

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 4: Acts 10,11,12

Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Acts 10: 28

ACROSS THE DIVIDE—ACTS 10

From the time that Israel began as a nation in Moses' day, God put great emphasis on teaching the people the difference between clean and unclean, holy and unholy. This was a "visual aid" to teach them that sin would separate them from God; for God was holy and pure, and sin would make man unholy and impure, and the two could never mix. For man to return to a clean state, an atonement, or ritual sacrifice must be made—a sin offering. They learned to avoid as much as possible anything that made them unclean.

The other practical result of these teachings was to keep the Jews separate from the other nations around them in order to keep their religious worship pure and undefiled by heathen practices. Other nations followed idol worship, temple prostitution, mystic and occult practices, even child sacrifice. By avoiding the surrounding nations, or Gentiles (the word means *the nations* in Hebrew), the Israelites built a wall of protection around their society.

The downside of a religion that constantly focused on making sure one was clean and separated from heathens and sinners was the tendency to become focused on rules, and then self-absorbed and finally self righteous and proud. God was about to change the whole economy of salvation, by replacing separateness and strict rule keeping as a way to righteousness before God, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which teaches that all mankind needs salvation from their sinful natures and must find it in the grace provided by the atonement.

Accepting the new way meant letting go of the old way. And it meant that all people were on an equal footing before the atonement of Christ, Jew and Gentile alike. If you read carefully in the Old Testament, you find prophecies that look ahead to the day when "I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6; 60:3; 42:6) But there are fewer things harder to change than a habit of religious practice that is deeply held. God was going to have to make His direction clear in order to break down a wall of prejudice that no longer had any purpose, and if left in place, would divide the church.

In Jesus' day, Caesarea was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. It lay about 65 miles north west of Jerusalem. Cornelius, a Roman centurion (the word meant the commanding officer of a group of soldiers about 100 strong), had a reputation as one "devout and God-fearing," in other words, deeply religious. When God sent an angel to this man, he told him "thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." God judges all mankind righteously, according to what is in their heart, even if they do not have correct theology. God is pleased with those who seek Him and have generous hearts toward their fellow man.

PETER'S VISION

Peter, in the meantime, has a vision of his own. At the home of Simon the Tanner where he is staying as a guest, Peter is up on the housetop saying his prayers and perhaps hoping to catch a sea breeze to find relief from the heat. The Lord sends him a vision that is entirely unexpected and puzzling. He sees something like a great sheet let down from heaven, filled with all kinds of beasts and fowls. He has been thinking to himself how hungry he is and the spirit seems aware of this, for it commands him to take one of the beasts of the vision, "kill and eat." But Peter has been conscientious in his observance of Jewish dietary laws all his life. Keeping the law is the way to please God; it is the way of safety and blessing. Knowingly partake of something unclean? Never! "Not so Lord! For I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean."

The answer from heaven is: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." In a more modern vernacular—"What I, God, call ok, is ok." And then the puzzling vision was repeated two more times.

Notice that God does not tell Peter that He is doing away with the categories of clean and unclean. Rather God is going to have a different way of determining the categories from now on. He is going to "call clean" some things that Peter has thought of as unclean in the past. These visions are still swirling in his brain when he hears the servants of Cornelius at the gate and the spirit whispers that God has sent them and Peter is to go with them as they request.

Peter and six other brethren journey with Cornelius' servants from Jerusalem to Joppa. They find Cornelius and many of his kinsmen and friends waiting expectantly for them. When Peter walked in the door, Cornelius bowed before him in worship. Quickly Peter assured him that he was only a man and asked why Cornelius sent for him. After he hears the story of the angel, Peter is amazed, for he realizes for the first time that "Of a truth ... God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." God is dealing with Peter's religious prejudices so that Peter can in turn deal with prejudice in the whole church. For the kingdom to roll forth, the fences must come down.

Peter preaches a missionary sermon to those assembled in Cornelius' house. Luke gives us a condensed version, showing that Peter bore testimony of Christ's life and mission and crucifixion and resurrection. Missing from this sermon are the things he typically might have included for a Jewish audience about their history and specific prophecies from the Old Testament. Peter, the spirit surely guiding, recast the message of the Gospel into universal terms: 1) "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." And 2) "...through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."

The word "gospel" literally means "good news" and never was that definition more fittingly applied than to this little gathering in Cornelius' home. The joyous news was preached that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ was meant for all men. Those who heard the message gratefully received and believed it. As a sign to them and to Peter's group that their belief was accepted and acknowledged by God, the Holy Ghost was poured out upon them like it had been poured out upon Jewish believers at Pentecost.

OLD WAYS DIE HARD

The Jewish Christians who challenge Peter on his return to Jerusalem, do so by saying, in effect, "We heard that you ate dinner at the home of Gentiles! How could you do such a thing"? Peter had begun his sermon to the Gentiles by acknowledging "it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company [with] one of another nation." (Acts 10:28) But in fact there is nothing in the Law of Moses forbidding this. It is true that God commanded Israel to wipe out seven Gentile nations (Amorites, Hittites, Canaanites, etc.) from the land of Canaan, but He explicitly told Moses that this was because they were ripe in iniquity, not because they were not Israelites. The taboo against mixing socially with Gentiles had developed as a protective measure during and after the return from the Babylonian captivity. It was codified in the writings known as the Talmud by scholars and Rabbis.¹ These writings had become the basis of religious authority in Jesus time, and Jesus himself was often in conflict with them. To come out from the grip of this false authority was a painful process for many Jewish Christians.

It is useful to think of God moving in history by looking at things as either a *stage* or an *endpoint*. God is eminently realistic and practical in His dealings with His children. If they needed to be separated from other nations so that their religion would remain uncorrupted, then He gave them commands that provided cultural isolation. But the separation was only a stage, not an

¹ In the Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah is the Governor of Israel after the return from captivity in Babylon. He uses the curse in Deuteronomy against the Ammonites and Moabites ever entering the "congregation of God" (Deuteronomy 23:3) as justification for ordering the departure from Jerusalem of any that had mixed their Israelite blood with these cursed groups. Originally the curse was for making war with the Israelites, to whom they were distantly related, being Lot's descendents, and for hiring Balaam to curse them. This scripture, and the repeated injunctions of the prophets not to intermarry with Gentile nations, are the only scriptural justifications one could try to use in refusing to mix with any Gentiles. But the Rabbis who wrote the Talmud took it much farther than it had been intended and thus provided the rationalization that supported a feeling of racial and cultural superiority over all the rest of mankind

endpoint. The Jews misinterpreted, however, thinking that the separation meant they were better than all the others, and by virtue of their superiority, must forever avoid contamination from the unclean Gentiles. This mindset was a barrier now that the Great Commission to take the gospel to the whole earth was in effect. If the truth was to spread, the Jews were going to have to stop thinking that everybody else in the whole world was icky, dirty and inferior to them.

This taboo ran deep. When Jesus had spoken in his hometown synagogue, he made the people so angry they tried to throw him off a cliff. And for what? He reminded them that Elijah had miraculously helped a Gentile widow in Sidon, and Elisha had healed Naaman the Syrian rather than any Israelite leper. (Luke 4:22-29) Just the mention of Gentiles who had been blessed by Israel's prophets had made them try to kill him! Hundreds of years of persecution and the continual struggle to avoid contamination had produced a built in hostility towards all outsiders.

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

Just how earthshaking Peter's taking of the gospel to the Gentile household of Cornelius was, can be seen in the first verse of Acts 11. The news instantly traveled to all the church in Judea. Brethren from the Jerusalem church were waiting to ask Peter about it as soon as he returned. Peter's defense is based on a simple witness to the facts as they occurred, noting the miraculous nature of those facts. The visions and providential coincidences and angelic visitations all lead to an inescapable conclusion—God is the author of it all.

The presence of the Spirit is the ultimate seal of approval from God. When the Gentiles begin speaking in tongues, this is a witness to all that God is present. So powerful a witness that in speaking of this occurrence later to doubters in Jerusalem, Peter simply tells them what happened and lets it speak for itself, saying, as if with a shrug, "Who am I to resist God?"

Luke now returns in his narrative to the missionary activities of the Christians who had been forced to leave Jerusalem during the persecution that arose after Stephan's death. Because of their preaching "a great number believed, and turned to the Lord." (11:21). The successful missionary work being carried out in the Antioch region resulted in a mixed congregation that included Gentiles with varying degrees of connection to Judaism. Perhaps some were Gentiles from "part member" Jewish families.

When tidings reached the Jerusalem church of this greater inclusiveness in Antioch, they decided to send Barnabus to investigate. The generous and good-hearted Barnabus was the perfect man for the job, for rather than react with concern or condemnation, he rejoiced when he saw the grace of God extended beyond the confines of Judaism. The church he found in Antioch was so enthusiastic and alive that Barnabus decided to stay and help in the harvest of souls. He sent for Paul from Tarsus and they worked together for a full year doing missionary work, a fortunate companionship that pre-figured their later journeys together.

HEROD'S PERSECUTION

The early years of Christianity were marked by waves of persecution. The first had arisen among the community of Grecian Jews and was marked by the accusation of blasphemy and Stephan's martyrdom. In Acts 12, Luke recounts a new wave of persecution coming from Herod Agrippa. He had been appointed by Rome as the vassal king over Palestine in A.D. 41. He was well aware of the hatred the Jewish people had toward his family, who did not consider the Herod family to be legitimate rulers. His persecution of the Christians was probably intended to curry favor with the Jews by showing that he was a pious and true Jew who refused to tolerate the supposed apostasy of the sect known as Christians. His first strike was to have James the brother of John killed by the sword. When he saw this pleased the Jews, he put Peter in prison where he would presumably contemplate the same fate during the seven days of Passover.

The important point that Luke wishes to make in this chapter is that the power of God is stronger than the power of governments and rulers. The powers of Satan are always linked with the governments of men. In the temptation in the wilderness, Satan showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time and said, "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it." (Luke 4:6) Not long before his death, Christ tells the disciples, "They shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake." (Luke 21:12)

While there have been good governments of good men that have done good things, Christians are not to make false idols of governments or hope that salvation comes politically.

We are to do all in our power to insure that good men govern. But our faith does not lie in man. It lies in a God who knows the end from the beginning. In a fallen world Satan has great power over the hearts of men and uses it to his advantage to try and stop the work of the Lord from spreading. But Luke shows plainly in his story of the murder of James and the arrest of Peter that the plans of the Lord cannot be thwarted. James, in his martyrdom, left his witness to the world of the truth of the gospel message. The adversary may win battles, but only those God lets him win. He will lose the war.

When it is in God's will to rescue one of His servants, it is always in His power to do so, no matter how many guards are stationed nearby. Luke emphasized the amazing quality of Peter's escape to remind us that God has all power and man's power to stop God's intended purpose is no more than a pile of dust, or as we read in the Doctrine & Covenants, it is like the power of a man's puny arm trying to stop the flow of the mighty Missouri River. (D&C 121:33)

WHAT WE CAN DEPEND ON

Studying the Saints of the early church leads us to compare and contrast their experiences with our own as Latter-Day Saints. It is remarkable to think of all that they didn't have. There were no printing presses so there were no manuals or church magazines or scriptures available to the general membership. Communication was very limited and took months, so there was no way for headquarters to know what was happening in outlying areas and to respond quickly to questions that arose. It took months for letters to travel back and forth. The apostles went on missions to far-flung places and could not communicate with each other or meet together regularly. In such a situation, what could an individual member of the church put his or her trust in? They had to rely on God's communication resources—prayer and the Holy Ghost. They had faith that God would hear their prayers and that His power was beyond any that their enemies had. Then they had faith that God could and would guide them through His spirit.

We see repeated examples in the early church of both prayer and the Spirit's guidance. Luke's frequent referrals to prayers by the saints shows how essential he believes this is. (See Acts 1:14; 2:1; 3:1; 4:31; 6:4; 12:5) In response to prayer the Spirit speaks, angels appear, and the voice of the Lord is heard. As a result, Ananias is led to Paul, or Phillip to the Ethiopian eunuch, or Peter to Cornelius. One had to rely on God's supernatural guidance system when there was no other. Is it possible that the saints of our day have let their spiritual muscles get out of shape because it is so easy to coast, knowing that we belong to God's true church and can just follow the manuals and do what we are told?

A woman who grew up in the church in East Germany behind the iron curtain, moved to Salt Lake City after the fall of Communism. She noted with surprise that there were so many people in her new home who had never seen an angel! The Lord provides what is needed according to the conditions His saints must face. It is easy to be lulled asleep by the rich opportunities that we have as members of the church today and as citizens of free Western nations. We must not let the oil in our lamps get low! It is up to us to do the work necessary to sink our spiritual roots deep so that we can soak nourishment from the word of God, and get His guidance and strength for our souls. The Latter-Day Saints of the 21st century do not know all that is ahead for the church, or what conditions we ourselves will face in a world increasingly unstable and out of alignment with God's truth in scripture.

The words of early LDS apostle Heber C. Kimball come to mind: *The time will come when no man nor woman will be able to endure on borrowed light. Each will have to be guided by the light within himself. If you do not have it, how can you stand?... If you don't have it, you will not stand; therefore seek for the testimony of Jesus and cleave to it, that when the trying time comes you may not stumble and fall* (Orson F. Whitney, Life of Heber C. Kimball, p 450).