

BARRIER-BREAKING WITNESS

Acts 9:43-10:35

OPENING QUESTION

When have you felt separated from people because of cultural and ethnic differences?

CONTEXT

Jesus commanded His followers to spread the good news about Him worldwide, but the early believers remained in their Jewish communities until persecution forced them to scatter (1:8, 8:1). As they resettled, they planted new churches. (8:31). The Apostle Peter gradually moved outward from Jerusalem to visit these new churches (8:14–25; 9:31–42; cf. 8:1). One thing to note before reading the passage is that Cornelius is a centurion in the Roman army. He is not a Jew, but a Gentile. However, he was a man who loved God. Simon the tanner was a Jew but he worked with dead animals that were considered unclean. (Lev. 11:39-40). Most Jews avoided tanners and they were considered outcasts among the Jews.

READ ACTS 9:43-10:35

^{9:43} Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. ¹⁰ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!” ⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. ⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” ¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. ¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.” ²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?” ²² The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

³⁰ Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Summary of Acts: 10:34-48 - Peter goes on to preach the Gospel message to all the Gentiles that were gathered there that day. Cornelius and his family become believers and even get baptized. Peter's heart has been changed forever.

DISCUSS

1. Peter's staying with the tanner (a person who takes animal skins and turns them into leather) in Joppa (a more ethnically diverse area). What does it say about Peter that he is staying with Simon the tanner?
2. The text refers to Cornelius as a religious, devoted, generous, respected, and sincere "God-fearer" (vv. 1-4). Why do you think God picked Cornelius, a Gentile, for this assignment? What does this tell us about our God?
3. In verse 2, Cornelius and his family are called "God-fearers." What does a God-fearer look like today? Do you know people in your life who fit this description? How can you grow to be more "God-fearing"?
4. In Acts 10:11-12, God gives Peter a very significant dream that contains images of both kosher and non-kosher animals. Then God tells Peter to kill and eat. Peter's response in verse 14 is one of shock. He can't imagine eating something that in the past has been categorized as unclean. God speaks in verse 15 and says, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." What do you think God is beginning to teach Peter here; how is He shaping Peter?
5. At what different points do you see Peter's heart for the Gentiles grow? How is Peter a work in progress?

REFLECT

1. The vision of the sheet didn't happen once, it happened three times. God was getting Peter's attention. He was laying the groundwork for growing Peter's heart for the lost. It is important that we pay attention to what God keeps bringing back into our lives. What opportunities keep presenting themselves to you? What challenges keep tugging at your heart? Or—another way to think about it—what people does God keep putting in your path? God often persists when He has a plan. God was persistent with Peter. Is God being persistent with you regarding anything in your life right now?
2. I'm inspired by Peter and Cornelius' obedience. God called both of them to do something that was way out of their comfort zones, one could even argue He called each of them to do something bizarre. When you think about your life right now as a graduate student, is there anything you are sensing God is calling you to do where obedience feels hard, maybe even bizarre? What does or would your continued obedience look like? As you read this story, what encourages you about either Peter's obedience, Cornelius' obedience, or both?
3. Later in the story Cornelius and his family become believers and are baptized. Peter sees the spiritual transformation of Gentiles. Peter's view of who God would call him to share the message of Christ with was limited before this encounter. It took a vision from God to change his thinking. Sometimes we can fall into similar thinking and assume that God wouldn't call us to share the Gospel with someone radically different than us. Who on your campus or even more specifically in your field of study, do you think God might be challenging you to share His Gospel with? What might be your first step?

PRAY

Ask God to open our eyes and hearts where they have been closed. Pray that we see people as the Lord sees them, as beloved by God and in need of Jesus, and for opportunities to share the gospel.