

I. Introduction

Good morning! This beautiful, Roman theater at Caesarea in Israel was built by Herod the Great about ten years before Jesus was born. The theater has been restored and is still in use today. I think it is a good symbol for our study in Acts 10 since this chapter could easily be presented as a dramatic play with the Lord as the playwright and Peter and Cornelius as the main characters.



In Acts 10, Cornelius and Peter each see visions from the Lord, and, as a result, Peter will travel up the coast road from Joppa to Caesarea to meet Cornelius and to open the way for the gospel to be preached to the nations. The theater is located at the south end of Caesarea and Peter would surely have seen it as he entered the city. When Peter saw the theater, I wonder if he imagined himself as an actor in God's play, presenting a drama on the great stage of the world. Certainly Peter knew that God had brought him to Caesarea for a purpose. But we are getting ahead of the story.

Let's begin by reading the opening verses of this dramatic story in Acts 10:1-8.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 10:1-8, (NIV, 1984)

1 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.

III. Teaching

A centurion in the Roman army commanded 100 men, so Cornelius was a man of authority who was used to being obeyed. He was a centurion in the Italian Regiment, so Israel was not his home. Cornelius came from a culture that worshipped numerous Roman gods, including gods of wine and war. But Cornelius had rejected the false gods of Rome. Even though Cornelius was part of the occupying Roman army in Israel, he had come to believe in the God of Israel, the Creator God who made all things. **Acts 10:2** says, **"He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly."**



Cornelius and his family worshipped the true God and he was a generous and devout man. But he had not become a full convert to the Jewish faith, and so he was still a gentile, a foreigner and an outsider to the Jews. We don't know why Cornelius had not become a Jew; perhaps he feared losing his position if he converted fully. But we do know that, to the Jews, all gentiles and their homes were unclean, and no good Jew of the time would enter the home of a gentile, not even one who worshipped God and who was a man of good reputation. Based on the Law of Moses, there was an immense wall of separation between the Jews and the Gentiles. But, as was soon to be made clear to Peter, Jesus came to tear that wall down. The Jews looked down on gentiles and they despised the Roman army as the enemy which had conquered their land. But now, after receiving the vision from God, Cornelius has sent men to find Peter and soon Peter's heart will change.

Cornelius was praying at three in the afternoon. This detail tells us that Cornelius observed the daily prayer times of the Jews. And, on that day, as Cornelius was praying, something extraordinary happened. An angel appeared in a vision and spoke to him. **Acts 10:4, “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.’”** God has sent the angel to Cornelius in response to the faith Cornelius has shown in his prayers and good works.



The angel instructed Cornelius to send for Peter, but what the angel did not do is even more interesting than what the angel did. God clearly desires for Cornelius to hear the Good News of Jesus so that Cornelius and his family can believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness of sins and salvation. God has even sent an angel so that Cornelius can have a chance to hear the gospel. But the angel does not preach the gospel and does not say a single word about Jesus. The angel just says, “Send for Peter.”

One of the amazing and mysterious things in God’s plan is God’s sovereign choice to use the men and women of the church to preach the gospel. God could speak from the sky to all people and tell them about Jesus. God could send the angels to appear in every home and tell about Jesus. But, except for a few rare exceptions, like when Jesus spoke to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, God seems to avoid using such direct methods. Instead, God uses the church, God says, “Send for Peter.” And God sends Peter, just as God also sends us, to tell others about the Good News of Jesus. But first, God has to prepare Peter’s heart.

IV. Scripture Reading Acts 10:9-16, (NIV, 1984)

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 of the earth and birds of the air. 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.

V. Teaching

The first specific mention of clean and unclean animals in the Bible is in the story of Noah’s ark. Noah was commanded to take one pair of each kind of unclean animal and seven pairs of each kind of clean animal into the ark with him. Noah needed to take more of the clean animals, because they would be used for sacrifices to the Lord and also for food immediately after the flood. But, in the Bible record, God does not explain to Noah why some animals are clean and others unclean, it seems that Noah is already familiar with these ideas.



Later, in the Law of Moses, God gave the people of Israel detailed rules for identifying exactly what kinds of animals, fish, and insects were clean and unclean, and they were allowed to eat only the clean. There are many theories about why some animals were clean and others unclean. Some people say that the rules were designed to protect the people of Israel from diseases carried by the unclean animals. Others say that the unclean animals were used in pagan rituals or were symbols of false gods. Still others try to assign ethical reasons for the dietary rules, for example, saying that lions were classified as unclean because they hunt and kill other animals, bringing fear and death.



These explanations sound interesting, but they all have some problems when examined closely. If the problem was that unclean animals carried disease, then why were Christians allowed to eat them in New Testament times when modern medicine and refrigerators had still not been invented? If animals that were

associated with false gods were supposed to be unclean, then why were bulls that were worshiped in Egypt considered clean? If lions were unclean because they hunted and killed, then, why was a Jewish man allowed to hunt and kill?

A more satisfying explanation may be that the classification of animals into clean and unclean was done strictly according to God's sovereign choice and not by any standard that we can understand. But why would God give the people of Israel complex and strict dietary rules? I think the purpose was to make the people of Israel visibly different than other peoples and so to give them a very strong sense of identity as a separate people. Israel would need this strong sense of national identity to separate them from the pagan nations and to make it possible for them to maintain their identity even when they were exiled from their homeland for many years. The dietary rules, along with the rest of the Law of Moses, protected the Jews from being absorbed by the other cultures around them. Many Jewish groups and households have continued to observe key parts of the Law of Moses even when isolated from other Jews for centuries.

The rules concerning the clean and the unclean in the Law of Moses applied not only to food, but to many aspects of life. These rules prevented free association between Jews and non-Jews and had become a wall of separation that divided the world into Jew and gentile. That wall served an important purpose in protecting the nation of Israel until the Messiah came. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, the long-promised Messiah, the time had also come for the dividing walls between peoples and cultures to be removed.

Some years after the time of Acts 10, Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:13-16**, **"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."** All peoples and nations are welcome in the church and in Christ we find unity and peace. By His finished work on the cross, Jesus has broken down the barriers between man and God and between the nations and races. In Christ, we are made one.

In today's passage, God is teaching Peter of these things through the vision of clean and unclean animals. Peter was told, **"Kill and eat."** But Peter objected. But in **Acts 10:15**, Peter was told, **"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."** The vision was repeated three times, and I am sure that Peter got the message that Christians were not to be bound by the dietary rules of the Old Testament. But, as Peter would soon understand, the vision was really about something much more important than food. Let's continue with Acts 10:17-23a.



VI. Scripture Reading Acts 10:17-23a, (NIV, 1984)

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 have you 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.

VII. Teaching

The arrival of the three men must have helped Peter to understand what God was telling him in the vision. Peter would have seen at a glance that the men were not Jews and, according to Jewish law, Peter could not invite them into a



Jewish home. But God had given Peter a vision and the Spirit of God had spoken to Peter. So, Peter understood that he must welcome the men in for food and rest. God had already softened Peter's heart to be willing to stay at the home of the tanner. Now God has softened Peter's heart more so that he welcomes the gentile visitors. In the rest of Acts 10, we will see how God even leads Peter to boldly enter a gentile home, something that would have been unthinkable to most Jews of the time.

VIII. Conclusion

Next time, we will continue our study in Acts 10 and see what happens when Peter goes to Cornelius' home. But for today let's take a moment to notice three lessons that we can learn from today's passage.

The first is the need for us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. God could use the angels to do this, but He has chosen to do it through us instead. Instead of considering this a burden, we should see it as a great privilege. We have been entrusted with the words of our Lord and the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus. Let us be diligent to share this treasure with the people around us.

The second is that to share the gospel effectively, we often have to leave our comfort zone. We need to leave behind the prejudices of our home cultures and welcome those the Lord sends to us. Peter welcomed his gentile visitors and invited them in, and we should follow his example and welcome people of all kinds into our lives, our homes, and our church.

The third lesson for us is to learn the true meaning of clean and unclean. In the Old Testament, for the nation of Israel, the ceremonial laws about the clean and the unclean served a necessary purpose. But in Christ we are set free from the ceremonial law and customs so that we can learn to be truly clean through living holy lives according to the leading of the Spirit of God.

Let's close with Jesus' words from Mark 7:14-23. **"14 Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. 15 Nothing outside a man can make him `unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him `unclean.'" 17 After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. 18 "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him `unclean'? 19 For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") 20 He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him `unclean.' 21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man `unclean.'"**"

Eating the wrong foods or breaking ceremonial laws or customs does not make us unclean; it is our sin which separates us from God. Our wicked thoughts and wrong words and actions make us unclean. But, thanks be to God! When we trust in Jesus we receive forgiveness and His blood washes us clean. Through the cross of Christ we are made clean and acceptable to God. This is the grace of God, received by faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let's pray.

IX. Prayer

