and died, they asked for their pastor, Peter.

2. The poor widows brought Peter to the upper room where Tabitha's body was laid. They cried, showing Peter the clothes Tabitha had made for them. It was a distressing situation. Peter put the people out of the room, and he knelt there in prayer alone – just him and Tabitha's cold body. Peter must have prayed, '*Lord, what do I do now?*' The Lord said, '*Peter, tell her to get up.*' Peter had never done this before, but he was there when Jesus raised the dead a couple of times - Jairus' daughter and the widow's son (Mark 5:41; Luke 8:51-56). Peter did exactly what Jesus did and spoke to the dead body. Jesus had said, '*Talitha qumi!*' - Little girl, get up! Peter said, '*Tabitha qumi!*' – Tabitha, get up!

Tabitha opened her eyes and sat up! This is the gift of faith operating by the Holy Spirit. Again, it was released by a direct and simple command. This is still happening today.

3. Jesus said, '*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.*' (John 14:12)

Peter was doing these works! And many came to believe in the Lord from all over Israel's coastland (9:42).

Thus far the gospel was preached only to the Jews. How about the Gentiles? Peter needed more than the gift of faith and miracles for this unprecedented step. He needed to conquer the prejudice within him, which was harder to break than sickness and death.

C. Cornelius' Vision (10:1-9)

1. This story is so important that it is retold three times (Acts 10, 11, 15). Cornelius was a 'centurion' in the Italian military regiment in Caesarea. In the military, a 'legion' had 6,000 soldiers, a 'regiment' had 600, and a centurion had 100 soldiers. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. They were powerful men afraid of no one. But Cornelius 'feared God' and 'prayed always'. This reveals his attitude toward God. He gave generously to the poor. This shows his attitude toward people. Like Tabitha, Cornelius was a man with true religion in God's sight (10:2 c.f. James 1:27).
2. Cornelius was not a Jew, nor a proselyte, but a full gentile. While he was praying at the 9th hour, which is 3pm, the time of the evening sacrifice, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a vision. The angel instructed Cornelius to send someone to Joppa for Simon Peter who was staying with another Simon who was a tanner.

It is one thing to pray to God, but quite another to receive the answer in such a supernatural way. Cornelius, a military man, was 'terrified' at the vision (10:4). The angel said, '*Cornelius, your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.*' (10:4) God knows us by name and He hears our prayer. And God sees what we do and He takes note. 'Memorial before God' means our prayers and works of faith are recorded in heaven. Cornelius immediately sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa. When the Lord gives us a clear leading, we need to obey immediately while it is still fresh.

D. Peter's Vision (10:10-23)

1. The following day God appeared to Peter in Joppa, just like He appeared to Paul and Ananias in Damascus. Note the pairing. The Holy Spirit has the greatest communication system, bringing two total strangers together. Peter 'fell into' a 'trance' (Gk. 'ekstasis', 10:10) – a dream-like state while fully cognisant. Peter saw a vision in a dream-like state (10:17, 19, 11:5). He was praying at noon on the rooftop when the sun was hottest directly above the roof (Ps 55:15; Dan 6:10).
2. There are three elements of the vision that related to Peter's mental and physical condition.
 - a) 'sheet' (Gk. 'othone'), lit. 'sail' or 'awning'. If you are on the rooftop in the middle of the day in the middle east, you will need an 'awning/sail/sheet' to provide shade.
 - b) Peter was hungry, and God used the vision of the food to communicate His message to Peter. However, midday was not a normal time to eat. People usually ate a light mid-morning meal and a heavy late afternoon meal. So why was Peter hungry at noon? Peter most likely didn't eat well because he is staying in Simon's house, a tanner who dealt with the dead animal skins, i.e., unclean.
 - c) Simon's work was an 'unclean' profession to the scrupulous Jews. Peter was probably often worried whether he had touched or eaten something unclean. He could not eat freely there, so now he was probably wondering if his lunch would be 'clean' and 'kosher' to make up for all the lost meals. Such thoughts would have been on Peter's mind when he fell into the trance during his midday prayer.
3. Suddenly Peter saw a great sheet bound at four corners with all kinds of unclean animals in it. Then the voice from heaven spoke, '*Rise Peter; kill and eat.*' (10:13) *You must be very hungry, Peter. So, help yourself.* Peter reacted violently, '*No, Lord!*' Clean and unclean food separated the 'good Jews' from the 'bad Jews' (c.f. Lev 11). Clean animals chewed the cud and were cloven-hoofed, etc. Peter's vision must have been of pork, ducks, prawns, lobsters, etc.

The Lord said, '*What God has cleansed you must not call common.*' (10:15) This vision was repeated three times! Each time it ended with Peter shrieking, 'Noooo!' Why was the vision repeated three times? Because Peter wasn't getting it. Each time gagging and screaming 'No!' Peter who conquered sickness and death by the power of the Spirit, was struggling to conquer the cultural prejudice within him. In the past,

Peter said 'no' to the Lord and received severe rebukes. (Matt 16:22; John 21:15-17; John 13:8) Here Peter was saying 'no' to the Lord again - three times! And three times in the vision he was rebuked.

4. Did Peter know he was in Jonah's shoes? Jonah was called to preach the message of repentance to the Gentiles. But he disobeyed and ran away from the Lord. This happened in Joppa! Will Peter obey the voice of the Lord after the 3rd warning? Thank God he did! But Peter did not understand fully what it meant at the time. He had to ponder on the meaning of the vision. (C.f. Jesus' teaching in Mark 7:14-23, Rom 14:14)

What is the message here? Who is hungry in this vision? Is it Peter or is it the Lord? (Ps 50:12-13, 5) While Peter was thinking about what the vision meant, Cornelius' men came to the house, looking for Peter! The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them without any doubt (10:20). This was the quiet inner voice of the Lord. Peter invited these men 'into the house', which was not the custom of the Jews. Peter was getting the message. He was linking the 'unclean food' in his vision to the 'Gentiles'.

E. Crossing the Boundary (10:24-35)

1. Thus far Peter has never crossed the Jewish boundary. But now for the first time, he was ready to cross it. Peter took six other Jewish disciples with him (11:12), a total of seven witnesses. It was a two-days trip from Caesarea to Joppa (10:30), around 50km. Cornelius was so sure Peter would come. So even before Peter arrived, he had gathered his relatives and friends in his house for a revival meeting!

When Cornelius saw Peter, he fell down and worshipped him (10:25 c.f. Rev 19:10; 22:8-9). Peter said, *'Stand up; I myself am also a man.'* (10:26) We must not make too much of the messenger of God. The bronze statue of Peter's toe in St Peter's Basilica in Rome is worn out by so many pilgrims kissing his feet! Peter would never have allowed it!

2. Peter said, *'I would have never gotten into this house the day before, but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean (10:28)... and therefore, I have now learned a truth which I have never realised before.'* This is a magnificent moment of truth. Cornelius said, *'God has sent an angel so that I can hear the truth I never knew before...'* Peter said, *'I have just seen a truth I have never seen before.'* (10:34) It was a double confirmation for both Peter and Cornelius, a Jew and a Gentile.

What was that truth? *God shows no partiality. God has no favourites.* Let that truth sink in. Peter was taught his entire life to see this Gentile soldier as 'unclean' and someone to dissociate from. Suddenly Peter saw the truth that profoundly altered his view of people, and more importantly his view of God! (a) *'I should not call any man common or unclean...'* (b) *'God has no favourites...'*

5. God is not bound by the prejudices that divide us. God looks at the heart. *'But in every nation whoever hears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.'* (10:35). Fearing God and doing what is right in itself did not qualify Cornelius for heaven. But when a man fears God and seeks to do what is right, then God can bring him to the knowledge of the truth. What hinders the unity of the church, the one new man, Jews and Gentiles becoming one in Christ? Pride and prejudice (C.f. Gal 3:26-29, c.f. Col 2:10-11).

F. Food for Thought

1. Jesus said to the disciples, *'He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.'* (John 14:12) This was fulfilled in Peter's life. Do you believe this promise is also for you and the followers of Jesus today?
2. You see Peter moving in the gift of faith and healing (9:34-35; 39-41). How does this gift work? Do you have examples of how this gift works in your life?
3. We see three examples of the Holy Spirit's guidance here: (a) angelic visitation (10:3-6), (b) vision and trance (10:10-15), (c) the inner voice of the Spirit (10:19-20). Do you believe these are for you today? What example can you share from your own life?
4. Why is it important for us to communicate the revelations accurately and humbly? What are the dangers if we do not share our spiritual experiences accurately and humbly? What happens when we do?
5. What core truth did Peter understand about God and people after his vision? (10:34-35) Why was it so difficult for Peter to understand the truth contained in the vision?